



## The Nutcracker by Tchaikovsky

### PRIMARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN

For:

- Key Stage 2 in England and Wales
- Second Level, P5-P7 in Scotland
- Key Stage 1/Key Stage 2 in Northern Ireland

*Written by Rachel Leach*

#### *Background*

**The composer:** **Pyotr Ilych TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 - 1893)**

- Russian composer
- Wrote three of the best ballets ever - *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*

**Pronunciation:** **PYOT-ruh il-YEETCH chigh-KOFF-ski**

- py as in pew
- ee as in street
- ch/tch as in church/catch
- igh as in high
- f as in fit

**The music:** **The Nutcracker - Waltz of the Flowers & Russian Dance (Trepak)**

- Written in 1892
- Tells a magical story of toys and sweets coming to life on Christmas Eve – or is it all just a dream?

#### *Learning outcomes*

Learners will:

- Listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- create their own dances to this music
- create their own rhythmic ostinatos and structure them into a piece
- perform a waltz as an ensemble
- begin to learn simple staff notation
- learn musical language appropriate to the task

## Curriculum checklist

- play and perform in ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments
- improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
- listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
- use and understand staff and other musical notations

## Glossary of music terms used

<b>Ballet</b>	A story told through music and dance
<b>Bar</b>	Music is divided up into small chunks often 3 or 4 beats long called bars. These help us to navigate the music and keep together. Musicians count the beats in bars when they are not playing
<b>Crescendo</b>	Gradually getting louder (opposite: decrescendo or diminuendo)
<b>Melody</b>	another word for 'tune'. A linear line of notes, like a musical sentence
<b>Ostinato</b>	a repeating (often rhythmic) pattern
<b>Pitched percussion</b>	Percussion instruments that can play different pitches (or 'notes') – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc.
<b>Pulse</b>	the steady 'beat' under much music made up of notes of the same length (like a ticking clock)
<b>Ternary Form</b>	ABA – a very popular musical shape which features the opening music returning at the end after a contrasting middle section
<b>Unpitched percussion</b>	Percussion instruments that make sounds that don't have a specific pitch (or 'note') – drums, shakers, woodblocks, tambourine.

## Resources required

- A large, open space
- Classroom percussion instruments and any other instruments your children might be learning
- A4 paper and pens

*This scheme of work is plotted out over six lessons. Feel free to adapt it to suit your children and the resources you have available.*

## **The six lessons at a glance**

### **Lesson 1**

Activities:	Watch the film and discuss Create art-work in response to a piece of music
Curriculum link:	Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory Appreciate and understand a wide range of high-quality live and recorded music drawn from different traditions and from great composers and musicians Develop an understanding of the history of music

### **Lesson 2**

Activities:	Learn and perform a rhythmic pattern to a pulse Select appropriate instruments and begin to follow music notation Create a dance to fit the rhythms
Curriculum link:	Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

### **Lesson 3**

Activities:	Learn to count bars Invent rhythms and gestures to fit a given number of bars
Curriculum link:	Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

### **Lesson 4**

Activities:	Listen and analyse a piece of music Learn about Ternary form Structure ideas into Ternary form Perform music and dance
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Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory  
 Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music  
 Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

## Lesson 5

Activities: Learn and perform a waltzing pattern  
 Choose appropriate instruments for this pattern

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory  
 Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

## Lesson 6.

Activities: Learn to count bars in 3  
 Perform on pitched and unpitched instruments Structure ideas into a piece  
 Perform the piece to an audience  
 Use technical terminology where appropriate

Curriculum link: Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression  
 Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

# LESSON 1

## Watching and listening

### 1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a 6-week music project focusing on an important piece of music by a composer called Tchaikovsky

Explain further that Tchaikovsky was from Russian and wrote one of the best **ballets** ever - The Nutcracker!

*\*Most children know what ballet is but if they don't, it's simply a story told through dance*

### 2. Watch the film

Watch the [Tchaikovsky Ten Pieces film](#) and afterwards have a class discussion about what you have just seen. You might like to ask the following questions –

- Did you like the film?
- What was your favourite part?
- Do you believe in the magic of the story or do you think it was all just a dream?

### 3. Listening task

Give out A4 sheets of paper to everyone and ask them to place them landscape on their desks. Explain that you are going to listen to the *Russian Dance (Trepak)* in full. You can either watch the [video clip of the full performance](#) of the piece or listen to the [audio by downloading the mp3](#). This is often danced by two or three men in traditional Russian dress. Ask your children to imagine and draw the dancing as they listen.

Move onto the *Waltz of the Flowers* and explain that this is an elegant dance often performed by lots of dancers making amazing patterns on the stage and swaying like flowers. Again, ask your children to imagine and draw this one as they listen

*Ideally, listen without images so that the children can really use their imaginations. Note that Trepak is much shorter than Waltz of the Flowers so you might have to listen to it several times. (There are lots and lots of versions of both dances online if you do want to watch at the end of the session)*

4. **Discuss** the pictures and ask for volunteers to come forward and explain their artwork in detail to the rest of the class.
5. **FINALLY** – arrange the artwork around the classroom and encourage your class to walk around looking at their new 'Nutcracker gallery' as you play some of the *Waltz of the Flowers* again (or *Trepak*) in the background.

## LESSON 2

### Dance the Russian Dance!

You need plenty of space for this lesson. Either clear your classroom as much as possible or, ideally, work in the hall, dining room or gym.

1. **Warm-up** - ask your children to stand in a circle. To wake them up, pass a quick clap around the circle.

Remind them about Tchaikovsky, the Nutcracker and in particular, *Trepak*. Explain that you are going to learn some of the rhythms of *Trepak* and then make up your own Russian dance to go with them.

2. **Teach** the following words to your class. The counts at the top are very important for getting the rhythm right.

1 (ssh) 3 + 4    1 (ssh) 3 + 4    1 2 3 4    1 2 3 + 4

SAY: 'I like to eat all kinds of sweets but the best are al-ways fiz-zy sweets'

If this is too hard, begin by just clapping and saying:

↑ this means 'repeat'

SAY: 1 (ssh) 3 + 4

3. When your class can perform this confidently, invite a few members of the class to clap rather than speak until eventually you can all clap it without the words
4. **Instruments** – it would be fun to hear this on body percussion or classroom percussion. Ask your children to suggest which **unpitched** instruments might play which bits. It doesn't have to be one instrument playing all the way through, for instance you could have one instrument providing a steady pulse, something else on the 3+4 ('like to eat' etc.) and something strong like a drum just playing on beat 1.

At this stage don't have everyone on an instrument, just a handful of children, perhaps those who don't want to dance!

5. **Return to the recording** – At the beginning of *Trepak*, this pattern will fit **four times** back-to-back. Put the recording on and challenge your class to clap, speak or play along.
  
6. **Dance** – now ask your children to suggest gestures for each of these rhythms so that you slowly build up a dance. You can do this as a full class with everyone doing the same gestures or in small groups to create lots of little dances. Remember the pattern must go around **4 times** to fit with the Tchaikovsky
  
7. **FINALLY** - perform your dance, with a small group on instruments, along with the beginning of the real recording.

## LESSON 3

### Invent your own Russian Dance!

Again, you'll need a large space for this task.

1. **Warm-up** – begin your session in a circle. Warm-up the children by quickly reminding them of the 'sweets' pattern they learnt last week and the dance moves they created to go with it
2. **Explain** that you are going to make a new section of dance and rhythm today to fit with the middle of Tchaikovsky's piece. To do this you need to count just like real ballet dancers and musicians do all the time. Encourage your class to join in counting to 4\* over and over again, keeping a steady **pulse**

\*Trepak is actually written in 2 but counting to 4 fits perfectly and is slightly easier!

3. Musicians and dancers sometimes must keep track of how many lots of 4 they are counting. This is called **counting bars**. To do this they change the number at the beginning of the 4 to match the number of times they have counted like this:

<u>1</u> ,	2,	3,	4,
<u>2</u> ,	2,	3,	4,
<u>3</u> ,	2,	3,	4,
<u>4</u> ,	2,	3,	4,
<u>5</u> ,	2,	3,	4, etc...

Teach your class to do this and practice counting to 12 bars (12 lots of 4, the last one being:  
'12, 2, 3, 4)

4. **Explain** that Tchaikovsky's piece features **12 bars of 4** in the middle. Your children's task is to invent what happens in this 12-bar section – dance and percussion. You can work on this as a full class or in small groups. You might like to have one group dedicated to providing the music, or have everyone simply dance along to the real recording. Choose whatever method suits your children the best

*The easiest way to achieve this is to concentrate on the 1, 2, 3, 4 count. Ask the children what gesture or sound happens on each number and build it up from there. This keeps it very simple: you just need 4 things repeated 12 times!*

5. **FINALLY** - perform your new 'B section' along with the recording after performing your 'A section' from last week

## LESSON 4

### Finish the Russian Dance with a whirl!

Again, you need a big space for this with just a few percussion instruments close to hand

1. **Warm up** – begin your session with a quick recap of your two existing dance sections – the ‘sweets’ pattern from lesson 2 and the new 12-bar middle section from lesson 3. It’s time to create an ending
2. **Listen** to the [Tchaikovsky again](#) and encourage the children to softly speak and count along with it. Can they spot what happens **after** the middle 12-bar section?

Tchaikovsky returns to the music of the beginning (the ‘sweets’ pattern) but he messes around with the structure a bit so we have the following –

*‘I like to eat all kinds of sweets but the best are always fizzy sweets’ x4*

12 counts of 4

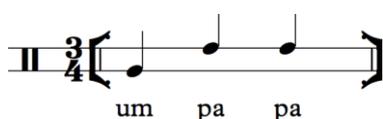
*‘I like to eat all kinds of sweets but the best are always fizzy sweets  
I like to eat all kinds of sweets  
But the best are always fizzy sweets’ x4*

3. **Explain** that the technical term for a musical shape where the beginning comes back at the end is **Ternary form (ABA)**. Challenge your children to make their dance match this musical shape. They don’t need any new material, they just need to adapt what they have already got to fit this new pattern.
4. **Practise** performing your dance and percussion to the recording and then without the recording. Have a vote on which is the best version.
5. **FINALLY** – end your session by performing your new dance (with or without Tchaikovsky) to another class. How closely does it match the artwork you made in lesson 1 or the real dance? (many versions of this dance can be found on the internet)

## LESSON 5

### Waltz!

1. **Warm-up** – you can revert to working in your classroom from now on but it would help to clear a large space and ask the children to sit in a circle on the floor. Explain that you are going to create a waltz. Waltzes are made up of **3** repeating beats rather than the 4 you used in Trepak. Practise counting three with the children, over and over, without gaps and at a nice, steady pace
2. In a waltz the three beats are split up so that there is one strong beat ('um') and two weaker beats ('pa pa'). **Practise** saying 'um-pa-pa' with your children instead of '1, 2, 3'.



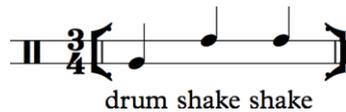
You may like to use a woodblock or drum to keep everyone together, and make a clear stop sign at the end.

3. **Now try performing the rhythm like this:**



4. When this is good, steady and strong **divide your class into two groups**. Explore with the class your school's instrument collection. At this stage, you don't need any **pitched** instruments such as xylophones or glocks, just the **unpitched** ones (drums, shakers, woodblocks etc.).
  - Ask them which instruments are strong and loud and should play the UM beat (they might say drums).
  - Ask them which should play the weaker pa beat (for example – shakers).

5. Decide which group is UM and which is pa and give out the instruments accordingly.  
**Create the waltz rhythm again** with each group simply playing on their beat.  
 Your new waltz might go like this:



6. When this is achieved appoint a conductor. Ask him or her to stand in the middle of the room and to count a loud, steady 1, 2, 3 (or *um, pa, pa*) and to signal to the groups to start. When your conductor raises his/her hand the waltz must stop.

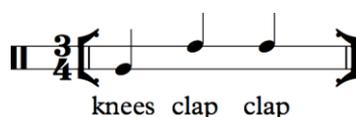
*You can practise your waltzes using different conductors or swapping the instruments around. Always aim for a steady, constant rhythm without any gaps and ignore anyone who hasn't quite picked up the pattern yet - they will probably be perfect next lesson!*

7. **FINALLY** – finish this lesson with one final performance of your **unpitched** waltz

## LESSON 6

### Waltz 2!

1. **Warm-up:** as usual, begin with a quick focusing warm-up. Sit the children in a circle and practice their body percussion waltz pattern from last week.



2. **Recap** – get out the instruments and practice your **unpitched** version too.
3. **Counting bars** – remind your class about how they learnt to count bars in the *Trepak* sessions. Challenge them to count bars of their waltz pattern too by thinking this as they play:

<u>1</u>	2	3	
2	2	3	etc...

Challenge them to perform **8 bars** of their waltz and then stop

4. **Pitched percussion:** it's time to add some harmony to your waltz. You can do this using pitched percussion such as xylophones and glocks and any orchestra instruments that your pupils might be learning. (Some children should stick with unpitched percussion to keep the original 'um-pa-pa' strong)

**Split** your class into **two** or **four** new groups and give out the following pitches to each group -

Group 1	G	G	
	C	E	E
Group 2	D	D	
	G	B	B
Group 3 (optional)	C	C	
	F	A	A
Group 4 (optional)	G	G	
	C	E	E

Group 2 features good notes for any beginner players

**Challenge** each group to make just **8 bars** of waltz using their new notes

5. **When this is achieved**, hear each group in turn and check that they are sticking to the rules and playing just **8** rounds of um-pa-pa **with no extra 'um' on the end!** You can now create a big waltz with the whole class by cycling around the groups aiming for each group to take over from the last without a break.

*The beauty of this task is that everyone is involved all the time either performing, or counting and getting ready to perform and the music will sound lovely as it cycles through the different notes (and harmonies) you've given out*

6. **FINALLY** – invite another class to come and listen to your piece. The true test of a waltz is whether or not it can be danced to. Why not challenge your audience to dance along? They just need two gestures (or steps): one for the 'Um' and one (repeated) for the 'pa'

## TAKING IT FURTHER

### Cross-curricular activities

- **ART:** Use *The Nutcracker* story to inspire artwork. You could draw or invent new characters, costumes for the dancers or stage sets.
- **MUSIC:** Tchaikovsky's other ballets (*Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*) are worth exploring too and *Swan Lake* in particular features some super famous waltzing
- **LITERACY:** Re-write the story of *The Nutcracker* from Clara's (the main character) point of view or invent your own magical story inspired by a dream