

ART OF PUPPETS AND MARIONETTES

The Nutcracker

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Contemporary/Classical

Culture: North American/Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

Jim Gamble, founding director of the **Art of Puppets and Marionettes**, is an internationally respected puppet designer and performer known for his appealing productions and beautifully crafted puppets. His dynamic company, founded in 1972 and composed of accomplished puppeteers and puppet makers, has an eclectic repertoire that includes *Peter and the Wolf*, *Carnival of the Animals*, *The Nutcracker*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Tales of the Ashanti* and *Myths of the Aztecs*. Each production features familiar classical music or an original score. Strongly committed to education, the company performs in hundreds of California schools annually and in theatres and festivals throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In 2001, Jim Gamble was the only American to perform at the Obratsov Puppet Theatre in Moscow in celebration of 100 Years of Russian Puppetry. National appearances include the Children's Theatre Series in Hawaii and the International Children's Festival in San Diego. Among the company's many awards are the *Parents Choice* and *Golden Apple* awards for their video series, and the *President's Award* from the *Puppeteers of America*.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Tchaikovsky's enchanting *Nutcracker Suite* provides the musical background for this puppet production of *The Nutcracker*. Based on the original story, Jim Gamble's adaptation of the classic holiday ballet is a marionette presentation. As the performance unfolds, the Sugar Plum Fairy guides the audience through a fantasy puppet world where toy soldiers, Russian Cossack acrobats, Arabian dancers, Chinese dragons, and even a Christmas tree come to life. The traditional duel of the evil Rat King and the Nutcracker hero caps the performance and creates a sparkling finale. The 45-minute show also includes an informative short piece entitled "The Art of Puppetry" which showcases various types of puppets, how to make and operate them, and how to use them in the classroom.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the first Russian composer to gain international fame, was a master of orchestration with a superb talent for blending instrumental sounds and achieving rousing orchestral effects. Born in Votkinsk in May of 1840, Tchaikovsky began to compose at the age of 10. In 1866, he completed a four-year study of music under pianist and composer Anton Rubenstein at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Shortly thereafter, this sensitive man who struggled with periods of depression began composing seriously and teaching at the Moscow Conservatory of Music. Though often described as a composer of melancholy music, he had a broad emotional and musical range which included the spirited *1812 Overture*, the lyrical symphonic poem *Romeo and Juliet*, powerful symphonies, and the lively ballet *Nutcracker Suite*.

Deeply influenced by the work of Mozart, a western European, and Mikhail Glinka, a Russian, Tchaikovsky's work represents a blend of the spirits of these two very different composers. First among his fellow Russian composers to write music in the Western manner, Tchaikovsky remained fully Russian in his feelings and incorporated quotations from Russian folk melodies into his work. Assured of an income by a wealthy benefactor, he left the Moscow Conservatory in 1877 to concentrate on composing. Tchaikovsky traveled widely and took part in the opening of New York's Carnegie Hall in 1891. He died of cholera in November, 1893 at the age of 53.

The term *marionette* came into usage during the Middle Ages when the Nativity Play was performed with string puppets. The name for the Virgin Mary, known as "little Mary," evolved into "Mari-onette." Unique because they portray characters from head to toe, marionettes move very freely, and are manipulated by a combination of strings, wires, or rods attached to hand-held controls above the puppets. They can fly or dance, literally fall apart and reassemble themselves, or magically transform from one being to another before the audience's eyes. This freedom of movement also makes the marionette the most difficult kind of puppet to control.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What character or musical segment of *The Nutcracker* did you find most memorable? Why?
- Did the differences in the rhythms, melodies or moods of the music affect the movement of the puppets? In what ways?
- Were there certain musical 'themes' that occurred more than once or were repeated throughout *The Nutcracker*?
- The puppets used in *The Nutcracker* are called *marionettes*. What are some of the unique characteristics of a marionette?

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

❖ Hold a storytelling hour with your class using some of their favorite folk tales or fairy tales. Ask students to select a character from one of the stories to make as a puppet. On a simple puppet stage or platform in the front of your class, have students use their puppets to pantomime the action of the story as you read along. Or have students take on the voices of the puppet characters and bring the story to life in a puppet play.

⊗ Improvisation involves making up dialogue and action without a written script. It is a fun and interesting way to develop imaginative puppet scenarios. Have students choose a partner and give each duo a situation to

improvise. As a guideline for structure, stress that each scene should have a beginning, middle and end. The characters and conflict should be introduced in the beginning, developed in the middle, and resolved at the end. After improvising, have students share their work with the class.

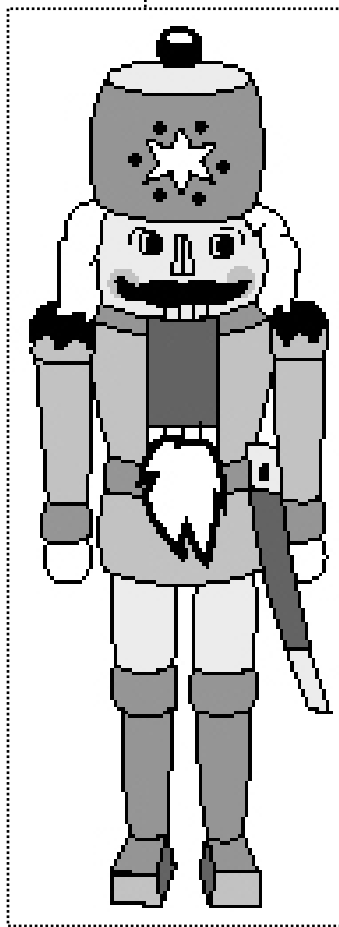
⇒ *The Nutcracker* is a classic ballet that is a traditional part of many families' winter holiday celebrations. Ask students to describe any special foods, music, rituals, dance or traditions that might be a part of their family's winter holiday celebrations. Traditions may include visits to relatives, vacation trips or other family events. Encourage students to share their traditions with the class.

▶ In 1866, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky began composing seriously. Listen again to *The Nutcracker Suite* and select two pieces to discuss. Can you identify the themes of each? What is the mood of each? What are some of the characteristics of each selection? Describe the characteristics or qualities of each. Do they illuminate their titles?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

Marionettes have often been referred to as nothing more than 'pendulums with limbs.' Ideally, a marionette should do all the work while the puppeteer holds on and is aided by gravity and the pendulum effect. In the perfect marionette, the center of gravity of each piece of the puppet is calculated.

Tie a small object onto a piece of string. Hold the string in one hand and give the object a gentle push so it swings from side to side in an arced path, like a pendulum. Explore the concept of the pendulum and how it is aided by gravity. Construct a simple 'jumping jack', the simplest stringed marionette. Using cardboard and strong thread (or brads), draw a large body, then cut out the basic parts -- head, torso, legs and arms. Rotate the limbs to see what movement could take place when they are attached. The joints of the jumping jack work on overlapping circles pierced through the center of each, and then matched up. When you are satisfied with the movement potential, punch holes in the torso and each part where it will connect, then use thread to connect the pieces to the torso. Once you have completed the puppet, demonstrate the pendulum effect and consider the following question: How is this movement similar to the way a pendulum works?



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Randel, Don Michael (Ed.) *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1986.

Buetter, Barbara MacDonald. *Simple Puppets from Everyday Materials*. Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1998.

Legend:

- ⊗ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications