The music of *The Nutcracker*, one of the world’s most beloved ballets, is inescapable during the month of December. Today, Tchaikovsky’s timeless score can be found alongside the dancing fairies in the classic Disney film, *Fantasia*, accompanying the antics of the town of Springfield on *The Simpsons*, or supplying the plot for an upcoming movie starring Morgan Freeman and Kiera Knightley. For the San Francisco Ballet, *The Nutcracker* generates roughly 40% of the company’s annual ticket revenue. It is, without question, one of the most recognizable and cherished scores in music.

However, the 1892 premiere at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg could not have predicted its astonishing success: *The Nutcracker* was almost universally panned. The most common criticisms were directed at the unappealing set and costume designs, the poor dancing skills of Antoinette Dell’era as the Sugar Plum Fairy, and a lackluster plot that differed greatly from the original tale by E.T.A. Hoffman. Even Tchaikovsky himself remarked that *The Nutcracker* “in spite of all the sumptuousness... did turn out to be rather boring.” The journey of the ballet, from universal failure to worldwide phenomenon, is an intriguing tale, made possible by Tchaikovsky’s magnificent score – and the genius of another Russian artist - who resurrected the work more than fifty years after the composer’s death.

Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky was born on May 7th, 1840 and studied at the St. Petersburg Music Conservatory under Anton Rubenstein. He continued his career at the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony. Being a homosexual in 19th century Russia was dangerous; Tchaikovsky lived in constant terror of being exposed. Confronted with intense social pressure to conceal his sexual identity, Tchaikovsky entered an ill-fated marriage with a former student, Antonina Milyukova. The grave mistake was quickly apparent, and distraught, Tchaikovsky resolved to commit suicide by plunging himself into the icy waters of the River Neva, believing he would freeze to death, or at least, contract pneumonia. The unsuccessful attempt prompted him to flee Moscow, and the botched marriage was a catalyst to an extremely unhappy life.

Tchaikovsky was a world-famous composer whose name-recognition extended far beyond Russia. In 1891, Conductor Walter Damrosch wanted a “big-name” to conduct the opening performance of New York’s brand new Carnegie Hall. He invited Tchaikovsky, and while the composer was hesitant, the fee (an astronomical $2,500 for 20 days) was an offer Tchaikovsky could not
refuse. As he started his journey, the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg offered Tchaikovsky a commission to compose a new ballet. The new work was on his mind during a stop-over in Paris, when he was introduced to the celesta, a French keyboard instrument with a bell-like sound. Tchaikovsky excitedly wrote to his publisher: “I've just met a man who's invented a new instrument. It's perfect for the ballet I must think about in America, but don't tell (friend and rival Nikolai) Rimsky-Korsakov, because he'll use it before me.”

In New York, Tchaikovsky was wined and dined; the composer was fascinated by the city and its residents. He couldn’t say enough about American hospitality. His diary notations express his joy: “...In other countries, if somebody comes up to you and you're nice, you suspect, ‘What do they want?’ Here in America, they don't want anything. They just want to be nice.” From New York, he traveled to Niagara Falls, and as he changed trains in Utica, he composed a letter to his brother, Modest, noting, “...ginger bread and toy soldiers have started dancing in my head.”

He made sketches for the new ballet during his travels through the United States, and, inspired by his new surroundings and a new instrument, he utilized the celesta in *The Nutcracker*’s “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.”

After the disappointing 1892 premier, the ballet and music of *The Nutcracker* remained unknown outside of Russia, until a young choreographer named George Balanchine left the Soviet Union for a new life in the United States. In 1948, Balanchine, dubbed the "Father of American ballet," co-founded the New York City Ballet, one of the most renowned dance companies in the world. Balanchine, in close collaboration with impresario Lincoln Kirstein, sought to produce a ballet to encourage a new and non-traditional audience to invest in the performing arts.

Balanchine selected the relatively unpopular Tchaikovsky ballet as his project, to be reimagined and brought to life in New York City. Balanchine saw *The Nutcracker* as a dependable source of income. The ballet, featuring children, would undoubtedly encourage new audiences looking for child-friendly entertainment, and, as he wisely noted, each child in the ballet brought a slew of friends and family members, creating an instant audience. More importantly, the ballet reminded Balanchine of his own childhood as a dancer in the Russian corps de ballet at the famed Mariinsky Theatre.

Balanchine oversaw the creation of a lavish production featuring colorful sets and costumes, a huge ensemble, several reindeer, and a 41-feet-tall, 23-feet-wide, 2,200 pound magical Christmas tree. The new production, which appeared in New York for the first time in 1954, was an immediate hit. Soon after, a complete recording of Tchaikovsky’s score was produced for the first time and the ballet was broadcast nationally on CBS. Quickly, *The Nutcracker* became a holiday tradition, emulated by companies across the country and the world. Balanchine’s groundbreaking interpretation of Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker* is still performed every holiday season by the New York City Ballet.

In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Patricia Wilde, a Balanchine ballerina who danced the Sugar Plum Fairy, remarked that "aside from his (George Balanchine's) own recollections of being a child in *The Nutcracker* and how much he loved it, he was thinking of it as a gift to American children." And what an enduring gift it is.
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Please try this link to hear a recording of Fry's *Santa Claus* (Christmas Symphony) performed by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz8UzYe6SRk&list=PLmnlFb19QoDm8WKnTlR3DeJvzxyICbqKG&index=10

Jennifer Higdon's Oboe Concerto may be heard at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWkBKhFBhUc

The Nutcracker Suite, performed in its entirety by the Berlin Symphony Orchestra may be heard at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1nzCDUNF-0

And for a visual experience, we suggest watching the ballet!

To see a full performance of The Nutcracker Ballet from St. Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theater, please watch:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtLoaMfinbU

To see a full performance by the New York City Ballet from 1993, see:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ofysvpgv7o

For fun, check out this behind the scenes look at The Royal Ballet:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fu0tp8xOYu4&spfreload=5
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Jennifer Higdon’s melodic Oboe Concerto is lovingly performed by James Button with Giancarlo Guerrero conducting the Nashville Symphony (NAXOS).

Hard to go wrong with virtually any great orchestra performing Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Suite, but Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony are charm personified, a surprising result from the martinet of conductors (RCA). If you fancy a complete recording of the ballet, Ashkenazy with the Royal Philharmonic are tops (DECCA).

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5. https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Nutcracker
6. Ibid
7. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pyotr-Ilyich-Tchaikovsky
8. Ibid
10. Ibid