

Meridian Music of the Week!

Issue No. 202 (based on previous Newsletter No.164 – September 2024)

Each week ALL our children will be listening to a piece of music as part of our music lessons. We'll be talking about it in class and discussing what we like, what we don't like and what it makes us think about. Parents/carers/family - why not join in and listen for yourself at home! All music is available **free** on YouTube as well as paid services such as iTunes and Spotify.



This week's music...

'1812 Overture' by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1880)

Listen to the WHOLE THING [HERE](#) (15mins)

Spectacular end-section with fireworks and real canons! [HERE](#)

Crazy heavy metal guitar version! [HERE](#)

Bonkers melodica version! [HERE](#)

Want to hear cats singing it?! [HERE](#)

Can you hear it in this swinging 60s pop record by [The Move](#)?

War! Battle! Armies! Cannons!

Let's start the new school year just like we did LAST year... with a BANG! There's a military flavour to our music this week. Many of our Meridian children have learned about the Battle of Waterloo, in 1815, in their history lessons. A battle where the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte fought unsuccessfully against the British and Prussian armies. BUT, only three years earlier, Napoleon faced **another** defeat – even though it seemed like a victory at the time. Napoleon's Grand Army decided to invade Russia and take control of Moscow. At the Battle of Borodino, it appeared that Napoleon was victorious. But, as his army slowly made their long, slow journey to Moscow, through the freezing Russian winter and deadly snow, many of his men died of exhaustion and starvation. When they finally arrived at the city, guess what? There was nobody there!

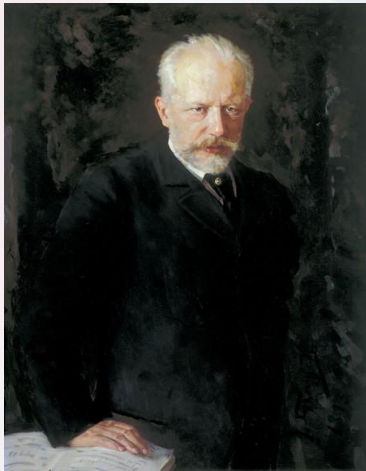
The Russians had played a trick on Napoleon. They realised they could never defeat his army but they **COULD** spoil his victory. They deserted the city that he wanted to conquer and set fire to many of its buildings! By the time Napoleon got there, there was hardly any city left for him to capture. The Russians had destroyed all the city's food supplies and farms. There was no way Napoleon could support his troops. Faced with this, Napoleon had no choice but to retreat with what was left of his army back through the snow.



Napoleon retreating from Moscow

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This week's music tells the tale of this important moment in military history. The overture is famous for its use of 'sound effects' – many performances use actual **cannons** in the music!



A painting of Tchaikovsky later in life.

The life of Tchaikovsky

Poor old Pyotr... He was born in a small Russian town in 1840 (one of six children) and his mother died when he was only 14 – something that upset Tchaikovsky immensely. He himself died aged only 53 – some people say he caught the disease cholera from drinking a glass of contaminated water at a restaurant! Unlike many other composers, he didn't start at a very young age. In fact, his parents sent him to study to be a lawyer. He didn't have professional piano lessons until he was 17 and didn't go to music college until he was 21. Because of this, he didn't have his first concert performed until he was already 25 years old (for comparison, Mozart was performing concerts of his own music at the age of 10!) Nevertheless, very soon he became the most famous composer in Russia and the first to become popular outside his home country

He wasn't a very good student when he was at music college, in fact, he didn't even bother to show up for his final music exam! The director of the college was very angry and refused to give him his diploma (certificate). Tchaikovsky got the last laugh though. Five years later the director of the college was sacked and by this time Tchaikovsky had become a famous composer – so they finally gave him his certificate!

Tchaikovsky was often short of money before he became famous and used to work as a journalist on newspapers to keep himself going. He also suffered a lot from depression during his life. Perhaps the oddest fact about Pyotr is that he suffered very badly from an irrational stage fright. Sometimes, when he was conducting an orchestra, he would hold his hand tightly onto his head because he was scared it might fall off!



Tchaikovsky as a boy with his family. He's the one on the left.

“Very loud and noisy...”

That's what Tchaikovsky himself said about the 1812 Overture! The last five minutes of the overture are probably the best and most famous. It begins with a simple, quiet melody on the strings (**violins** and **cellos**) based on a Russian hymn. Are the Russians praying for an end to the war? Then we hear the French national anthem ('Le Marseillaise') on the brass instruments (**trumpets** and **trombones** etc.) which represents the French army. (Listen [HERE](#) for the French rugby team singing it before a match!)

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Trumpet in B♭ **1812 Overture (Finale)** P. Tchaikovsky

Allego vivace (♩=144)

The trumpet music for the main theme of the overture.

Then, we hear both tunes played at the same time – which represents both armies fighting each other. As the French get closer to Moscow, in the music we hear five cannon shots – which represents the Battle of Borodino (where over 100,000 soldiers died). Are the French winning?

BUT, the music slows and slows and slows, showing how the French army had to slow down and finally retreat. At the very end we hear the bells of all the Moscow churches ringing in happiness and Russian cannon fire celebrating victory over the French. Listen out for the bells, cannons and fireworks at the end – they're COOL!

Bang!

Originally, Tchaikovsky meant for there to be **sixteen** canons used in the music, even though he knew that it wouldn't be possible for them to be fired in time with the music. In fact, he never heard it performed that way before he died. But, 74 years later in 1954, a recording of the overture was made following Tchaikovsky's original instructions (sort of!). The people organising the recording decided they would record the canon sound as authentically as they could. Obviously, they couldn't fire a canon indoors, so they set up in a local park. They hired a Napoleonic canon from a local military academy, closed all the local roads, had microphones hung in nearby trees and even had ambulances ready in case there was an accident! They fired the canon (once), recorded it, then took the recording back to the studio where they dubbed it (copied it) sixteen times onto a recording of the orchestra that they had already made. A bit of a cheat – but maybe Tchaikovsky would have approved?...



An original canon from Napoleon's times.

Listen and enjoy – and play it **LOUD!**

Mr. Mole

Music teacher

