

The Swiss conductor, Ernest Ansermet, came from a musical family; he successfully studied the clarinet, violin and brass instruments, which he used in fanfares; later he wrote military marches for the Swiss army which he did not consider important. Besides Music, he studied Mathematics in Lausanne and graduated with a Diploma in 1903; until 1906 he taught at the Lausanne Grammar School, then he decided to continue his studies at the Sorbonne and, at the same time, to attend courses at the Paris Conservatory. After his return to Lausanne, he taught Mathematics for one more year before devoting himself entirely to music.



Ansermet was a particular advocate of the Swiss composers Arthur Honegger and Frank Martin. He conducted the first performances of the following works of A. Honegger: *Horace victorieux* (1921), *Chant de joie* (1923), *Rugby* (1928) and *Pacific 231* (1923), which was dedicated to him, and of the following works of Frank Martin: *Symphonie* (1938), *In terra pax* (1945), *Der Sturm* (1956), *Le mystère de la Nativité* (1959), *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (1963) and *Les Quatre Éléments*, which were dedicated to him. Also important were the first performances of Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Cantata misericordium* (1963).

Ballet Music by *Tchaikovsky* *Respighi* *Delibes* *Adam*



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Covent Garden

From a strictly professional point of view, Tchaikovsky should have been a happy man in 1890. Finally acknowledged as the greatest Russian composer, he had produced symphonies, concertos, ballets, and his latest opera, *The Queen of Spades*, had been hailed as a masterpiece. He had accepted an offer to conduct his works at the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York, and had in hand commissions from the Imperial Opera Directorate at St. Petersburg for a one-act lyric opera and another ballet.

His personal life, however, had become a train wreck and he was clinically and deeply depressed. Then, his long-time patroness, the Mme. Nadezhda von Meck, suddenly withdrew both her friendship and her financial support. His brilliant new opera was suddenly withdrawn after only 13 performances. In January 1891, he wrote his brother Modeste, "I am very tired...Is it wise to accept the offer of the opera?...My brain is empty; I have not the least pleasure in work."

Further -- the choice of subject for the new ballet had been made for him. It was to be a setting of Alexandre Dumas' adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale *The Nutcracker* and the *Mouse King*. Tchaikovsky insisted the work was unsuitable as the framework for a ballet, but set to work on it. Incredibly, he sketched out the entire first act before setting sail for America in March, but not before advising the Opera Directorate that the work could not be finished before December and would thus be ready for the following season, not the very next.

An unexpected musical highlight of the trip was the discovery in Paris of an instrument called a celesta, and immediately fascinated with it, he ordered his publisher to obtain one for use in the new ballet. By early July, the second act had been sketched and Tchaikovsky set to work orchestrating the lengthy work. This took until March 1892 and it was at this point that the suite came into existence. A concert in St. Petersburg on March 19 was to include his orchestral fantasy *Voyevode*, but Tchaikovsky substituted instead a 20-minute suite consisting of excerpts from the ballet. These are not performed in the same order as in the ballet itself and are ordered thus: Overture; No. 2 March; No. 14 Variation 2 (*Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*); No. 12d Trepak (*Russian Dance*); No. 12b Coffee (*Arabian Dance*); No. 12c Tea (*Chinese Dance*); No. 12e (*Dance of the Mirlitons*), and No. 13 (*Waltz of the Flowers*). The celesta appears in the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*.

Rising above his suicidal state of mind, Tchaikovsky crafted wonderful short dance tunes for the suite. The opening overture is scored for high strings and winds only and is a cheerful curtain raiser. The march is brisk but suggests toy soldiers as opposed to real ones, and the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is positively ethereal in its use of the celesta. The Russian Dance is as furious and rousing any 60-second piece could be, and the Arabian and Chinese dances are tiny jewels which, if not particularly authentic, are brilliantly evocative. Possibly the most brilliant and original work is the *Dance of the Mirlitons* -- a flute trio -- and the suite ends with the perfectly beautiful *Waltz of the Flowers*. It is music such as might have been crafted by Mozart himself had he persevered into the Romantic age and approached this same subject. It remains one of his most enduring works.

After writing his opera *William Tell* in 1829, Rossini, while still a young man, decided to retire from full-time composition, though he continued to write piano pieces for his own amusement. The ballet music *La boutique fantasque* (*The Fantastic Toy Shop*), taken from some of these unpublished miniatures, could have no better advocate than Respighi, whose orchestral flair and Italianate bravura perfectly matched Rossini's lively tunes.

Like another nineteenth century ballet, *Coppélia* by Delibes, the ballet concerns a toy shop in which the toys come to life. A pair of can-can dancers who have been sold, respectively, to an American

and a Russian family, decide to flee in order to avoid separation. Their owners return in fury, but are driven from the shop by the other toys. This pleasingly silly story is irrelevant to the music itself, which consists of an Overture followed by a set of dances -- *Tarantella*, *Mazurka*, *Can-Can*, *Galop*, and *Finale*. But, thanks to the enduring popularity of the ballet (written for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*), Respighi's arrangement and deft orchestration have forestalled the almost certain extinction of this delightfully light and high-spirited music. A similar service to Rossini was later performed by Benjamin Britten in an equally sparkling version of the *Tarantella*.

Coppélia, comic ballet by French composer Léo Delibes that premiered in Paris on May 2, 1870. It was an immediate success and soon reappeared in the form of excerpts scored for piano and as an orchestral suite.

Coppélia was based on German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "Der Sandmann" (1816; "The Sandman"), a dark psychological fantasy concerning a man's destructive infatuation for a lifelike mechanical doll. The same tale was later featured in Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which preserved the tragic and surreal mood of the original. Delibes, however, presented French audiences with an amusing and sweet-tempered version of the story.

Of particular musical interest are a sequence of folk dances in Act 1, which features eastern European dances such as the *mazurka* and the *czardas*; and the mechanical doll's dance in Act 2, a steady waltz with clockwork precision befitting a dancing automaton.

Giselle, ballet by French composer Adolphe Adam, first performed in Paris on June 28, 1841. Other than the Christmas carol *Minuit, Chrétiens* (known in English as *O Holy Night*), *Giselle* is Adam's most famous work.

The idea for the ballet *Giselle* originated with French poet and novelist Théophile Gautier, who took an interest in German poet Heinrich Heine's retelling of a Slavic legend concerning the willis, ghostly spirits of girls who have died before their wedding day. Gautier imagined a version in which a girl betrayed by her beloved dies of a broken heart but returns as a spirit to save him from retribution by the vengeful willis. Her merciful act saves her from becoming a willi herself.

Gautier took his idea to the Paris Opéra, where a new Italian dancer, Carlotta Grisi, had recently been so well received that the management wanted to feature her in a ballet as soon as possible. The proposal for a ballet with a young heroine seemed perfectly suited to Grisi's talents, and a libretto was commissioned from Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges. Adam was quickly recruited for the new ballet, having written for the Paris Opéra before. Work on the score and its choreography began at once; *Giselle* made its debut two months later. The original ballet, called a ballet pantomime, devoted almost half the performance time to mime and action scenes that drove the story's plot, but many 20th-century productions shortened or completely eliminated most of those, focusing on the dance sequences. By the early 21st century a return to the original performance practice had begun.

Of particular musical interest are the jolly hunting music in Act 1, rich with horns and scurrying strings; the tumultuous finale to Act 1, in which *Giselle* loses her mind and dies; the mysterious music of the willis in Act 2, in which strings and woodwinds evoke the light-footed spirits; and the alternately triumphant and serene finale at sunrise.

Ansermet conducts Ballet Music with the The Orchestra Of The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Tchaikovsky The Nutcracker Suite

1 March

2 Dance Of The Sugar Plum Fairy

3 Arabian Dance

4 Chinese Dance

5 Dance Of The Toy Flutes

6 Waltz Of The Flowers

Respighi / Rossini La Boutique Fantasque

7 Tarantella

8 Andante Mosso

9 Can Can

Delibes Coppélia

10 Act 1: Introduction And Mazurka

11 Introduction And Waltz

12 Czárdás

13 Act 2: Valse De La Poupee

Adam Giselle

14 Act 1: Introduction And Waltz

15 Act 2: Pas De Deux And Variation

**Recorded by Decca for RCA, 13-16 Jan 1959 Kingsway Hall
Producer: Michael Williamson Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson**



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