

1812 Overture

The Year 1812 Solemn Overture, Op. 49, popularly known as the *1812 Overture*,^[1] is a concert overture in E♭ major written in 1880 by Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to commemorate the successful Russian defense against Napoleon's invading Grande Armée in 1812.

The overture debuted in Moscow on 20 August 1882 (Julian date: 8 August 1882),^[2] conducted by Ippolit Al'tani under a tent near the then-almost-finished Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which also memorialized the 1812 defense of Russia.^[3] Tchaikovsky himself conducted another performance at the dedication of Carnegie Hall in New York City.^[4] This was one of the first times a major European composer visited the United States.^[5]

The 15-minute overture is best known for its climactic volley of cannon fire, ringing chimes, and a brass fanfare finale. It has also become a common accompaniment to fireworks displays on the United States' Independence Day. The *1812 Overture* went on to become one of Tchaikovsky's most popular works, along with his ballet scores to *The Nutcracker*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*.^[6]

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1812 Overture

Concert overture by P. I. Tchaikovsky



A performance, with cannon fire, at the 2005 Classical Spectacular in Melbourne, Australia

Key	E-flat major
Opus	49
Occasion	Commemoration of the 1812 defense against Napoleon's invading Grande Armée
Composed	1880
Premiere	
Date	20 August 1882
Location	Moscow
Conductor	Ippolit Al'tani

Instrumentation

The *1812 Overture* is scored for an orchestra that consists of the following:^[7]

- Brass band**: "Open" instrumentation consisting of "any extra brass instruments" available. In some indoor performances, the part may be played on an organ. Military or marching bands also play this part. Note: the brass band or its substitute is meant to play during the finale only.
- Woodwinds**: 1 piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 1 cor anglais, 2 clarinets in B♭ and 2 bassoons
- Brass**: 4 horns in F, 2 cornets in B♭, 2 trumpets in E♭, 3 trombones (2 tenor, 1 bass) and 1 tuba
- Percussion**: timpani, orchestral bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, carillon
- Strings**: violins I & II, violas, cellos and double basses.

- Artillery: one battery of cannon, or even ceremonial field artillery.

The carillon is sometimes replaced with tubular bells or recordings of carillons, or even church bells. In the sections that contain cannon shots, actual cannons are sometimes replaced by recorded cannons or played on a piece of staging, usually with a large wooden mallet or sledgehammer as in the Mahler 6th. The bass drum and gong/tam-tam are also regularly used as cannon substitutes or adjuncts in indoor performances.

In his 1966 Deutsche Grammophon recording, Herbert von Karajan scored the first 02'43" (or 36 bars) for voices instead of strings at the start and the subsequent dialogue between strings and woodwind, adding the Russian Orthodox plainchant *God Preserve Thy People* text to the melody and slightly rearranging the texture to suit voices rather than instruments. The American conductor Igor Buketoff, son of a Russian Orthodox priest, went a stage further on his 1960s RCA Victor recording with the New Philharmonia Orchestra. Not only did he deploy voices for the opening chant but he also had a children's chorus sing the folk tune *By the Gates* and brought the choir back to bolster the chant and the Russian Imperial national anthem *God Save the Tsar!*.^[8]

Composition

Historical background: Napoleon's invasion of Russia

On 7 September 1812, at Borodino, 120 km (75 mi) west of Moscow, Napoleon's forces met those of General Mikhail Kutuzov in a concerted stand made by Russia against the seemingly invincible French Army. The Battle of Borodino saw casualties estimated as high as 100,000 and the French were masters of the field. It was, however, ultimately a pyrrhic victory for the French invasion.^[9]

With resources depleted and supply lines overextended, Napoleon's weakened forces moved into Moscow, which they occupied with only about 25,000 men of resistance. Expecting capitulation from the displaced Tsar Alexander I, the French instead found themselves in a barren and desolate city, parts of which the retreating Russian Army had burned to the ground.



A scene depicting the French retreat from Russia in 1812, painting by Illarion Pryanishnikov (1874)

Deprived of winter stores, Napoleon had to retreat. Beginning on 19 October and lasting well into December, the French Army faced several overwhelming obstacles on its long retreat: famine, typhus, frigid temperatures, harassing cossacks, and Russian forces barring the way out of the country. Abandoned by Napoleon in November, the Grande Armée was reduced to one-tenth of its original size by the time it reached Poland and relative safety.^[10]

In 1869, the full edition of *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoj was published. The novel reported a very accurate description of the Napoleonic invasion of 1812, reviving the memoirs of the Russian resistance. This led to the commissioning of new monuments, paintings and also of new musical compositions, including Tchaikovsky's.

Commission

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, commissioned in 1812 by Tsar Alexander I to commemorate the Russian victory, was nearing completion in Moscow in 1880; the 25th anniversary of the coronation of Alexander II would be at hand in 1881; and the 1882 All-Russia Arts and Industry Exhibition at Moscow was in the planning stage. Tchaikovsky's friend and mentor Nikolai Rubinstein suggested that he write a grand commemorative piece for use in related festivities. Tchaikovsky began work on the project on 12 October 1880, finishing it six weeks later.

Organizers planned to have the overture performed in the square before the cathedral, with a brass band to reinforce the orchestra, the bells of the cathedral, and all the others in downtown Moscow playing "zvons" (pealing bells) on cue—and cannons, fired from an electric switch panel to achieve the precision the musical score required. However, this performance did not take place, possibly due in part to the over-ambitious plan. Regardless, the assassination of Alexander II that March deflated much of the impetus for the project. In 1882, during the All-Russia Arts and Industry Exhibition, the Overture was performed in a tent next to the unfinished cathedral.^[3] The cathedral was completed on 26 May 1883.^[11]

Meanwhile, Tchaikovsky complained to his patron Nadezhda von Meck that he was "... not a conductor of festival pieces," and that the *Overture* would be "... very loud and noisy, but [without] artistic merit, because I wrote it without warmth and without love." He put it together in six weeks. It is this work that would make the Tchaikovsky estate exceptionally wealthy, as it is one of the most performed and recorded works from his catalog.^{[12][13][14]}

In Russia during the Communist era, the Tsar's anthem melody was replaced with the chorus "Glory, Glory to you, holy Rus'!" (*Славься, славься, святая Русь!*) from the finale of Mikhail Glinka's opéra *A Life for the Tsar*; a historical drama about a patriotic commoner, Ivan Susanin. With the end of the Soviet Union, the original score returned.^[15]

Adaptation in other contexts

As a rousing patriotic hymn, the Overture has subsequently been adapted into and associated with other contexts than that of the Russian resistance to Napoleon's invasion. The *1812 Overture* is popularly known^[16] in the United States as a symbol of the United States Independence Day, a tradition that dates to a 1974 choice made by Arthur Fiedler for a performance of 4 July of the Boston Pops.^{[17][18]}

The piece was parodied by composer Malcolm Arnold in *A Grand, Grand Overture* which features 4 rifles, three Hoover vacuum cleaners (two uprights in B \flat and one horizontal with detachable sucker in C), and an electric floor polisher in E \flat ; it is dedicated to President Hoover.^[19]

Structure



U Vorot, Vorot is a folk song brought up in the piece representing the Russian people

The piece begins with the simple, plaintive Russian melody of the Eastern Orthodox Troparion of the Holy Cross (also known as "O Lord, Save Thy People") played by four cellos and two violas.^[20] This represents the Russian people praying for a swift conclusion to the invasion. Then, the French National anthem, "La Marseillaise", is heard, representing the invading French army.^[21] Then, the melody of "La Marseillaise" is heard competing against Russian folk music, representing the two armies fighting each other as the French got closer and closer to Moscow. At this point, five cannon shots are heard, representing the Battle of Borodino. This is where "La Marseillaise" is most prominent, and seems to be winning. After this, a long descending run represents the French army retreating out of Moscow as the freezing winter rages on. At the end of this run the hymn that the piece begins with is repeated. This can be interpreted as prayers being answered. The grand finale culminates with eleven more cannon shots and the melody of God Save the Tsar!.^[22]

Anachronism of nationalist motifs

Although *La Marseillaise* was chosen as the French national anthem in 1795, it was banned by Napoleon in 1805 and would not have been played during the Russian campaign. It was reinstated as the French Anthem in 1879—the year before the commission of the overture—which can explain its use by Tchaikovsky in the overture.^[23] *Veillons au salut de l'Empire*, which served as the unofficial anthem of Napoleon I's regime, had been largely forgotten by 1882, while educated Russians of the time were likely to be familiar with the tune of *La Marseillaise* and recognize its significance.

Although *God Save the Tsar!* was the Russian national anthem in Tchaikovsky's time, it had not been written in 1812. There was no official Russian anthem until 1815, from which time until 1833 the anthem was *Molitva russkikh*, "The Prayer of the Russians," sung to the tune of *God Save the King*.^[24]

Themes



O Lord, Save thy People represents the praying for deliverance from the invading army. A part of this hymn translates to "Grant victory to all Orthodox Christians over their enemies."^[25] By including this hymn in the piece, Tchaikovsky is suggesting that God granted the Orthodox Russians victory over the French imperial troops. Later in the piece when *La Marseillaise* is played, it seems as though the Russians will lose the battle. Then *O Lord, Save thy People*, along with *God Save the Tsar!*, is played powerfully in the brass section with a strong display of chimes in the background. The ringing chimes are written to represent the bells of Moscow.^[26] The Bells of Moscow hold significance, because in the Russian Orthodox religion, the bells symbolize the voice of God.^[27]

Performance practice

In a live performance, the logistics of safety and precision in placement of the shots require either well-drilled military crews using modern cannon, or the use of sixteen pieces of muzzle-loading artillery, since any reloading schemes, to attain the sixteen shots, or even a semblance of them, in the two-minute time span involved, makes safety and precision impossible with 1800s artillery. Time lag alone precludes implementation of cues for the shots for fewer than sixteen 1812-era field pieces.^[28]

Recording history

The earliest traceable orchestral recording, which does not include the shots and features no percussion apart from bells, was by the Royal Albert Hall Orchestra conducted by Landon Ronald, and issued by His Master's Voice on three 12-inch 78-rpm sides in 1916.^[29] A Royal Opera Orchestra recording of about the same time similarly contains no shots at all.^[30]

Antal Doráti's 1954 Mercury Records recording with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, partially recorded at West Point, and using the Yale Memorial Carillon in New Haven, Connecticut, uses a Napoleonic French single muzzleloading cannon shot dubbed in 16 times as written. On the first edition of the recording, one side played the *Overture* and the other side played a narrative by Deems Taylor about how the cannon and bell effects were accomplished. (Later editions placed the commentary after the performance on side 1 and the *Capriccio Italien* on side 2.) A stereophonic version was recorded on 5 April 1958, using the bells of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Carillon, at Riverside Church. On this Mercury Living Presence Stereo recording, the spoken commentary was also given by Deems Taylor and the 1812 was coupled with Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien*. Later editions coupled the 1812 *Overture* with Dorati's recording of Beethoven's Wellington's Victory, which featured the London Symphony Orchestra and real cannon.^[31]

Kenneth Alwyn's early stereo recording for Decca used a recording of slowed-down gunfire instead of cannon fire. Robert Sharpley and the London Festival Orchestra released a recording in 1963, later remastered in quadrophony by Decca.

The Black Dyke Band has recorded a brass band arrangement of the piece. This recording on their album *Symphonic Brass* includes the cannon shots as originally written.^[32]

The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Herbert Von Karajan, and the Don Cossacks Choir recorded the piece in 1967 for Deutsche Grammophon.^[33]

In 1971, CBS released a recording^[34] with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy, also featuring the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Valley Forge Military Academy band and real artillery shots. British rock drummer Cozy Powell sampled the overture at the end of the track "Over The Top" in his eponymous 1979 studio album. The first digital recording occurred in 1979 by Telarc of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. High-definition cannon shots using full-sized 19th century military cannons were also recorded. In addition to becoming Telarc's best-selling record and establishing them as a company, the record soon became a popular and well-known method for testing hifi record-playing equipment and related setups. Only the best and most fine-tuned allowed the cannon shots to be played properly (an accompanying warning for users not to destroy their audio equipment was included with the record).^{[35][36][37]} In 1989, the Swingle Singers recorded an a cappella version of the overture as part of an album whose title is *1812*.^[38]

In 1990, during a worldwide celebration of the 150th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's birth, the *Overture* was recorded in the city of his youth by the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra using 16 muzzleloading cannons fired live as written in the 1880 score. That recording was done within earshot of the composer's grave. The festival was televised for the first time in the United States on 9 March 1991.^{[39][40]} The Texan band "The Invincible Czars" released a rock version of *1812 Overture* for the bicentennial of the Battle of Borodino in September 2012.^[41] The band had already debuted their arrangement of the piece at the 20th annual OK Mozart classical music festival at Bartlesville, Oklahoma, with professional orchestra musicians, in June 2009, complete with fireworks at the finale.^[42]

In popular culture

The piece is featured prominently in both the opening and ending scenes of the film *V for Vendetta*.^[43]

The melody of Dan Fogelberg's top ten hit "Same Old Lang Syne" is drawn from the distinctive leitmotif that represents the Russian forces in the piece.^[44]

The riff of The Move's 1966 hit single "Night of Fear" was adapted from *1812 Overture*.^[45]

Canadian progressive rock band Rush adopted the famous brass theme of *1812 Overture* in their suite *2112*, from their album of the same name. Significantly, other than being included in a similarly titled piece of music, Tchaikovsky's theme is featured in the first section of the song, which is itself titled "Overture". Also, cannon shots are heard at the end of Rush's "Overture".^[46]

In "The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim" (Episode 5, Series 2, of the British drama series, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*), the title character plays a record of the *1812 Overture* so that the cannon fire will mask the sound of him breaking into his own safe.^[47]

A shortened version of the piece is featured as a sea shanty in the Xbox One game *Sea of Thieves*. It is playable by characters using any one of the game's four playable instruments.

English slapstick comedian Charlie Drake performed part of the overture in a short film for television, with himself playing the conductor and all the musicians. In 1967 it won the Golden Rose at the Montreux Festival.^[48]

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External links

- [1812 Overture: Scores at the International Music Score Library Project](#)
- [Tchaikovsky Research \(http://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/The_Year_1812\)](http://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/The_Year_1812)

- [Article from 2003 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on how "1812" has become a piece of patriotic Americana \(http://www.postgazette.com/ae/20030704overtureae3.asp\)](http://www.postgazette.com/ae/20030704overtureae3.asp)
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