

The Tchaikovsky Ballet Trilogy: Formal Architecture, Harmonic Language, and Timbral Dramaturgy

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Abstract: *Ballet represents a model of synthesis between form, harmony, and dramaturgy, being ideal for the analysis of applied musical forms, the study of expressive harmony, the understanding of Romantic orchestration, and the relationship between music, movement, and psychology. Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, and The Nutcracker constitute a fundamental trilogy in the history of ballet music, marking the transformation of the genre from a predominantly choreographic form into a symphonic-dramatic musical construction. This article proposes a comparative analysis of these works from the perspective of musical forms, harmonic language, and the dramaturgical function of orchestration, highlighting the evolution of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's compositional thinking and his decisive contribution to the consolidation of modern classical ballet.*

Keywords: *Romantic ballet; musical forms; expressive harmony; sonic dramaturgy; Romantic orchestration; music pedagogy; Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky;*

Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, ballet music occupied a subordinate position in relation to stage movement, serving primarily as accompaniment. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's intervention in this genre generated a paradigm shift: music acquired artistic autonomy, complex internal structure, and a dramaturgical function. The three ballets analyzed in this study reflect distinct stages of this evolution, constituting a stylistically and conceptually unified corpus.

1. Case Study – „Swan Lake”

1.1. Context of Creation and Stylistic Positioning

Swan Lake (1877) marks the beginning of Tchaikovsky's collaboration with ballet theatre during a period when “serious” composers generally avoided the genre. The acceptance of the commission from the Imperial Russian Theatres represented an act of artistic courage, justified by the composer's conviction that ballet music could attain the same expressive depth as symphonic music. In a letter to Sergei Taneyev, Tchaikovsky rejected the prejudice that ballet music was superficial: “I do not understand at all how ballet music can contain anything reprehensible. Ballet music is not always bad. There is also good music...”²

The ballet belongs to late Romanticism, integrating subjective lyricism, psychological tension, and the symbolic opposition between good and evil. Tchaikovsky himself defined his artistic identity through his cultural roots: “I am Russian, Russian to the marrow of my bones”³.

This identity is reflected in the melodic and harmonic character of the ballet, which Igor Stravinsky considered “more profoundly Russian than works labeled as picturesque Muscovitism”⁴.

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² Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k S. I. Taneevu*. Moskva–Leningrad: Muzgiz, p. 112.

³ Chaikovsky, Modest Ilich. 1940. *Jizni Petra Ilicia Chaikovskogo (Viața lui Piotr Ilici Ceaikovski)*. Moskva: Muzgiz, vol.1, p. 145.

⁴ Maes, Francis. 2002. *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 119.

1.2. Synopsis of the Ballet by Acts

The action follows the destiny of Prince Siegfried and Odette, a princess transformed into a swan by the sorcerer Rothbart. The narrative structure unfolds in four acts:

Act I – The Real World: the prince's court and the inner conflict of maturation.

Act II – The Fantastic World: the encounter with Odette, the theme of the curse, and the promise of love.

Act III – Illusion: the appearance of Odile, seduction, and involuntary betrayal.

Act IV – Catharsis: forgiveness, sacrifice, and liberation.

The central theme is the duality of purity and illusion, reflected in the opposition between Odette and Odile.

1.3. General Framework of the Harmonic Language

The ballet functions as a „*scenic symphony*”, and harmony acts as the binding element that unifies the macrostructure (the four acts) with the microforms (dances, pas de deux, variations). Tchaikovsky employs a rich yet transparent tonal language in which:

- Tonality defines the dramaturgical plane (real vs. fantastic, light vs. darkness).
- The major–minor alternation carries symbolic meaning (pure love vs. illusion, hope vs. fate).
- Chromaticism and unexpected modulations mark conflict, hesitation, and the characters' inner fractures.

LE LAC DES CYGNES

Grand Ballet en 4 actes Musique de Peter Il ch Tchaikovsky Opus 20

ИНТРОДУКЦІЯ **INTRODUCTION**

Moderato assai

Madamata assai

Example No. 1. P. I. Tchaikovsky. *Swan Lake*. Measures 1–6

1.4. The Swan Theme and Its Tonal Field

Melodic and Harmonic Profile

The Swan Theme (solo oboe over strings) is generally in the minor mode, with a descending, sighing contour. Harmonically:

- Tonal Frameworks: It relies on the classical tonic–subdominant–dominant relationship (I–IV–V), enriched by modal mixture (borrowed chords from the parallel major or derived modes).
- Chromaticism: Chromatic passing tones and appoggiaturas soften the tonal outline, suggesting Odette's fragility and the instability of her fate.
- Cadences: Cadences are often avoided or delayed (e.g., deceptive resolutions, shifts to the submediant), creating a sense of unfulfilled enchantment and suspended promise.

For students: the Swan Theme is an excellent example of a harmonic leitmotif—each recurrence recalls her tragic condition not only through melody but also through characteristic progressions (chromaticism, delayed resolutions).

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N. 6. PAS D'ACTION.

(Le gouverneur, devenu ivre, danse et excite par sa maladresse la gaité de tout le monde).

56 Andantino quasi moderato.

56 Andantino quasi moderato.

B.B. 59

Example No. 2. P. I. Tchaikovsky. Swan Lake. Pas d'action. Measures 1–7

1.5. Harmonic Design Across the Acts

Act I – Relative Stability and Social Convention

- Predominant tonalities: clear, major, dance-like (waltzes, polonaises).
- Function: outlines the “real” world of the court, with diatonic harmony and predictable progressions (I–IV–V–I, typical waltz sequences).
- Dramaturgical role: Tonal stability suggests social order, convention, and “normality” before the entrance into the fantastic realm. Modulations are mostly close (to dominant, subdominant, relative), reinforcing a sense of security.

Act II – The Lake, Mystery, and Pure Love. As an example, the *Pas d'action* between Siegfried and Odette in the lakeside scene.

Tonalities: predominantly minor, with modal inflections and nocturnal colors.

• Harmony:

Tonic or dominant pedal points in the strings, over which chromatic lines unfold in the upper voices (oboe, flute), creating a “water mirror” effect.

Diminished chords (VII⁷, secondary) mark Rothbart’s appearances or moments of fear.

Unexpected modulations (to distant keys, e.g., major/minor thirds) underline the transition between real and fantastic.

Cadences:

In the large adagios, Tchaikovsky favors extended plagal cadences (iv–i with internal chromaticism) or delayed resolutions, enhancing the sense of prayer and supplication.

Act III – Seduction, Illusion, Conflict. The *Pas de Deux* (Odile and Siegfried) is one of the most virtuosic moments.

Tonalities: brighter, often major, but with an underlying harmonic instability.

Odile’s Theme:

- Supported by secondary dominants, ascending sequences, and dominant-seventh chords with spectacular resolutions.
- Strict rhythm, clear and “cutting” harmony (V⁷–I, fanfare-like progressions) contrasting with Odette’s fluid harmonic world.

Character Dances: Use national modes and colors (e.g., Spanish, Neapolitan, specific chromatic alterations), yet remain integrated into a classical tonal framework.

Conflict: In moments of recognition and deception, sudden modulations appear, along with Neapolitan chords (bII) and descending chromatic bass lines (lamento patterns), suggesting the prince’s moral collapse.

Act IV – Tragedy and Transfiguration

Tonalities: return to minor, with episodes of transfigured major (depending on the version).

Harmony:

- Dense chromaticism, overlapping diminished chords, descending sequences suggesting inevitability.
- In moments of sacrifice, Tchaikovsky often employs plagal–mixolydian progressions (IV–I with alterations), evoking a sacred, cathartic aura.

Transformation of the Swan Theme:

The same melody appears in a different orchestration and harmonic light (e.g., shifting from minor to a warm major or to an ambiguous major/minor zone), signifying transfiguration rather than simple repetition.

N. 5. PAS DE DEUX.
I.

[42] Tempo di Valse ma non troppo vivo, quasi moderato.

[42] Tempo di Valse ma non troppo vivo, quasi moderato.

Example No. 3. P. I. Tchaikovsky. *Swan Lake. Pas de Deux*. Measures 1-10

1.6. The Major–Minor Alternation as Symbol

Odette: rooted in minor, with borrowings from the major mode in moments of hope (e.g., brief appearances of the major tonic, immediately shadowed by chromaticism).

Odile: predominantly in brilliant major, built on “aggressive” harmony (secondary dominants, brass fanfares), suggesting false brightness and deception.

Rothbart: associated with dominant chords featuring a lowered second degree (Neapolitan), diminished chords, and abrupt modulations—a harmonic language that disrupts continuity.

For analysis: students can observe how the same key (e.g., a given minor) acquires different meanings depending on orchestration, register, and cadence type (perfect, plagal, deceptive).

1.7. Rhythm, Agogics, and Harmony

Although rhythm appears to be a separate parameter, in Tchaikovsky it is closely linked to harmony:

- Act I: regular rhythms, clear harmony, frequent cadences → stability.
- Act II: fluid pulse, long phrases, harmony that “floats” over pedal points → suspended time.
- Act III: energetic rhythms, syncopations, rapid harmonic changes → tension and spectacle.

- Act IV: compressed rhythms, accelerations toward the climax, dense harmony → tragedy and release.

Odette vs. Odile – Beyond Timbre: Harmonic Profile

Odette – The White Swan

- Harmonic frameworks: Lyrical minor, softened subdominants (chords with added sixth, “sospeso” sonorities), delayed resolutions.

- Chromaticism: Mainly in the melodic line, as ornamentation rather than harmonic aggression.

- Cadences: Often plagal or incomplete, leaving the phrase “open,” like a question.

Odile – The Black Swan

- Harmonic frameworks: Brilliant major, strong dominants, clear progressions (V7–I), ascending sequences.

- Chromaticism: Used to intensify tension (secondary dominants, chromatic bass), not to soften the contour.

- Cadences: Perfect, triumphant, often reinforced by brass—the sound of illusory victory.

The difference is not merely tempo or timbre, but harmonic identity: *Odette* inhabits an unstable minor with postponed resolutions; *Odile* dominates an authoritative major with firm cadences.

1.8. Musical Architecture

The ballet is conceived as a four-part scenic symphony with strong cyclic unity. Tchaikovsky himself emphasized the importance of form and critical revision: “What has been written passionately must be examined with a critical eye... Only persistent work allowed me to achieve a form corresponding to the content”⁵.

Macrostructure:

- four acts with distinct dramaturgical functions;
- alternation between the real and the fantastic planes;
- thematic returns that unify the discourse.

Microforms:

- ternary dances (A–B–A);
- variations (the swan dances);
- classical *pas de deux* (adagio – variations – coda);
- extended lied forms in lyrical scenes.

For students, this architecture provides an ideal model for analyzing the relationship between microform and macrostructure.

1.9. Musical Language

Melody. Melody represents the expressive nucleus of the ballet. The Swan Theme, introduced by the oboe, is lyrical, descending, and melancholic, suggesting *Odette*’s fragility and purity. *Odile*’s theme, by contrast, is virtuosic, rhythmically incisive, and brilliant.

Harmony. Harmony supports dramatic tension through:

- major–minor alternations with symbolic value;
- chromaticism in moments of conflict;
- unexpected modulations.

Rhythm and Agogics. Rhythm mediates the relationship between orchestra and dance:

- regular rhythms in Act I;
- fluid pulsation in Act II;
- energetic rhythms in the character dances of Act III.

⁵ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekh*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 257.

1.10. Orchestration and Timbral Dramaturgy

The orchestration is among the most refined in the ballet repertoire. Tchaikovsky uses timbre as a narrative instrument, consistent with his conception of programmatic music: “All music is programmatic... the ability of music to express ideas, feelings, and emotions”⁶ (Tchaikovsky, letter to N. von Meck).

Principal Timbral Roles:

- Strings – lyricism, inner flow, emotion.
- Woodwinds – fragility and individualization (the oboe representing Odette).
- Brass – power, destiny, and illusion (associated with Rothbart and Odile).
- Harp – magical and nocturnal atmosphere.

Dramaturgical Function by Acts:

- Act I – stability and social convention.
- Act II – poetry, mystery, and pure love.
- Act III – seduction, illusion, and conflict.
- Act IV – tragedy, catharsis, and transfiguration.

Harold C. Schonberg observed that the world of ballet — “splendor, pomp, opulence, and supple rhythms”⁷ - constantly reappears in Tchaikovsky’s music.

1.11. Odette vs. Odile – Comparative Analysis

Odette – The White Swan

- luminous and airy timbre;
- soft, legato attack;
- restrained dynamics (pp–mp);
- flexible rubato;
- transparent orchestration.

Odile – The Black Swan

- dense and tense timbre;
- precise and articulated attack;
- broad dynamics (mf–ff);
- strict rhythm;
- brilliant orchestration with active brass.

The difference lies not only in tempo, but also in the quality of sound and attack.

1.12. Scenic Reinterpretations and the Vision of Yuri Grigorovich

Grigorovich’s 1969 production transforms the conflict into an inner psychological struggle, with Rothbart becoming Siegfried’s symbolic double. This interpretation approaches the symphonic aesthetics of the composer, for whom empathy toward characters was essential: “I cannot write music... if the characters do not win my sympathy”⁸.

1.13. Didactic Conclusion

Swan Lake represents an exemplary model for the development of students’ analytical competences because it combines:

- clear musical forms;
- expressive harmony;
- timbral dramaturgy;
- cyclic unity;
- the relationship between music, movement, and psychology.

For students, *Swan Lake* is an ideal model for:

⁶ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekk*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 301.

⁷ Schonberg, Harold. 2008. *The Lives of the Great Composers*. New York: W. W. Norton, p. 274.

⁸ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekk*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 188.

- correlating microform and macrostructure: each dance has its own harmonic logic, yet all fit into a coherent tonal plan;
- harmonic leitmotif analysis: not only melodies but also types of progressions, cadences, and modulations function as character motifs;
- symbolic reading of harmony: the major–minor alternation, chromaticism, diminished and Neapolitan chords are not mere effects but musical translations of the conflict between love, illusion, and destiny.

For the discipline *Rhythm and Musical Forms*, the ballet offers an ideal framework of study, since “music does not illustrate dance, but generates it.”

2. Case Study – „*The Sleeping Beauty*”

2.1. Introduction: Context of the Genesis

The Sleeping Beauty (1890) represents the culmination of Tchaikovsky’s ballet creation. Commissioned by the Imperial Theatres and created in collaboration with Marius Petipa, the ballet is distinguished by monumentality, formal rigor, and an expansive symphonic conception. Unlike *Swan Lake*, where the conflict is inner and symbolic, the dramaturgy here is built upon a classical, almost solemn architecture, in which order, balance, and proportion become fundamental aesthetic principles.

Tchaikovsky himself emphasized the importance of form and discipline in artistic creation: “One must work constantly, and a self-respecting artist has no right to remain idle... Only persistent work allowed me to achieve a form corresponding to the content”⁹ (Tchaikovsky, letter to N. von Meck). This conception is reflected exemplarily in the structure of the ballet.

2.2. Musical Architecture: The Leitmotif Technique

The Sleeping Beauty is the ballet in which Tchaikovsky employs the leitmotif technique most systematically, approaching the symphonic logic of the programmatic poem. In a letter to Nadezhda von Meck, the composer stated: “All music is programmatic... the ability of music to express ideas, feelings, and emotions”¹⁰.

In this ballet, the leitmotifs are not simple thematic labels, but generative structures shaping the entire discourse:

- Aurora’s Leitmotif – luminous, diatonic, associated with purity and grace.
- The Lilac Fairy’s Leitmotif – calm and protective, with an ascending melodic profile.
- Carabosse’s Leitmotif – chromatic, tense, with fragmented rhythm.

These motives return transformed according to the dramatic context, contributing to the cyclic unity of the work.

2.3. Symphonism and Orchestral Innovation

The ballet is conceived as a genuine symphonic fresco. The orchestration is broad and brilliant, with carefully planned timbral distribution. Conscious of the Russian musical tradition, Tchaikovsky affirmed: “Numerous Russian symphonic compositions have been written... all are contained in *Kamarinskaya*, just as the oak is contained in the acorn”¹¹.

In *The Sleeping Beauty*, this tradition manifests itself through:

- strings functioning as the architectural foundation and carriers of broad melodic arches;
- woodwinds individualizing the characters (the flute associated with Aurora, the clarinet with pastoral moments);

⁹ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekk*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 259.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 301.

¹¹ Maes, Francis. 2002. *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 45.

- brass instruments providing monumentality to court scenes;
- harp and celesta creating the magical atmosphere of the fairy-tale world.

Symphonism is not decorative, but structural: each musical section contributes to the dramaturgical construction.

2.4. *The Relationship between Music and Choreography: Creative Mathematics*

The collaboration between Tchaikovsky and Petipa was one of the most fruitful in ballet history. Petipa provided the composer with an extremely detailed choreographic plan, and Tchaikovsky responded with music of remarkable architectural precision.

This „creative mathematics” manifests itself through:

- symmetry of forms (paired dances and mirrored variations);
- the exact relationship between musical phrase and movement;
- alternation between virtuoso sections and lyrical moments;
- rhythmic clarity necessary for academic classical dance.

Tchaikovsky rejected the idea that ballet music was inferior: „Do you understand ballet music as merely any cheerful melody with dance rhythm?... I do not understand at all how ballet music can contain anything reprehensible”¹².

In *The Sleeping Beauty*, this conception becomes evident: music does not merely accompany dance, but structures it.

2.5. *General Framework of the Harmonic Language*

The ballet functions as a „*theatricalized classical symphony*”, and harmony is the element that provides stylistic unity and nobility to the musical discourse. Here, Tchaikovsky adopts a brighter, more stable, and ceremonial tonal language in which:

- Tonality defines the order, splendor, and hierarchy of the courtly world.
- The major–minor alternation carries symbolic meaning (blessing vs. threat, grace vs. fatality).
- Chromaticism is more discreet than in *Swan Lake*, but appears in moments associated with Carabosse or magical interventions.
- Modulations are elegant, classical, often moving through the circle of fifths.

¹² Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k S. I. Taneevu*. Moskva–Leningrad: Muzgiz, p. 112.

SUITE
pour grand orchestre, tirée de la partition du ballet
„LA BELLE AU BOIS DORMANT“
de P. TCHAIKOWSKY, OP. 66.
№ 1. INTRODUCTION. LA FÉE DES LILAS.

Allegro vivace.

Flauto piccolo.
Flauto I.
Flauto II.
Oboi.
Corno inglese.
Clarinetti in A.
Fagotti.
I.
II.
Corni in F III.
IV.
Pistoni in A.
Trombe in A.
Tromboni tenori
Trombone basso
e Tuba.
Timpani A, B, H.
Piatti e gr. Cassa.
Arpa.
Violini I.
Violini II.
Viole.
Violoncelli.
C-Bassi.

Allegro vivace.

Example No. 4. P. I. Tchaikovsky. *The Sleeping Beauty*. Measures 1–3

Aurora's Theme and Its Tonal Field

Melodic and Harmonic Profile

Aurora's theme is luminous and graceful, predominantly in the major mode, with an ascending line that suggests purity and nobility.

Tonal Frameworks:

- It relies on the I–V–I relationship, with frequent passages through the subdominant (IV) to create a pastoral character.
- Borrowed chords from the parallel minor appear in moments foreshadowing destiny (the spindle scene).

Chromaticism:

- Used as ornamentation (appoggiaturas, chromatic passing tones), not as destabilization.
- In tense moments, chromaticism appears in the bass, suggesting Carabosse's threat.

Cadences:

- Perfect cadences (V–I) predominate, symbolizing order and aristocratic decorum.
- In lyrical scenes, plagal cadences (IV–I) appear, producing an effect of calm and purity.

Harmonic Design Across the Acts
Act I – Splendor, Innocence, Order

Nº 5. Valse.

Allegro. (Tempo di Valse.)

Allegro. (Tempo di Valse.)

Example No. 5. Sleeping Beauty. Waltz. Measures 1-6

- Predominant tonalities: bright major keys (E major, G major).
- Harmony: diatonic, stable, with classical progressions (I–IV–V–I).
- Dramaturgical role: expresses the order of the royal world and the joy surrounding Aurora's birth.
- Modulations: close, elegant, often through secondary dominants.

Act II – Dreaming, Nostalgia, Magic. In the following example, we can identify the orchestral interlude known as the *Panorama*, which leads Prince Désiré toward Aurora's castle.

№ 4. Panorama.

Andantino. (♩ = 120.)

Flauto piccolo.

Flauto I.

Flauto II.

Oboi.

Coro inglese.

Clarinetti in B.

Fagotti.

Cori in F I. II. III. IV.

Violoni in B.

Trombe in B.

Violoni tenori.

Violoni basso e Tuba.

Violoni in G, D.

Arpa.

Violini I.

Violini II.

Viola.

Violoncello.

Contrabassi.

Andantino. (♩ = 120.)

Example No. 6. Sleeping Beauty. Panorama. Measures 1-4

- Tonalties: lyrical minor, mixolydian inflections, pastel colors.
- Harmony:
 - Dominant pedal points in scenes with the Lilac Fairy.
 - Diminished chords associated with Carabosse.
 - Third-related modulations (E major → C major → A major) suggesting the transition into the dream world.
- Cadences: often delayed, creating a sense of suspended time.

Act III – Apotheosis, Triumph, Restored Order

Nº 3. Pas de caractère.
Le Chat botté et la chatte blanche.

Allegro moderato. (♩ : 92.)

Allegro moderato. (♩ : 92.)

Example No. 7. Sleeping Beauty. Character pitch. Measures 1-7

- Tonalties: triumphant major keys (D major, A major).
 - Harmony:
 - Frequent perfect cadences.
 - Fanfare-like progressions (V7–I).
 - Character dances employ national modes but remain integrated into a classical tonal framework.
 - Dramaturgical role: harmony becomes a symbol of restored order and the triumph of good.
- The Major–Minor Alternation as Symbol*
- Aurora: bright major, with brief shifts to minor in moments of danger.
 - Carabosse: chromatic minor, diminished chords, Neapolitan (bII).
 - Lilac Fairy: pastoral major, plagal cadences, transparent harmonies.
- Rhythm, Agogics, and Harmony*
- Act I: regular rhythms, stable harmony → splendor and order.
 - Act II: slow pulse, floating harmony → dream and magic.
 - Act III: ceremonial rhythms, triumphant harmony → apotheosis.
- Harmonic Profile of the Characters*

Aurora

- Bright major, added-sixth chords, perfect cadences.

Carabosse

- Chromatic minor, VII⁷, bII, abrupt modulations.

Lilac Fairy

- Diatonic harmonies, pedal points, plagal cadences.

2.6. Comparative Chart – *The Lilac Fairy* vs. *Carabosse* (Timbral Perspective)

The Lilac Fairy

- luminous and warm timbre;
- predominance of woodwinds and middle-register strings;
- ascending, linear melody;
- flexible agogics;
- dramaturgical function: protection, balance, and harmony.

Carabosse

- dark and tense timbre;
- chromaticism, dissonances, and harsh accents;
- dominant role of brass and percussion;
- fragmented rhythm and ostinato;
- dramaturgical function: threat, destabilization, and conflict.

This timbral opposition constitutes one of the clearest demonstrations of Tchaikovsky's programmatic thinking.

2.7. Didactic Conclusion

The Sleeping Beauty represents an ideal model for the study of:

- the leitmotif technique;
- the relationship between music and choreography;
- symphonism applied to ballet;
- rigorous formal construction;
- timbral dramaturgy.

The ballet serves as a model for:

- analyzing classical harmony integrated into dramaturgy,
- studying tonal symbolism,
- understanding the relationship between character and harmonic language.

For students, the ballet provides an example of balance between expression and form, lyricism and monumentality. Tchaikovsky himself emphasized the importance of this synthesis: "What has been written passionately must be critically examined... my compositions will never be perfect examples of form, but I can correct what is flawed in my musical nature"¹³.

From a didactic perspective, this work becomes an essential instrument for understanding the way form, timbre, and dramaturgy intertwine within a unified artistic construction.

3. Case Study – *The Nutcracker*

3.1. Introduction: *The Nutcracker* – A Work of Artistic Maturity

The Nutcracker (1892) represents Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's final contribution to the ballet genre and one of the most refined syntheses of his symphonic thinking. Commissioned by the Imperial Theatres and created in collaboration with Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, the ballet is distinguished by its oneiric atmosphere, innovative orchestration, and dramaturgy

¹³ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekk*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 258.

constructed upon the alternation between reality and fantasy.

During this period, Tchaikovsky attained full artistic maturity, characterized by discipline, self-control, and formal rigor. In a letter, the composer confessed.

This conception is reflected in the clear and balanced architecture of the ballet.

3.2. *Microstructures and Timbral Innovation*

The Nutcracker is the ballet in which Tchaikovsky explores microstructures most intensively - miniature dances, variations, and short tableaux integrated into a coherent symphonic flow. Each number possesses a distinct timbral identity, and the orchestra becomes a laboratory of sonic colors.

Major Timbral Innovations:

- Celesta (used for the first time in Russia) — symbol of the magical world, associated with the Sugar Plum Fairy;
- Woodwinds in the upper register — suggesting the childish and playful atmosphere;
- Pizzicato strings — used in miniature dances;
- Restrained brass writing — avoiding excessive monumentality.

Tchaikovsky believed that music should express ideas and emotions rather than merely decorate. In *The Nutcracker*, programmatic expression is subtle and poetic, filtered through Clara's childlike sensibility.

3.3. *Dramatic Architecture: From Realism to Fantasmagoria*

The ballet is constructed upon a dual dramaturgical perspective:

Act I – Festive Realism

- the domestic atmosphere of the Stahlbaum family;
- salon dances, regular rhythms, and luminous orchestration;
- the symbolic conflict: transition from childhood to adolescence.

Act II – Fantasmagoria

- the Land of Sweets governed by the Sugar Plum Fairy;
- character dances (Arabian, Spanish, Chinese) conceived as timbral miniatures;
- the apotheotic finale, constructed like a miniature symphony.

This transition from reality to fantasy reflects the composer's sensibility, as he confessed: "I cannot write music... if the characters do not win my sympathy"¹⁴.

Clara, Fritz, Drosselmeyer, and the Sugar Plum Fairy thus become emotionally charged figures rather than simple fairy-tale characters.

3.4. *Oneiric Symphonism: The Waltz of the Snowflakes*

The Waltz of the Snowflakes is one of the most poetic pages of Tchaikovsky's ballet creation. Its symphonic structure is based on:

- superimposed timbral layers;
- string tremolos;
- dialogues between woodwinds and harps;
- continuous modulations;
- crescendo dynamics.

The result is music suggesting movement, light, fragility, and the weightlessness of snowflakes. In the spirit of Boris Asafiev's observation — "Talent is talent, but the skill of construction is skill"¹⁵ - this section demonstrates both the composer's melodic imagination and his architectural mastery.

¹⁴ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekh*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 188.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 412.

3.5. General Framework of the Harmonic Language

Here, harmony becomes playful, colorful, and magical, with a wide variety of modes, tonalities, and orchestral colors. Tchaikovsky employs:

- Bright tonalities for the world of childhood.
- Exotic minor modes for the character dances.
- Delicate chromaticism for magic and transformation.
- Rapid modulations to suggest dynamism and fantasy.

Here is an example from the Introduction (before Act I), the *Miniature Overture*, which opens the entire ballet.

ЩЕЛКУНЧИК CASSE-NOISETTE

**П. ЧАЙКОВСКИЙ
P. TCHAIKOVSKY**

Увертюра Ouverture

Allegro giusto

2 Flauti
Flauto piccolo
2 Oboi
2 Clarinetti (B)
2 Fagotti
2 Corni (F)
Triangolo
Violini I divisi
Violini II divisi
Viole divisi

Example No. 7. *The Nutcracker*. Overture. Measures 1–7

Clara's Theme and Its Tonal Field

Melodic and Harmonic Profile

Clara's theme is warm and innocent, predominantly in the major mode, with a simple, diatonic line.

Tonal Frameworks:

- I–V–I, with passages through VI and IV to create a pastoral character.
- In dreamlike moments, borrowings from the parallel minor appear.

Chromaticism:

- Minimal, used only as ornamentation.

Cadences:

- Perfect cadences predominate, symbolizing the purity of childhood.

Harmonic Design Across the Acts

Act I – The Real World, Childhood, Celebration

Марш 2 Marche

- Tonalties: warm major keys (G, D, A).
- Harmony: diatonic, stable, with simple progressions.
- Soldiers' Dance: secondary dominants, martial rhythm.
- Christmas Tree Scene: ascending chromaticism in the bass → the tree's magical growth.

Act II – The Fantastic World, The Kingdom of Sweets

- Tonalties: highly varied, each dance has its own color.
- Harmony:
 - Arabian Dance: harmonic minor, augmented seconds, oriental chromaticism.
 - Chinese Dance: pentatonicism, static harmony.
 - Trepak: rapid progressions, strong dominants.
 - Waltz of the Flowers: third-related modulations, Neapolitan sixth chords.
- Cadences: frequently perfect, marking the conclusion of each dance.

The Major–Minor Alternation as Symbol

- Clara: warm, stable major.
- Nutcracker/Prince: heroic major, secondary dominants.

- Mouse King: chromatic minor, VII7, bII.
- Exotic dances: specific minor modes (harmonic, melodic), oriental scales.

Rhythm, Agogics, and Harmony

- Act I: regular rhythms, simple harmony → realism and childhood.
- Act II: varied rhythms, colorful harmony → enchantment and cultural diversity.

Harmonic Profile of the Characters

Clara

- Diatonic major, perfect cadences, transparent harmony.

The Prince

- Heroic major, secondary dominants, ascending progressions.

Mouse King

- Chromatic minor, diminished chords, abrupt modulations.

3.6. Conclusions Regarding The Nutcracker

The Nutcracker represents a synthesis of:

- poetic lyricism;
- timbral innovation;
- formal miniature;
- mature symphonism;
- oneiric dramaturgy.

The ballet is ideal for:

- analyzing exotic modes and harmonies,
- studying the relationship between character and harmonic language,
- understanding rapid modulations as a dramaturgical device.

In this ballet, that world takes the form of a childlike universe filtered through Clara's innocent sensibility.

3.7. Didactic Conclusion

For the discipline *Rhythm and Musical Forms*, *The Nutcracker* constitutes ideal material for:

- the analysis of microstructures;
- the study of modern timbrality;
- understanding the relationship between miniature and symphonism;
- observing how music generates scenic movement;
- practicing the analysis of sonic dramaturgy.

The ballet demonstrates that, in Tchaikovsky's vision, inspiration is not accidental but the result of discipline: "Inspiration is a guest that does not visit the lazy"¹⁶.

(Tchaikovsky, apud Poznansky).

For students, this work becomes an example of controlled creativity, in which poetic imagination is supported by a solid formal architecture.

4. The Tchaikovskian Ballet Trilogy – A Comparative Musicological Study

The Tchaikovskian ballet trilogy — *Swan Lake* (1877), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), and *The Nutcracker* (1892) — represents one of the most coherent aesthetic constructions of late Romanticism. Although each ballet belongs to a distinct expressive universe, they share a common vision of musical form, harmony, and sonic dramaturgy, reflecting the composer's evolution from symbolic lyricism to classicizing monumentality and, ultimately, to poetic

¹⁶ Chaikovsky, P. I. 1953. *Pisma k N. F. fon Mekh*. Moskva: Muzgiz, p. 349.

miniaturism. Tchaikovsky often defined his creative process through empathy and discipline, emphasizing that his music arises from emotional attachment to characters and from structural rigor — principles visible throughout the entire trilogy.

4.1. Architectonics and Macrostructure of Form

The three ballets share an organization into acts, yet Tchaikovsky constructs the macroform differently in each case, in accordance with the dramaturgical nature of the work.

Swan Lake

- dual architecture (real vs. fantastic);
- cyclic unity based on the transformation of the Swan Theme;
- symbolic dramaturgy centered on inner conflict and destiny.

The Sleeping Beauty

- the most classical and monumental architecture of the trilogy;
- formal symmetry and rigorous proportions;
- a fresco-like ceremonial structure with a representative function.

The Nutcracker

- two-level architecture (realism → dreamlike);
- a succession of miniature tableaux, each with its own identity;
- flexible, poetic structure oriented toward the child's imagination.

Comparatively, the trilogy illustrates an evolution of formal thinking: from lyrical symbolism (*Swan Lake*) to academic monumentality (*Sleeping Beauty*), and then to coloristic miniaturism (*The Nutcracker*). This maturation confirms Asafiev's observation that „the skill of construction” is fundamental to Tchaikovsky's art.

4.2. Melodic Aesthetics and Thematic Function

Melody is the expressive core of the trilogy, and its profile adapts to each dramaturgical universe.

Swan Lake

- lyrical, descending, elegiac melody;
- the Swan Theme functions as a psychological leitmotif;
- vocal profile, close to the lied tradition, with broad phrases.

The Sleeping Beauty

- diatonic, luminous melody with classical balance;
- leitmotifs with architectural function (Aurora, the Lilac Fairy);
- ceremonial, noble character.

The Nutcracker

- miniature, graceful melody built from short motives;
- playful profile associated with childhood;
- dance themes with strong timbral identity.

In all three ballets, melody is not mere ornament but a carrier of psychological and dramaturgical meaning, defining the character and function of each scene.

4.3. Harmonic Language and Rhythm

Integrating harmonic analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the stylistic differences among the three ballets.

Harmony

- *Swan Lake* Symbolic major–minor alternations, expressive chromaticism, diminished chords associated with conflict, third-related modulations marking the passage between real and fantastic.

- *The Sleeping Beauty* Stable, classicizing harmony with diatonic progressions, perfect cadences, and elegant modulations through the circle of fifths; chromaticism appears only in moments of magic or threat.

- The Nutcracker Coloristic harmony with exotic modes (Arabian, Chinese), rapid modulations, altered chords, and timbral effects integrated into the harmonic structure.

Rhythm

- Swan Lake: elastic pulse, rubato, lyrical rhythms supporting psychological tension.
- Sleeping Beauty: clear, symmetrical rhythms suited to academic and ceremonial dance.

- Nutcracker: playful, dance-like, miniature rhythms emphasizing the character of each tableau.

Thus, each ballet explores a distinct rhythmic-harmonic universe adapted to its dramaturgical function.

4.4. *Orchestration and the Phenomenology of Timbre*

Orchestration is the unifying element of the trilogy, yet also the space where aesthetic differences become most visible. Tchaikovsky uses timbre as a narrative instrument, in line with his programmatic conception of musical expressivity.

Swan Lake

- oboe — symbol of Odette's fragility;
- strings — lyricism and interiority;
- brass — destiny, conflict, dark magic.

The Sleeping Beauty

- monumental orchestra with ceremonial function;
- woodwinds differentiate characters;
- brass confer splendor and authority.

The Nutcracker

- celesta — magic and enchantment (Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy);
- pizzicato — miniature and playfulness;
- exotic timbres in the character dances.

In all three ballets, timbre becomes an essential dramaturgical element, confirming Schonberg's observation regarding the "brilliance and opulence" of Tchaikovsky's balletic world.

4.5. *Concluding Synthesis*

The Tchaikovsky ballet trilogy represents:

- a synthesis of lyricism, symphonism, and scenic dramaturgy;
- an evolution from symbolic (*Swan Lake*) to monumental (*Sleeping Beauty*) and then to poetic (*The Nutcracker*);
- a model of integrating musical forms into narrative construction;
- a demonstration of music's capacity to generate movement and meaning, not merely accompany it.

From a didactic perspective, the trilogy offers students an ideal framework for:

- analyzing musical forms,
- studying expressive harmony and tonal functions,
- understanding timbral dramaturgy,
- practicing comparative thinking,
- developing analytical writing skills.

Tchaikovsky himself summarized this vision: "What has been written with passion must be examined critically... my compositions will never be perfect examples of form, but I can correct what is wrong in my musical nature." The trilogy demonstrates precisely this maturation: an art in which emotion and form achieve balance, and music becomes a language of psychology, movement, and inner worlds.

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