

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky – 1812 Overture projects

In these two projects we explore Tchaikovsky's famous *1812 Overture* in different ways. **Project 1** focuses on composition inspired by Tchaikovsky, in which two tunes from the piece are used to create a class battle of the melodies. In **Project 2** we invite teachers to recreate the victorious finale of the piece with your class, using classroom percussion, any instruments children already play, and body percussion.

We have provided an outline of both projects, and some supporting resources. Please feel free to adapt the ideas below to suit the resources you have and the needs of your children.

This project is a downloaded version of the online version, which can be found here:

<https://www.lpo.org.uk/creative-classrooms-connect/pyotr-ilyich-tchaikovsky-1812-overture-project.html>

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Resources needed for these projects:

Project 1: the battle of the melodies

- Recording of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Timings listed in these projects refer to [this version](#).
- Recording of *U Vorot* (in playlist on project webpage) and *The Marseillaise* (optional)
- Range of tuned and untuned classroom percussion instruments
- [Classroom arrangement of U Vorot \(pdf\)](#) (downloadable on project webpage)

Project 2: recreate the victorious finale of 1812

- Recording of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Timings listed in these projects refer to [this version](#).
- Recording of Cannons chant and easy piano accompaniment (in playlist on project webpage)
- [Video demonstration of The Battle theme using body percussion](#)
- Range of tuned and untuned classroom percussion instruments, or any instruments children can play
- [Classroom arrangement, full score and parts for Victorious Finale of 1812 \(pdf\)](#) (downloadable on project webpage)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a Russian composer of the Romantic period whose gift for writing melodies made him an international star in his lifetime. The young Tchaikovsky showed early promise as a musician, writing a song for his mother at the age of four and quickly outgrowing his teacher when he started piano lessons at five. However, there were no musicians in his family and not enough money to fund a musical training, so he became a civil servant, learning what he could in his spare time. Frustrated by his job and his poor prospects (he had just been refused a promotion), the 22-year-old Tchaikovsky applied to the brand new Conservatory of Music in St Petersburg and finally was able to study music full-time. The Conservatory's director Anton Rubenstein introduced him to his brother Nikolai, who helped him achieve early success and championed him for much of his career.

Fast-forward to 1880, by which time Tchaikovsky was an established composer. The plan that led to the **1812 Overture** was all Nikolai's idea. An enormous new cathedral was being built in Moscow to commemorate the Battle of Borodino – a turning point in Napoleon's ultimately unsuccessful invasion of Russia in 1812. The 25th anniversary of Tsar Alexander's coronation was also coming up. Nikolai encouraged Tchaikovsky to write a work that would be exciting, patriotic, and suitable for the celebrations. The result was the **1812 Overture**, which Tchaikovsky composed in just 6 weeks.

The **1812 Overture** is highly **programmatic** – it tells the story of the battle by painting a vivid picture of the events, using tunes to represent the Russian people and the invading French army. It pulls out all the stops to tug at Russian heart strings, containing Russian folk music and a Russian Orthodox hymn as well as patriotic anthems and, of course, the famous finale with live cannons and cathedral bells.

Tchaikovsky died at the age of just 53. Some mystery surrounds his death, which many think was suicide, although his brother claimed he accidentally drank contaminated water and contracted cholera. Despite his short career, his output was incredibly prolific, and his orchestral works remain some of the most popular in the orchestral repertoire.

Project 1: the battle of the melodies

In this project, children are invited to explore the melodies Tchaikovsky used to represent battling forces, and compose their own tunes to create their own musical battle.

1. Setting up the task

Start by telling children that they will hear a piece of music depicting a battle from over 200 years ago, between the Russian people and the French army. You can [show pictures](#) of the Battle of Borodino to set the scene, and get children to tell you what they see, and what kind of music they expect to hear.

2. Introducing Tchaikovsky's melodies

Tell children that Tchaikovsky used two melodies to depict the two different sides of the battle, and that that they will learn these melodies before creating their own.

Melody 1: the Russian People

Tchaikovsky uses an old Russian folk song, У Ворот (*U Vorot*) to represent the ordinary Russian people. It has a bouncing dance-like melody, and it's full of energy.

Here is the opening, which you can sing in Russian or in English (you can listen to it in the playlist further up this page). The Dunai is the River Danube (which runs from Germany all the way to the Black Sea).

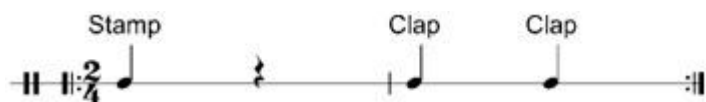
The image shows two staves of musical notation in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff is in Russian and the second is in English. The melody is a simple, rhythmic line with a bounding quality.

Staff 1 (Russian):
 U vo - rot, vo - rot, vo - rot, vo - rot ba - tiush - ki - nyikh
 At the gate, the gate, the gate, gate to my fa - ther's house

Staff 2 (English):
 Ai, Du - nai, moi Du - nai, Ai, ve - se - lyi Du - nai
 Ai, Du - nai, my Du - nai, Ai, sing we all Du - nai

Simple accompaniments on ukulele, piano or tuned percussion go well with it and this can be extended into a class project (download the classroom arrangement pdf in the resources section above for parts).

Start by teaching your class to sing U vorot. It works well starting off slowly and gradually getting faster. Add stamps and claps using this rhythm.



Melody 2: the French Army

Tchaikovsky represents the invading French Army with *The Marseillaise*. This really famous tune is still the French national anthem today. Here is the opening (English translation: "Arise, children of our country, the day of glory has arrived!"). Its dotted rhythms and strong beat in 4 suggests marching soldiers.



Some children might recognise it, because it's extensively quoted in other works, appearing in numerous other classical pieces as well as in film scores (e.g. *Casablanca*) and in pop music and even hip hop (it's in the outro of *Push it Along* on A Tribe Called Quest's seminal 1990 album *Peoples' Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, running brilliantly into a great groove at the start of the next track). The most famous example, though, is probably the opening of The Beatles song *All you need is love*.

Sing the tune (to la, or of course in French!) while marching around or on the spot, L-R-L-R. Emphasise the dotted rhythms. Imaging playing the tune on trumpets as you march, or banging military drums.

3. Listen to the two melodies in Tchaikovsky's piece, and explore how they "battle" each other

Once the children are familiar with both of these tunes, listen to [11:10–12:15](#) of the *1812 Overture*, where Tchaikovsky makes the two tunes fight each other.

Ask children to listen out for the melodies they have learned. You could ask them to do an action when they hear all or part of either of the tunes (e.g. a fist in the air for the Russian People, a salute for the French Army). Discuss the structure, eliciting as much from the children as possible. Here are some key features:

- *U Vorot* is played by the strings, they sound scurrying and anxious
- *The Marseillaise* is played by the brass, a military sound
- At first the tunes take quite long turns, but they get shorter and shorter
- As the tunes begin to fight, the music speeds up
- Eventually short snatches of the tunes overlap and happen at the same time

4. Composition task: compose own melodies using the notes and/or rhythms Tchaikovsky uses

Explain that we are going to make some music like Tchaikovsky's, where two tunes fight each other – The People and The Army. First we need to compose some People music and some Army music.

These activities work well in pairs, choosing one tuned and one untuned instrument. There are a few ways to organise it, depending on how much time you have – for example:

Lesson 1 – all pairs write people music

Lesson 2 – all pairs write army music

Lesson 3 – pairs choose people or army, and refine their ideas (make sure you have roughly half and half)

Or you can start by dividing the class into army and people, each pair working on only one tune.

People music:

U Vorot is based on a minor scale, like these 5 notes. It has a narrow range and uses mostly step-wise movement (next-door notes).



Demonstrate these notes in order, then improvise simple melodies using mostly next door notes. Tell children they can experiment with different sets of 5 consecutive notes on their instrument, and choose their favourite. Then use just these notes to make their own scurrying tune. Untuned percussion players can add a rhythm part like the stamps and claps we did with *U Vorot*.

In pairs, children create their own People music using one tuned and one untuned instrument, practise and perfect their tunes. If you are spreading this task over several lessons, **make sure children write down what they created**, in whatever way will make them remember it next time.

Army music:

The Marseillaise uses a marching beat and dotted rhythms. The melody features thirds – playing alternate notes. Demonstrate by playing this bit of the original tune, then improvise using the same idea.



In pairs again, children make up their own spiky military music using thirds on tuned percussion instruments. Children playing untuned instruments add a marching rhythm part. Again, practise and perfect, and **write everything down** if you are spreading this over several lessons.

5. The battle!

Now we are going to make our tunes fight each other. Combine the pairs into groups of 4, so that each group has an Army tune and a People tune. Use ideas from the *1812 Overture* – remember how the tunes start off taking turns, but then gradually get faster and shorter and begin to overlap until they are fighting each other. Who is the winner?

Groups can perform their battles to the rest of the class. Depending on how much time you have, you could think about combining all the music the children have created into one large battle.



Project 2: play the victorious finale of 1812

This project gradually assembles a classroom arrangement of the final section of the *1812 Overture*. To learn the full arrangement as a class is quite ambitious but achievable; it depends on the time you have and the prior learning of your students. However, you don't have to include all the parts, and can pick and choose elements that suit you.

There is a piano backing accompaniment you can use in the playlist at the top of the page, or untuned/sung parts can be performed along with an orchestral recording of the work. See resources section at the top of the page for downloadable parts and a link to a recording of the piece.

1. Setting up the task

Listen to the finale of the *1812 Overture* – from **13:59–end**. Explain that this is the end of a long piece that tells a story. What sort of story might it be? What sort of ending? What are those loud bangs? Explain that they are cannons, and that this piece of music tells the story of a famous battle when the French army invaded Russia, ending in the French army retreating and Russia eventually victorious. This section of the piece is built around two main melodies, and various other elements. Tell the children that we will learn these and recreate the piece as a class.

2. The Battle theme

The most memorable tune will probably be recognisable to some children, as it has been so widely used in TV and advertising. We are going to call this the *Battle theme*. We first hear it much earlier in the overture, combined with a military drum when the army start to arrive (**3:40-4:26**) but it is in the finale where it forms the backbone of the thrilling climax.

Here is a simplified version of it, which can be played on tuned percussion or keyboard.

C D E D C D E C C C D E D C D E C C D E D D E D D E D
C D C C D C C D C A C A G B G C

Start by learning the *Battle theme* using body percussion, as follows (stamps have been added in to help with the rests). This looks off-putting, but it's easy to do by ear and demonstration, and children pick it up quickly ([see video demonstration](#)).

Clap
Knee
Stamp

Clap
Knee
Stamp

Now try doing body percussion along to the recording. Can you keep up?

3. God Save the Tsar!

Alongside the *Battle theme*, we hear a melody which would have been very well-known to Tchaikovsky's audience, as it was the Russian national anthem at the time.

Here is part of the tune to sing or play. It works well on tuned percussion as it fits into a C-C' diatonic octave (perfect for boxed chime bars) and is not too fast-moving.

G A A G E C C' B A G A F G G E
God save our no - ble Tsar E - ne-mies fear him, God save the Tsar!

Teach the children to sing this extract of *God Save the Tsar!* Once they are familiar with it, try singing it along to the recording (it's in E flat, so a bit higher – but still singable!)

Once you and the children are confident with how the *Battle theme* and *God Save the Tsar!* fit into the finale, you can try dividing the class in half and combining the two.

Note that *God Save the Tsar!* starts later. The *Battle theme* has four bars by itself, and when it repeats, *God Save the Tsar!* joins in. NB. If you are playing instruments, you are in the wrong key for an original recording! However you can use the easy piano part (see audio playlist in resources section above to hear the piano part).

4. The Cannons

The cannons are a very famous feature of the *1812 Overture*. The timing of the cannon shots is very tricky. Tchaikovsky puts them sometimes on the beat, and sometimes in between – this makes them seem more naturalistic, as if the real battle is happening at the same time as the music reaches its climax.

Here is a chant to help (you can listen to it in the playlist further up the page).

Now the can-nons BANG, the dea - fe - ning can-nons go BANG (sh sh sh)
BANG, the dea-fe-ning can-nons go BANG, the dea-fe-ning can-nons go BANG BANG BANG!

Start by chanting it in sections, always with a very strong pulse. Once it is learned, stamp or clap every time you say BANG. Then finally whisper it, or say it silently in your thinking voice, but putting in the BANGS.

It takes time to become confident with this tricky rhythmic part. It makes a good warm-up exercise, and could be taught and reinforced over several lessons.

Of course, the piece is not always performed with actual cannons! It is a traditional concert item for 4th July celebrations in the USA, where fireworks are often set off instead. There are plenty of easier (and cheaper) ways to make a loud noise. Low-tech ways to create a sonic boom include bursting paper bags or crisp packets, stamping on polystyrene cups, or how about making an origami banger – the method here: <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-an-Origami-Bangerworks> with an ordinary sheet of A4 paper, but for a louder bang use a larger sheet of paper or heavier grade paper/thin card.

5. The orchestral percussion

Tchaikovsky uses the bass drum and cymbals to great effect, making the climax of the piece as exciting and triumphant as possible.

Odds and Evens:

- Count to 8 – 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 etc – in strict time.
- Divide the class in half. Half count the even numbers, half the odd numbers.
- Try clapping instead of counting out loud. Try it faster.
- Divide into pairs – try playing the game with 2 people. Tricky! Which part is easier? Why? Now do both parts yourself, alternating stamps and claps – much easier!
- But we have to work as a team, just like the players in the orchestra, as we can only have one instrument each.

After playing *Odds and Evens*, listen to the finale of the *1812 Overture*. See if your children can identify the odd and even numbers (bass drum and cymbals). Notice that once *God Save the Tsar!* has started, the drum and cymbals stop playing alternate beats and start playing crashes on the first beat of each bar (this way, they don't get in the way of the cannon shots).

Allocate the class into odd and even groups and clap, or play instruments, along with the recording – or ask a group of children on drums and cymbals (or any untuned percussion instrument pairs) to play this part along with parts you have already learned (It's good fun putting it with the cannon shots).

6. Bringing it all together

Now you can structure all your material into a piece! You can use Tchaikovsky's structure, or create your own. We have provided a score and parts in the resources section at the top of the page if you would like to download this. You should have all or some of these elements:

- **Accompaniment** – easy piano part (around Grade 2 standard) live or recorded (see resources section at the top of the page)
- **God Save the Tsar!** – sung and/or played – works on C-C' tuned percussion, or any melodic instrument.
- **Battle Theme** – use the body percussion part, or play it on keyboards (where the faster movement of this melody is easier) or some children will manage it on tuned percussion if not too fast. It also works well on treble recorder, where the notes are easy.
- **Orchestral percussion** – drums and cymbals (or other untuned percussion if you don't have enough of these)
- **Cannons** – whatever you like!

You may wish to perform your piece to another class, incorporating narration, artwork or simple costume such as paper army hats.

Sharing your work

We would love to see or hear your performances and compositions for both of these projects. If you would like us to share any of your work, you can send in any audio, images or video to education@lpo.org.uk (please send any large files via wetransfer or other filesharing service rather than direct email).

About the author

Rosamond Savournin started out as a half-hearted psychologist, became a rather more enthusiastic pianist and then finally found her forté (via all sorts of schools, and lots of community music projects, theatre companies and choirs) getting people to sing and make music together. She currently works as a musical director, arranger, teacher, consultant and occasional performer, conducts several youth and adult choirs, and writes music education projects making orchestral and operatic repertoire more accessible to young people.

