



1812 OVERTURE

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1880)



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By Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Russia)
Romantic (1880)

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Important Terms and Concepts

- * **Overture:** a musical “introduction.” Traditionally, overtures were instrumental works played at the beginning of operas and ballets. However, in the 19th century, composers began to write “concert overtures,” like the *1812 Overture*, that were intended to be performed as entirely separate works.
- **Musical Quotation:** short melodic segment borrowed from another work
- **Dynamics:** describes how loud or soft a piece of music is

BEHIND THE MUSIC



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893) was a Russian composer at the peak of the Romantic Period who was known for his open-hearted melodies, impressive harmonies, and emotional orchestration. After the death of his mother in 1854, Tchaikovsky’s father finally came to realize his son’s musical calling and invited the professional teacher Rudolph Kündinger to give him piano lessons. His work shows the influence of Italian operas, French ballets, and German symphony and song. His most famous works include *The Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake* ballets. The *1812 Overture*

is captivating because the music tells a story and creates the mood about the national unity of a country during a time of war.

Tchaikovsky was appointed to write the *1812 Overture* to commemorate Russia's victory over the French invasion of 1812. The piece begins with cellos and strings captivating the distraught mood of the Russian people after Napoleon's declaration of war. It then moves on to a lively horn rendition of the French national anthem to symbolize the arrival of French troops, followed by a Russian folk dance theme that symbolizes the growing Russian national unity. The Battle of Borodino is represented with an explosive climax using brass, percussion, and real cannons to illustrate the experience. With the onset of winter, and dwindling supplies, the French decide to retreat. This is represented with the Russian national anthem, commemorating the Russian victory!

ACTIVE LISTENING

BEFORE THE LESSON: Download the listening map (from https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwpMEIwYV_STbmp0Z01uVGF2QUk/view) and familiarize yourself with the way in which it lines up with the recording. Depending on the needs of your classroom, you may want to project the listening map for all the students, or print out individual copies for them.

1. Display the 1812 Overture poster (page 1) prominently. Say, "In 1880, the Russian composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was commissioned to create a piece of music that would celebrate his country's victory over Napoleonic French forces that invaded in 1812."

If you were Tchaikovsky, how would you respond to this commission? What kind of song would you create? What instruments would you use? How would you represent the battle between the French and Russian armies?

2. After listening to student answers, reveal: "One of the ways that Tchaikovsky depicted the battle was to use a musical quotation of each country's national anthem." (Be aware, however, that Tchaikovsky's use of these two anthems was anachronistic; neither was in use as a national anthem in 1812)
3. Play a snippet of *La Marseillaise* (French national anthem – see Resources, page 7) so that students will be able to identify the melody.

Explain to students that Tchaikovsky used **dynamics** (**volume: how loud or soft the music is**) to represent the progression of the battle.

Ask students what it might mean for the Marseillaise tune to be played **loudly (forte)** in the song? (*the French army is succeeding, advancing*)
What about when the tune is played more **quietly (piano)**? (*the French army in the distance, or losing ground*)

To demonstrate, play the following excerpts from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfCPVUQZ-6g>, and have students make guesses about what might be happening in the battle:

- 6:00 – 6:30
- 6:55 – 7:11
- 9:30 – 9:50
- 10:30 – 11:00
- 11:47 – 12:32

4. Say: **“Let’s listen to the turning point of the song – the Battle of Borodino, when the Russian army finally started to defeat the French forces, and Napoleon’s army began to retreat.”**

Show the listening map

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwpMEIwYV_STbmp0Z01uVGF2QUk/view), and if necessary, demonstrate how to follow along with the first line of the map. Point out the **dynamic** markings referenced in the listening map: pianissimo, piano, forte, crescendo, decrescendo.

The finale begins at 11:47 in the recording linked above, or you may choose to use this complete Youtube video instead:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2W1Wi2U9sQ>

If you are displaying the listening map for the whole classroom to see, invite students to come forward and follow along by pointing to the appropriate section.

5. After listening to the entire finale with the listening map, ask students: **“What instruments did you notice on the listening map?”**

Discuss the instrumental families represented.

Strings: violins

Brass: French horns, trumpets, trombone
 Percussion: cymbals, cannons**, bells, timpani, snare drums

***You may wish to discuss the cannon fire in more depth with students. Tchaikovsky's original score called for cannon shots to be fired within the piece. Today, most performances use recordings of cannon shots, bass drum, or tam-tam to represent the cannons.*

**8. Overall, how would you describe the mood of this piece?
 How did Tchaikovsky create this mood?**

GO DEEPER

OPTION 1. EXPLORING NATIONAL ANTHEMS

During this activity, students will each pick a country to research. They will then research and listen to that country's national anthem, and present the anthem to the rest of the class.

OPTION 2. SOUND EFFECTS

The 1812 overture uses cannon shots and church bells to represent the sounds of the battle and the village churches. In this activity, students will think about how they might be able to create other kinds of sound effects within music.

1. Listening

- a. The third movement of the "Pines of Rome" includes a recording of birds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4k45YTpnx4>. (Listen especially from 5:49 to the end).
- b. "Dance Macabre" (also referenced in the "Fossils" lesson) uses a xylophone to represent a dancing skeleton (1:32 – 2:00): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1j8Dv3PELs>

2. Composing

- a. Invite students to use available percussion instruments to depict the sounds of: a thunderstorm, the ocean, their home, etc.
- b. Lead students on a nature walk outside. Encourage them to find non-traditional percussion instruments in nature (i.e. banging acorn caps together; brushing pine straw over a hard surface, etc.) and share their findings with the class.

OPTION 3. MUSICAL CONNECTIONS: THE OVERTURE

During this activity, students will listen to other famous overtures.

1. Operatic Overtures:

- a. Overture from *Così fan tutte* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwwsbEjmWjU>

- b. Overture from *Carmen* by George Bizet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwwsbEjmWjU>

The Shreveport Symphony will perform in the Shreveport Opera's production of *Così Fan Tutte* on April 29, 2017! Learn more [here!](#)

2. Concert Overtures

- a. "Academic Festival Overture" by Johannes Brahms:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6cxcBhivec>

- b. "Festive Overture" by Dmitri Shostakovich:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gDZTah8J2A>

RESOURCES

YOUTUBE RECORDING:

- The entire overture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfCPVUQZ-6g>
- Finale section (which lines up with the listening map):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2W1Wi2U9sQ>

SHEET MUSIC: http://hz.imsip.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/ae/IMSLP23744-PMLP03587-Tchaikovsky_-_1812_Overture_orch_score_.pdf

LISTENING MAP:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwpMEIwYV_STbmp0Z01uVGF2QUk/view

"LA MARSEILLAISE" MELODY:



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- 1812 Overture Game: <http://games.usvsth3m.com/dance-dance-revolution-1812-overture-edition/>