

L'Oiseau de feu (*The Firebird*) [complete ballet score]

Igor Stravinsky

As musicians go, Igor Stravinsky was a rather late bloomer. He didn't begin piano lessons until he was nine, but these were soon supplemented by private tutoring in harmony and counterpoint. His parents supported his musical inclinations, all the more laudable since they knew what their teenager was getting into. (Stravinsky's father was a bass singer at the opera houses of Kiev and, later, St. Petersburg; his mother was an accomplished amateur pianist.) One of Stravinsky's friends at school was the son of the celebrated composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. When Stravinsky's father died, in December 1902, Rimsky-Korsakov became a mentor, both personal and musical, to the aspiring composer. By 1907 Stravinsky (already 25 years old) was ready to bestow an opus number on one of his compositions, his *Symphony in E-flat major*, Op. 1, which he dedicated to his great teacher. Rimsky-Korsakov died a year later, but his star pupil was ready to strike out on his own.

Stravinsky's breakthrough to fame arrived when he embarked on a string of collaborations with the ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes, launched in Paris in 1909, became identified with the cutting edge of the European arts scene. Stravinsky's first Diaghilev project was modest: a pair of Chopin orchestrations for the 1909 Ballets Russes production of *Les Sylphides*. The production was a success, but some critics complained that the troupe's choreographic and scenic novelty was not matched by its conservative music. Diaghilev addressed this by commissioning new ballet scores, of which the very first was Stravinsky's *Firebird*, premiered in 1910. Thus began a collaboration that gave rise to some of the most irreplaceable items in the history of Modernist stage music: *Petrushka* (premiered in 1911), *The Rite of Spring* (1913), *The*

Nightingale (1914), *Pulcinella* (1920), *Mavra* (1922), *Reynard* (1922), *The Wedding* (1923), *Oedipus Rex* (1927), and *Apollo* (1928).

The Ballets Russes made a specialty of pieces inspired by Russian folklore (primeval Russian history being a cultural obsession of the moment) and *The Firebird* was perfectly suited to the company's designs. The tale involves the dashing Prince Ivan (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

IN SHORT

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

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work composed: November 1909–May 18, 1910; dedicated “To my dear friend Andrey Rimsky-Korsakov,” son of the Stravinsky's mentor, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

World premiere: June 25, 1910, in a staged ballet production of the Ballets Russes at the Paris Opéra, Gabriel Pierné, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: excerpts from the complete ballet, February 21, 1948, Walter Hendl, conductor; complete ballet score, January 16, 1975, Pierre Boulez, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 18, 2014, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 47 minutes

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 goes off to marry the newly liberated Princess, with whom, of course, he will live happily ever after.

Stravinsky's score is one of music's great showpieces of orchestration, a remarkable tour de force for a 28-year-old composer, even one who had issued from the studio of Rimsky-Korsakov, himself acknowledged as a wizard of instrumentation. Although Stravinsky would

A Lucky Break

The Firebird was the first of Stravinsky's original scores for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, yet the opportunity came to him almost by accident. One of Diaghilev's set designers, Alexandre Benois, pushed to have Nikolai Tcherepnin write the score, but what may have been tentative steps in that direction were derailed and Tcherepnin instead ended up producing an orchestral tone poem on the firebird legend, titled *The Enchanted Lake*. In any case, Diaghilev favored his own one-time harmony professor Anatoly Lyadov and, even though he was 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.

Eventually Diaghilev, who was running out of both patience and time, turned 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 Rimsky-Korsakov family, and turned out his sparkling score in short order, between November 1909 and March 1910, with final orchestration and retouching continuing until May.



Michel Fokine as Prince Ivan and Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird in the Ballets Russes's premiere production

“slim down” his orchestra for the concert suites he later assembled from his *Firebird* score, the orchestration for the original ballet production, heard here, is opulent indeed.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo) and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon) and

contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, orchestra bells, xylophone, celeste, piano, three harps, and strings; also four Wagner tubas, played offstage.

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Views and Reviews

A French critic reported his experience of hearing Stravinsky play through his work-in-progress during the winter of 1910 in St. Petersburg:



The composer, young, slim, and uncommunicative, with vague meditative eyes, and lips set firm in an energetic looking face, was at the piano. But the moment he began 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-rest, scored over with fine pencilings, revealed a masterpiece.

Stravinsky in 1910