

# DANCE OF THE SUGAR PLUM FAIRY - TCHAIKOVSKY

## Context

*Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is the most famous dance in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. In the ballet, Clara and her brother Franz receive a nutcracker as a Christmas gift. Unfortunately, Franz breaks the nutcracker and Clara sadly places it with her new doll in a cradle. During the night, when she peeps into the cradle, she gets a fright when she sees some mice scurrying around in the room. The rest of the ballet seems to take place in a dream. In the battle between the mice and the toy soldiers, Clara saves the nutcracker by flinging her shoe at the king of the mice. The nutcracker turns into a handsome Prince and invites Clara to visit the Land of Sweets with him. This is where the Sugar-Plum Fairy does her dance.

## Teaching and Learning

- This is a dance in 2-time.
- The three main instrumental sounds are produced by the celesta, the bass clarinet and the plucked strings.
- A celesta is like a small piano and a bass clarinet looks a bit like a saxophone.



- The main instrumental features are the contrasting registers – high and low sounds.
- Useful words for describing the music: tinkly, scary, magical, dainty, toys, nutcracker, mice, kingdom of sweets, dream, ballet.
- Here is an outline score of the first few bars. *Pizzicato* (*pizz.*) means ‘plucked’.

*Sugar-Plum Fairy*

The image shows a musical score for the first few bars of the Sugar-Plum Fairy dance. It is written in 2/4 time and features three staves. The top staff is for the celesta, the middle for the bass clarinet, and the bottom for the plucked strings. The celesta part begins with a rest, followed by a series of eighth notes and a sixteenth-note run. The bass clarinet and plucked strings parts consist of rhythmic patterns of eighth notes and quarter notes. The score includes dynamic markings such as *8<sup>va</sup>* and *8<sup>vb</sup>*, and the instruction *pizz.* for plucked strings.

## Activities for Children

- The children stand in a circle and tiptoe around in time to the music to reinforce their sense of beat and tempo.
- They keep their arms up high for the tinkly celesta tune and then crouch down low when the growly bass clarinet part is heard, to distinguish between high and low registers.
- The full story on which the ballet is based could be read to the children. The story is called *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. It was written in 1816 by E. T. A. Hoffmann.
- Ask the children to imagine their own favourite toys coming alive and to describe what happens. Remind them of the *Toy Story* films.
- The children will understand the setting of the piece better when they are colouring in the image of the fairy which has details such as sweets, stars and a Christmas tree.

