Composer of the Month
January : Pyotr Tchaikovsky













Pyotr Tchaikovsky



Born : 7th May, 1840 in Votkinsk., Russia. Died : 6th November, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia.
Music Period : Romantic (c.1820-1900)

Tchaikovsky was born in Russia in 1840. He was the second eldest of six children. His father had served in the Russian army and ran the ironworks in the town where the family lived.

He is considered to be the most popular Russian composer of all time.

Have a listen to one of his most famous compositions...

Do you recognise, or have you heard it before? Can you describe the tempo of the music, using the correct musical word?

You can also watch the video clip of the piece performed by the world famous "Bolshoi Ballet Company"

What Is Romantic Music?

Romantic Music music is (any orchestral or classical style of music) composed between 1820 and 1900.

Some features of Romantic music include :

- more focus on telling a story (programme music) or expressing an emotion or feeling, including national pride.

- themes and ideas all based around fantasy, nature, heroes and villains;

- larger orchestras and better range of instruments being used.
- a much greater variety of dynamics and expression is used.

Other famous composers from this era include Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner, Verdi, Brahms and Schubert.

Tchaikovsky showed musical talent from an early age. When he was four years old, he wrote his first musical composition with his sister, Alexandra.

At five years old, Tchaikovsky started piano lessons and soon began to play complex pieces of music; including those by famous composer, Chopin.

His great ear also helped him with languages and, by the time he was six, he was fluent in both German and French.



Tchaikovsky (left), aged 8, with his mother Aleksandra (seated), his sister Aleksandra (leaning on her mother's knee), half-sister Zinayda (standing behind), older brother Nikolay, younger brother Ippolit, sitting on father Ilya's lap.

When Tchaikovsky was young, music was not something that was studied at schools or universities. Despite his talent, his parents didn't consider music as a career for him and wanted him to work for the government. He went to boarding school where he worked hard and got good qualifications.

When Tchaikovsky was 14 years old, his mother died from a disease called cholera. He composed a piece of music in her memory.

His father began to realise how talented his son was and paid for him to have further music lessons.

Did you know?

Cholera is an infectious disease caused by a bacteria that infects the small intestine. The most common symptom is large amounts of watery diarrhoea. The worst cases, diarrhoea can be so bad that people can die in a few hours from dehydration. In Tchaikovsky's time Cholera killed many thousands of people. Today, although we have vaccines it is still a major problem for the World Health Organisation.

World Health Organization

After finishing school, Tchaikovsky began to work for a government department. However, in 1862, the St. Petersburg Conservatory (a music school) opened. Tchaikovsky resigned from his job and started studying at the conservatory, where he studied for three years. In August 1865, his music was performed in public for the first time at a concert in Pavlovsk.



After graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Tchaikovsky moved to Moscow and began to teach music Moscow Conservatory. He soon wrote his first symphony and **opera.**

In 1869, he composed Romeo and Juliet, an **overture** based on the Shakespeare play. This piece of music has since been used in films, adverts and television shows.

In 1875, Tchaikovsky travelled around Europe watching performances of some of the world's most famous pieces of music. The following year, he completed his first ballet, Swan Lake.

Swan Lake tells the story of Prince Siegfried and Princess Odette. One night, the prince is out hunting and notices a group of swans. One of them transforms into a beautiful woman, Odette. She is under the spell of Baron Von Ruthbart which can only be broken if someone who has never made a vow of love before promises to marry her. The Prince promises to break the spell. However, things do not go to plan and tragically at the end of the ballet, both Odette and Siegfried die.

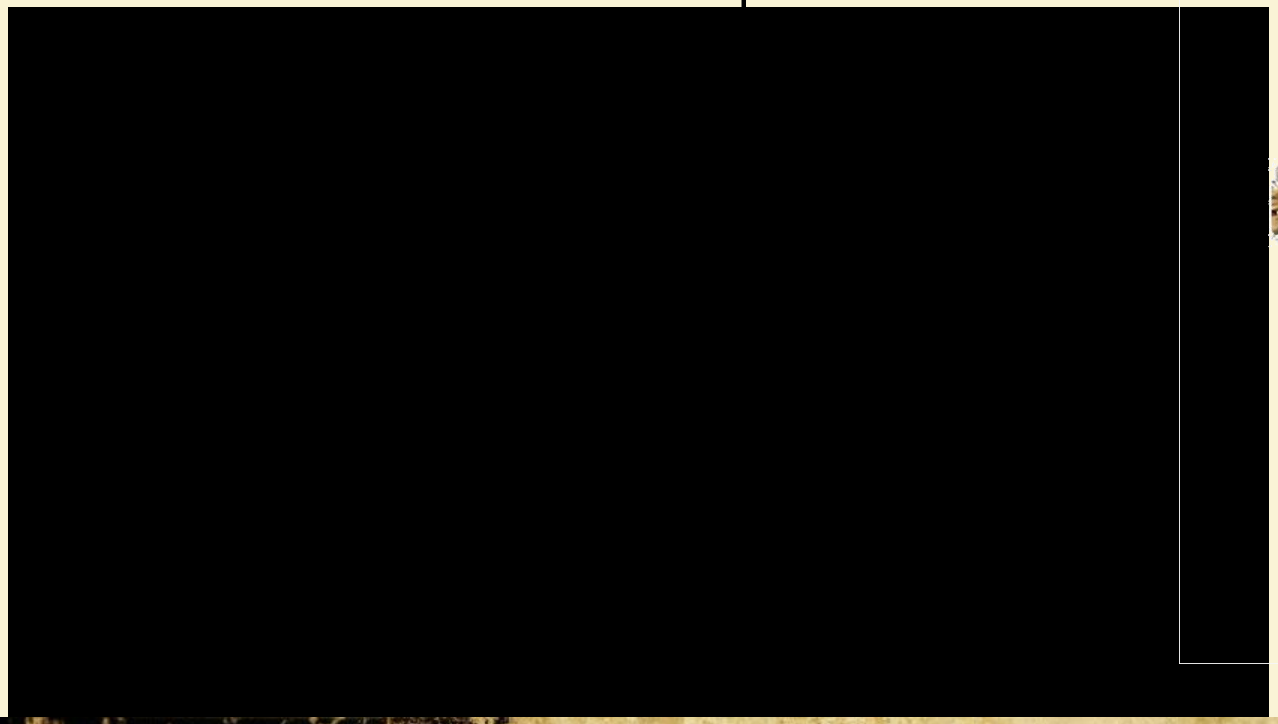


Listen/Watch - The Dance of the Cygnets is one of the most famous dances from the ballet. What word would you use to describe the tempo of the music?

At first, Swan Lake was not a success! However, it would eventually become one of the world's most popular ballets.

As Tchaikovsky's music became more popular, he was able to afford to spend each winter in Europe before returning to Russia in the summer. He wrote many more operas, symphonies and overtures.

In 1880, Tchaikovsky composed the 1812 Overture, written to commemorate Russia's military victory over Napoleon in 1812.





Between the winter of 1888 and the summer of 1889, Tchaikovsky composed his second ballet, The Sleeping Beauty. The ballet was based on the well-known fairy tale Sleeping Beauty, where Princess Aurora pricks her finger on a cursed spinning wheel and falls into an enchanted sleep. At nearly three hours long, it is Tchaikovsky's longest ballet.

The first performance of the ballet was watched by

Listen and Compare :

Listen to the 'Sleeping Beauty Waltz' from the ballet. You may recognise it! It was used as a basis for a song in the Disney film version of the story 'Sleeping Beauty' – "Once Upon a Dream".

Can you hear the main melody in both?



Tchaikovsky continued to enjoy great success. In 1891, he was invited to the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York, USA. To this day, Carnegie Hall is one of the world's most prestigious concert venues.



In 1892, Tchaikovsky wrote his third ballet, The Nutcracker. The ballet is set on Christmas Eve and tells the story of two children called Clara and Fitz. Clara goes on a magical adventure with their toy nutcracker who magically turns into a prince.

Today, the Nutcracker is a popular ballet, especially at Christmas.

Listen to 'The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' from The Nutcracker. A lot of it is played on an instrument called a celesta that sounds like bells being played. It is in a minor key, which means it sounds mysterious.



Alternatively you can watch the version of this piece from the video clip from Disney's Fantastia version of "The Nutcracker".





In 1893, Tchaikovsky was awarded an honorary doctorate by Cambridge
An honorary doctorate is a special degree given to someone who hasn't studied at a university but has made significant achievements in a certain area.

The last known photograph taken of Tchaikovsky at Cambridge University.

On 28th October, Tchaikovsky conducted an orchestra in the first performance of his Sixth Symphony.

Nine days later, at the age of 53, he died. It is thought he may have died of cholera, the same disease that killed his mother.

Tchaikovsky is still considered one of the world's greatest composers and his music is performed throughout the world.

Tchaikovsky's Works

Listening Extract 1 – Symphony No.6 in B Minor Op. 74
"Pathetique" Finale - Adagio Lamentoso



Listening Extract 2 – Sleeping Beauty

Listening Extract 3 – Swan Lake
Wedding Dance



Listening Extract 4 – Slave March

Which piece is your favourite? Why?