**Chapter 17**

**Ballet Music**

Dance has been an important form of human expression for millennia and music in some form or another has always been used to accompany it. This chapter focuses on music for ballet. Ballet was developed in France in the 17th century and became important at the court of Louis XIV. He created a special ballet school and professional dance troupe in 1661. At this time the French court was the envy of and model for other European courts. What Louis did, other monarchs copied, and ballet spread throughout the courts of Western Europe. It first became popular with the general public through opera. Many early operas had brief ballets performed between acts while scenery, sets, and costumes were changed. Eventually the art form developed in its own right and ballets were created separately from opera. By the 18th century ballet was an important art form. Not many composers wrote music for ballet and just a few stand out in musical history. The ballet, like the drama or opera, tells a story. The story is told through the music and the dance. Most ballet plots are fairy tales, myths, or legends.

The ballet music we hear today often happens outside the ballet itself. Many ballets contain such beautiful music that the composers created orchestral suites of the best music from ballets and performed them by symphony orchestra alone in the concert hall with no dancing. This is the music that concerns us most in this chapter.

The earliest ballet music that is still regularly performed today comes from the Romantic era and the most important composer of ballet music was Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky was Russian and lived from 1840 to 1893. He was the first Russian composer to be known internationally. His ballets *Swan Lake, Romeo and Juliet, Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* are standards of any professional ballet company’s repertory today. And, *The Nutcracker* is the most popular ballet of all in America drawing huge audiences at Christmastime of people who otherwise would never attend a ballet.

The early 20th century ballet music was also dominated by another Russian composer, Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky lived from 1882 to 1971 and spent a good deal of his life in America. He left Russia after the revolution of 1917 and went to Paris. Here he created three important ballets for the famous Ballet Russe; *The Firebird, Petroushka,* and *The Rite of Spring*. All three were very modern in style making use of so-called primitivistic rhythms and new tonalities. From each of these works was created an orchestral suite played by professional orchestras all over the world today.

Along with Arnold Schoenberg, Stravinsky was considered to be one of the two most important composers of the 20th century. He wrote in or originated several styles of music of that century including primitivism, neoclassicism, and expressionism. Stravinsky wrote in all genres of the time except film music but his ballet music remains his most famous and influential.

Ballet has been popular in America since the turn of the 20th century. American composer Aaron Copland was an important composer of this form. Copland lived from 1900 to 1990 and was well loved for his symphonic music and film music. His music is still considered to be the quintessential American sound, especially of the American West. Copland was very influenced by jazz and was considered a neoclassical composer. His works are tonal and he made constant attempts to make them accessible to the average American listener. His three ballets *Billy the Kid, Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring* all tell stories of American frontiers. Copland was the first internationally recognized American composer in his own lifetime.

A third Russian composer wrote important and influential ballet music in the 20th century. Sergei Prokofiev, the last of the influential Russian composers of ballet wrote *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, both of which are part of the standard repertory today.