



TCHAIKOVSKY ARR. SPANSWICK

Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy

Pull on your tutu and practise your staccato for **Melanie Spanwick's** enchanting arrangement of a highlight from *The Nutcracker*

Ability rating **Beginner**

Info

Key: E minor

Tempo: Andante non troppo

Style: Romantic

Will improve your

✓ Staccato

✓ Repeated notes

✓ Articulation



Melanie Spanwick is a pianist, author and educator. She selected the repertoire for *The Faber Music Piano Anthology*, and is the author of *Play It Again: PIANO* (Schott Music) for those returning to piano playing after a break. Melanie has given workshops in Germany, the USA and the Far East; she is a tutor at Jackdaws Music Education Trust and curator of the Classical Conversations series on YouTube, where she interviews pianists on camera. www.melaniespanwick.com

Here's a magical excerpt from a popular Christmas ballet. In this arrangement, the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy requires a light touch, quick movement around the keyboard and precise fingering. The suggested tempo is 96 crotchet beats per minute, but you may prefer a slightly quicker pulse.

Let's start with the LH. Playing the opening crotchets with the third finger as marked gives greater control over the sound and length of the note. Press down the key quite slowly until it goes right into the key bed (rather than striking it from above) before moving off swiftly. This will allow for a clean, clear and, crucially, soft repeated crotchet.

How should you practise the chords in the LH? Try blocking them out individually to begin with. For example, at bar 5, play the notes of the first two beats together, then the last two together, assimilating the note patterns and fingerings. Then ensure that the thirds in the chords are sounded at exactly the same time. This is important for overall crispness.

Let's look at the little downward semiquaver introductions to each four-bar phrase. Not all of these lie naturally under the hand, and they require isolated practice. Take each group of semiquavers out of context, and work at all five notes, landing on the crotchet of the next bar: for example, in bars 8-9: E-D-C \sharp -B-A \sharp . For a smooth, even, rhythmical and well-phrased group of semiquavers, begin your practice by playing the pattern slowly and heavily, focusing on the touch of each finger. Once each note is secure, accent them in turn. Place an accent on the E initially, then on the D, then the C \sharp and so on. This way, each finger will be strengthened.

The B and A \sharp (4th and 5th fingers in this figuration) require attention.

While playing these notes heavily and accented, be sure to engage the finger and its joints fully, playing on the fingertips, supported by the hand and wrist. Try turning the hand and wrist slightly to the left in order to support the weaker fingers. When these downward runs are played with a lighter touch and up to speed, they should feel easier and will be even and rhythmical. The last note of each run has a tenuto marking. This indicates a strong accent – not too sharp or short – so that the note is clearly projected.

The RH chords of bars 1-4 need careful balancing. As with the LH chords, take both notes down into the key bed at the same time, keeping the wrist and arm light and free, but with the fingers in contact with the keys as much as possible. As you play each chord, move the hand and wrist a little to the right, supporting the top note so that it rings out. Give a colour the last beat of each two-bar phrase, especially the top note (D \sharp).

The famous tune is best practised with a firm beat. A metronome may help to curb any tendency to rush when playing with a light staccato touch on every note. Listen to the end of each note, leaving a small but distinct gap between the sound, and don't be tempted to play the next note before the beat. Tune your ear in to the tick of the metronome or your own counting, instead of focusing purely on the notes.

There are repeated notes throughout. These can be played with many different fingerings, and I have made a few suggestions. To aid clarity and dexterity, you may find the version in brackets above the staff helpful.

This fingering will encourage you to establish a steady pulse – the act of changing fingers should help with placing the notes – and will also ensure that each group of notes is clearly punctuated and articulated.

However, using the same finger for a repeated pattern also has its benefits!

At this speed, I would use the fingering below the brackets. Repeating notes with a single finger brings finger control, and it becomes easier to master the movements needed for imaginative tonal colouring. To do this, make sure that your finger-joint (the one nearest the fingertip) is fully active and use

Learning Tip

A slight breathing space between phrases will lend serenity and poise to your playing.

a small tapping or 'scratching' motion with the finger on every note. Once you have practised with a full tone, lighten your touch, and brush each note evenly and softly.

The LH part sets the pulse. When practising with hands together, a firm pulse – remember that this is music written to be danced to – is most important on the fourth beat of the bar, especially in semiquaver passages, so that the first beat of the next bar is placed exactly in time.

Dynamic swells shape each four-bar phrase. A really soft *pianissimo* will lend contrast to a passage such as the louder closing three bars. The sustaining pedal could be employed discreetly during bars 17-19 where the LH has a minim, but release the pedal quickly to avoid smudging the following semiquaver passages. ■