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Hey there! Welcome to Episode 85 of 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 joining me today. This episode is brought to you by my Nutcracker Camp, which is my free, online 3-day camp all about Tchaikovsky's famous ballet. When you sign up for the camp I'll send you links to guided listening activities and short video lessons to introduce you to musical concepts all centered around the Nutcracker. I'll pop the link to my free Nutcracker Camp in this episode's show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85) so that you can learn more about it and hopefully join in on the fun!

A few episodes ago, in episode 82, we learned about the composer Duke Ellington. A creative genius, Ellington wrote music, directed bands and played instruments in a variety of styles, including jazz. If you want to learn more about Ellington himself, I'll link to that episode in the show notes, but today, we're going to be talking specifically about Ellington's jazz interpretation of...the Nutcracker.

This project – the reimagined Nutcracker Suite – was a collaboration of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, who collaborated with Duke Ellington on many projects throughout his career. The story goes that Ellington heard Strayhorn play the piano backstage before a show, and that he played Ellington better than Ellington played Ellington.

Now maybe you remember from our episode about Ellington, that he liked to explore the fusion of classical techniques with jazz style, so you can imagine the appeal of updating Tchaikovsky's ballet with jazz sounds.

Ellington and Strayhorn didn't arrange every single selection from the original Nutcracker, but rather, re-interpreted the ballet in 9 movements total in order to specifically show off the skills of the members in Ellington's band

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The piece you're listening to now, which in Tchaikovsky's ballet is called "Dance of the Reeds" is playfully re-named "Toot, Toot, Tootie, Toot" in Ellington's and Strayhorn's version. Tchaikovsky used piping flutes and bassoons over strings for his dance, but Ellington and Strayhorn emphasized clarinets and saxes in a relaxed, groovy beat, with the clarinet eventually leading the band in a section of improvisation.

Likewise, Ellington's march, called "Peanut Brittle Brigade", is less military-like in its rhythm and precision, but includes a series of upbeat solos, this time for trumpet, clarinet, saxophone and piano.

In Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy", he sought to showcase a new instrument that he found fascinating – the celesta.

Ellington and Strayhorn borrowed the melody for their dance, named "Sugar Rum Cherry," but they used sounds that are much different from the twinkling, delicate sounds of the celesta, don't they?

In this version, the drums set the rhythm while the saxophone plays the melody.

Ellington's and Strayhorn's interpretations were written about a century after the Romantic-era Russian ballet and are considered very difficult to play. The musicians typically need to be virtuosos – or highly skilled, master musicians – who are comfortable improvising – or rather creating a variation of the tune – on the spot. It can be difficult to find a band that can pull all nine movements off. The performance of all nine movements is typically about 35 minutes, depending on the length of some of the improvised solos.

Ellington and Strayhorn's version of the Nutcracker was recorded in 1960 and performed in Las Vegas by Duke's band. It was very popular at the time, but the written music – the score – wasn't published until 2010. It is likely the jazz masterpiece wasn't performed for a large audience after the initial recording was released until this score was published. Since 2010, many orchestras and bands have performed it

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during the holiday season, and, in fact, some groups and artists have added choreography and dance or narration to their performances. Ellington and Strayhorn are greatly admired for the genius ways they reimagined Tchaikovsky's ballet, and I hope you'll take a chance to visit this episode's show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85) where you'll find a link to some fantastic performances of this masterpiece in a curated playlist that I've put together for you on YouTube. I've also shared links with you to some other episodes you might be interested in about Duke Ellington, Tchaikovsky and the story of the Nutcracker ballet that we've done here on the Busy Kids Love Music podcast. Again, you'll find all of those resources at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/85).

Thanks so much for joining me today to learn about Duke Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's magnificently reimagined Nutcracker. I look forward to connecting with you again in 2 weeks, when the next brand new episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs.

Bye for now!