

## Suite from *The Firebird*

### Igor Stravinsky

Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes made a specialty of dancing pieces that were inspired by Russian folklore, and *The Firebird* was perfectly suited to the company's designs. The tale involves the dashing Prince Ivan (otherwise put, Ivan Tsarevich), who finds himself one night wandering through the garden of King Kashchei, an evil monarch whose power resides in a magic egg that he guards in an elegant box. In Kashchei's garden, the Prince captures a Firebird, which pleads for its life; the Prince agrees to spare it if it gives him one of its magic tail feathers, which it consents to do. Thus armed, the Prince continues through his evening and happens upon 13 enchanted princesses. The most beautiful of them catches his eye, and (acting under Kashchei's spell) lures him to a spot where Kashchei's demonic guards can ensnare him. But before he can be put under a spell himself, the Prince uses the magic tail feather to summon the Firebird, which reveals to him the secret of the magic egg from which Kashchei derives his power. The Prince locates and smashes the egg, breaking the web of evil enchantment, and he goes off to marry the newly liberated beautiful Princess, with whom, of course, he will live happily ever after.

*The Firebird* would be the first of Igor Stravinsky's truly original Diaghilev scores, but the opportunity came to him rather by accident. One of Diaghilev's set designers, Alexandre Benois, pushed to have Nikolai Tcherepnin write the score. Diaghilev favored his own one-time harmony professor Anatoly Lyadov and, even though he was well aware of Lyadov's reputation for procrastination and debilitating self-criticism, invited him to accept the commission for the new ballet. Lyadov strung Diaghilev along for months before the impresario, who had exhausted his patience and was running out

of time, turned instead to the aspiring young Stravinsky. Eager to capitalize on this break, Stravinsky immediately dropped what he was working on, installed himself in a dacha belonging to the family of his late teacher Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and turned out his sparkling score in short order, between November 1909 and March 1910, with final orchestrations and retouching continuing until May.

A French critic reported his experience of hearing Stravinsky play through his work-in-progress that winter in St. Petersburg:

The composer, young, slim, and uncommu-  
nicative, with vague meditative eyes, and  
lips set firm in an energetic looking face,  
was at the piano. But the moment he began

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, now Lomonosov, near St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York City

**Work composed:** between November 1909 and May 18, 1910; the concert suite heard here was created in Morges, Switzerland, in 1919

**World premiere:** the original ballet was unveiled on June 25, 1910, in a staged production of the Ballets Russes at the Paris Opéra, Gabriel Pierné, conductor. This concert suite was premiered on April 12, 1919, in Geneva, Switzerland, Ernest Ansermet, conductor.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 10, 1921, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** January 31, 2015, David Robertson, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 21 minutes

to play, the modest and dimly lit dwelling glowed with a dazzling radiance. By the end of the first scene, I was conquered: by the last, I was lost in admiration. The manuscript on the music-desk, scored over with fine penciling, revealed a masterpiece.

The ballet was well established by the time Stravinsky assembled several of its movements into a symphonic suite in 1919. (He would later expand this in 1945, but the 1919 version remains more popular.) This is one of music's great showpieces of orchestration, a remarkable tour de force for a 28-year-old composer. Even in the reduced orchestration of the 1919 version the music of *The Firebird* is filled with astonishing instrumental effects. Some of the sounds are frankly startling, such as when, in the introduction, the strings play eerie glissandos over their instruments' fingerboards to evoke the mystery of the garden

at night. When the Firebird dances, it does so to a set of variations on a Russian song, and the overlay of wind orchestration makes one believe that its feathers must indeed sparkle with magic. More folk tunes inform the dance of the Princesses, which is thrown into disarray when Kashchei's diabolical guards swarm onto the scene with their Infernal Dance. A solo violin comes to the fore in the tender Lullaby; and, with the evil spells broken, the Finale depicts a breathtakingly beautiful wedding processional for the Prince and his chosen Princess.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, xylophone, harp, piano (doubling celeste), and strings.

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## Fire Music

Several of the works on tonight's program are connected through their references to fire. Tan Dun's Violin Concerto: *Fire Ritual — A Musical Ritual for Victims of War* is inspired by an ancient ritual that would have involved fire, and the suite from Stravinsky's *The Firebird* is based on a Slavic legend about a mythical bird who rises from ashes and whose feathers glow with bright colors that resemble those of a bonfire as its flames recede. In Mozart's aria "Der Hölle Rache," the Queen of the Night sings about how death and despair blaze around her. Liu Yuan's *Train Toccata* also has fire buried in its etymology. In Chinese, the word "train" is *hua chua*, expressed by a pair of characters. The first, *hua*, means "fire," the second, *chua*, means "vehicle." When the word was formulated, a train was, literally, a "fire vehicle."



Léon Bakst's costume design for the Ballet Russes production of *The Firebird*, 1910