

PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

The Sleeping Beauty (1889)

Centuries before Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather waved their magic wands in Disney's animated classic of 1959, the story of the sleeping beauty had been conceived by French author Charles Perrault in 1697. It is Perrault's original fairy tale that is adapted for the second of Tchaikovsky's three ballets. Tchaikovsky's other two ballets are also fairy-tale-derived: *Swan Lake* (1877) and *The Nutcracker* (1892).

Essentially written in 40 days with minor revisions during rehearsal, *The Sleeping Beauty* was commissioned by the era's premiere ballet company, the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg (now the Mariinsky). The theater director, Ivan Vsevolozhsky proposed: "I am planning to write a libretto on *La belle au bois dormant* after Perrault's fairy tale. I would like a *mise en scene* in the style of Louis XIV, which would be a musical fantasia written in the spirit of Lully, Bach, Rameau, etc. If this idea appeals to you, then why not undertake to write the music? In the last act there would have to be quadrilles for all Perrault's fairy-tale characters—these should include *Puss in Boots*, *Hop o' My Thumb*, *Cinderella*, *Bluebeard*, etc." Tchaikovsky agreed with one caveat: he must first meet and collaborate with choreographer Marius Petipa.

Master-orchestrator Tchaikovsky built a massive, vivid score around the simple children's story. Although ending happily ever after, what the heroine must endure! Centered on the clash between good and evil (Carabosse vs. the Lilac Fairy), Tchaikovsky was able to employ his passion for the theme of fate and utilized his ability to craft memorable character leitmotifs.

In the Prologue, the king and queen are celebrating the christening of Princess Aurora. Invited fairies bestow gifts of beauty, enchantment, and talents on the child. Amid darkness and thunder, the uninvited wicked fairy Carabosse arrives and curses Aurora to die on her sixteenth birthday by pricking her finger on a spindle. The Lilac Fairy tempers the curse: she will not die, but sleep for 100 years and be awakened by a prince's kiss.

The first act fast-forwards to Aurora's sixteenth birthday party as she is courted by four foreign princes. A cloaked old lady (Carabosse) sneaks in with the gift of a spindle, despite knitting having been prohibited by the king to protect the princess. Aurora pricks her finger and falls into a deep sleep along with the entire kingdom.

Fast forward a whole century. In Act II the Lilac Fairy guides the Prince Désiré, who is on a hunting trip, to the sleeping kingdom and explains the predicament. Prince Désiré awakens Princess Aurora with a kiss. The kingdom also wakes, and a marriage is planned. The ballet concludes with the triumphant wedding ceremony including dances for various attending fairies and guests from other fairy tales.

While working on the orchestration, the composer wrote, "It seems to me that the music from this ballet will be amongst my best works. The subject is so poetical, it is so suited for music, that in composing it I was utterly absorbed, and wrote with a fervor and passion which always result in work of merit." After the staging, he felt the same: "Besides, I confess that I love working in a rush, I love the anticipation and the urgency! And yet this doesn't show itself at all in the quality of my works. Isn't *The Sleeping Beauty* perhaps the best of all my compositions, and yet I wrote in incredibly quickly."

Audience reaction was favorable, and reviews were generally positive, but the Tsar lukewarmly responded, “very nice.” It took some time for the ballet’s popularity to surge around Europe. But before long it was a resounding hit. Tchaikovsky and Petipa would go on to work together on *The Nutcracker*, but the composer wouldn’t live to bask in the success of either masterpiece. He died of cholera in 1893.

Ballet designer and art critic Alexandre Benois, thought that the music of *The Sleeping Beauty*, “really possesses so strong a power of suggestion that those who give themselves up to it are completely transported from reality into the magic world of fairy tale.”

- ♪ 1889 WORLD EVENTS: Charlie Chaplin is born, the Eiffel Tower opens, Mahler’s first symphony premieres
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: January 1890, St. Petersburg, Russia
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: this is the first time the SSO has performed the complete ballet