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Hey There! Welcome to the twentieth episode Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music-loving families. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano and I'm thrilled to have you here with me today. Before we get started, just a quick note to the parents out there that enrollment is open through the end of May for my online piano lesson programs, Busy Kids Do Piano and Busy Moms Do Piano. I'll link to the details for that in the show notes, or you can also check them out at busykidsdopiano.com/membership

Many well known composers were born during the month of May, including a composer whose work you might be quite familiar with -- Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. He would be celebrating his 180th birthday this month. The reason you might be familiar with his work is that he wrote this ballet...

Do you recognize this music? It is from the Nutcracker ballet, and we learned the story of The Nutcracker back in December during Episode 9, which I'll link to in the show notes.

In today's episode, we're going to learn a little bit more about Tchaikovsky's life, to give you some context for his musical work. Tchaikovsky was born in Russia and was the second child of six. His father was a mine inspector and metal works manager. When he was just 5 years old, he began taking piano lessons. Even though his skill was obvious, his parents hoped that he would become a lawyer when he grew up. At first, he honored his parents' wishes and took up a job with the Ministry of Justice for four years, but during that time, he remained passionate about music, and went on to study music at St. Petersburg Conservatory when the opportunity arose for him.

Tchaikovsky had ups and downs in his life, which affected his mental health. He had a close relationship with his mother, and leaving her to attend boarding school when he was 10 years old was difficult for him. When his mom died of cholera when he was just 14, the composer was devastated.

Tchaikovsky married a young music student named Antonina in 1877. The marriage was a disaster, and he quickly realized he had made a grave mistake in marrying Antonina. Within a few weeks of the wedding, he fled, saying, "There's no doubt that for some months on end I was a bit insane and only now, when I'm completely recovered, have I learned to relate objectively to everything which I did during my brief insanity."

Tchaikovsky attempted to divorce Antonina several times in the following years, but she held out hope for reconciliation and refused to grant the divorce. This period during Tchaikovsky's life -- with all this marriage drama -- was one of his most productive times creatively speaking. He wrote some of his most famous compositions, including his operas and symphonies during this time. It was during this time that he also developed a friendship with a wealthy widow, who became his patroness. She basically gave him a monthly allowance so that he would have the freedom to write music whenever he pleased. He and the widow agreed never to meet, but wrote over a thousand letters through the years discussing everything from politics to religion.

In 1885, Tchaikovsky grew tired of traveling and settled into a more predictable life at a country house outside of Moscow. He always had a fear of conducting, but a couple of years later, he managed to get over this fear and began touring again as a conductor for his operas and ballets. He was even invited to the United States in 1891 for the inauguration of Carnegie Hall in New York City. He then toured in some American cities, making him the first Russian composer to achieve international fame.

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In October of 1893, Tchaikovsky conducted his premiere of a new symphony in St. Petersburg, Russia. Less than a week later, he became sick with cholera -- most likely from drinking contaminated water -- and died a few days later from complications of the illness.

Tchaikovsky's music really shows a range of style. Some of his music contained inspiration from Russian folk songs. He is known for being very expressive and dramatic in his music. Some of his pieces had strong, pronounced rhythm and other pieces experimented with new and unusual rhythms. His works include symphonies, operas, concertos, ballets and chamber music. In the next few episodes of Busy Kids Love Music, we're going to learn a little bit more about some of Tchaikovsky's famous works.

If you head over to my website at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/20, I've shared a listening calendar that will include links to view some of Tchaikovsky's most well known works. Again you'll find that at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/20.

I hope you enjoyed learning a little bit more about the life of Tchaikovsky in today's episode, and I look forward to making more musical discoveries with you in two weeks. Bye for now!