

## CHRISTMAS WITH SEPTURA

The seasonal celebration of Christmas has been the inspiration for so many great musical masterpieces, and brass instruments are a vital part of this festive musical fabric. Perhaps the greatest secular Christmas masterpiece is Tchaikovsky's ballet, *The Nutcracker*. Composed in 1892 with a libretto based on Alexandre Dumas's adaptation of ETA Hoffmann's story, *The Nutcracker* is set on Christmas Eve, and tells the story of a young girl, Clara, whose favourite present, a nutcracker shaped like a little man, turns into a handsome prince at midnight. Septura performs a selection of movements from the ballet, starting with the energetic Miniature Overture which, with its restless moto perpetuo rhythms, conjures all of the excitement of Christmas Eve. As night falls the children burst into the living room and Fritz (Clara's brother) performs a March with his squadron of toy soldiers, with crisp rhythmic trumpets eventually succumbing to the chaotic bellowing of the low brass. The children enthusiastically Galop around the room (our trumpets fly around acrobatically), before their parents and the guests from the town enter with a little more grandeur (the trombones take the tune). All gathered together, they begin a rustic dance.

The festivities are interrupted by angular music, very low in the trumpet range, heralding the Arrival of Drosselmeyer, an eccentric magician and toymaker, and Clara's godfather. He has brought presents: for Clara, a large doll, which dances a graceful waltz, to the tune of a low trumpet; and for Fritz, a soldier which, once wound up, springs into a crazed mechanical dance of its own. Drosselmeyer then reveals a final gift: a wooden nutcracker, carved into the shape of a little man. Clara loves it, but Fritz tries to crack too big a nut, and breaks it. Clara tries to console the broken little man with a Berceuse (lullaby), played gently by the E-flat trumpet, but Fritz and his friends keep interrupting with a din of toy trumpets and drums – here we have had to expand our forces to include a piccolo "toy" trumpet, ratchet, and mouth siren. The commotion only ends when everyone joins together to dance a hefty German folk dance, the Grandfather's Dance.

The guests depart and the family go to bed, but in the middle of the night Clara wakes and nervously tiptoes downstairs to tend to her beloved nutcracker. As the clock strikes midnight, the Christmas tree grows ever larger in front of Clara and the Nutcracker. An almost Wagnerian endless melody grows through the trumpets, accompanied by restless movement in the trombones, reaching a massive climax that unleashes the full force of the septet as the Nutcracker grows to become a life-size Prince.

Suddenly there is a pattering of tiny feet, as an army of mice appears from under the floorboards and arrange themselves for The Battle. A shot is fired and Tchaikovsky's score vividly conjures the chaos of the battlefield: calls to arms ring out through the septet; the rhythmic scampering of mice is heard above a commanding virtuosic tuba solo; and the mechanical legions of Fritz's hussars are reinforced by howling harlequins, clowns and jumping jacks. Unable to bear it any longer, Clara throws her slipper with all her might at the King of the Mice, and with a ferocious *sforzando* he is knocked unconscious. With dizzying semiquavers the whole room begins to swirl, and Clara faints.

As she awakes, Tchaikovsky introduces the most beautiful music of the entire ballet, with another rapturous endless melody played first by the lowest trumpet. Clara finds herself in A Forest of Fir Trees in Winter brightly lit by gnomes carrying flaming torches. The music

builds to a glorious climax as she looks around to see the Nutcracker standing beside her, now transformed into a charming Prince.

Clara and the Prince travel through the Land of Sweets, to the enchanted palace of Confituremburg. A fanfare heralds their arrival and the Sugar-Plum Fairy, ruling in the Prince's absence, commands exotic sweets to dance in honour of the couple. Le Chocolat is first, with a flamboyant Spanish trumpet melody giving way to graceful duetting trombones with castanet accompaniment. Le Café evokes the dusky Arabian desert with relentless low brass rhythms underpinning mysterious shifting harmonies below the trumpet melody. In contrast, the Trepak is an energetic Cossack candy-cane dance, featuring virtuosic agility in the bass trombone and tuba. The septet is muted to depict the delicate marzipan flutes of the shy Mirlitons. Then the Sugar-Plum Fairy herself takes to the stage. Her surprisingly graceful dance calls for a uniquely ethereal sound – Tchaikovsky's original uses the celeste, and here we adopt three harmon-muted trumpets.

The Prince thanks Clara for saving his life and to show his gratitude he invites her to reign with him in the Land of Sweets. She accepts and everyone joins together in an ecstatic waltz – made even more joyful by the brassy brilliance of the septet – to celebrate the new rulers of Confituremburg.

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