Igor Stravinsky’s breakthrough to fame arrived when he embarked on a string of collaborations with the ballet impresario Sergei 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 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 musical score. Diaghilev set about addressing this by commissioning new ballet scores, of which the first was Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, premiered in 1910. Thus began an association that would give rise to some of the most irreplaceable items in the history of the early-20th-century stage: *Petrushka* (1911), *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913), *Le Rossignol* (*The Nightingale*, 1914), *Pulcinella* (1920), *Mavra* (1922), *Renard* (1922), *Les noces* (*The Wedding*, 1923), *Oedipus Rex* (1927), and *Apollon musagète* (*Apollo*, 1928).

Stravinsky, who worked on *Petrushka* from August 1910 through May 1911, later wrote of how the idea for the piece coalesced:

> I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of *arpeggi*. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet-blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet. ... One day I leapt for joy. I had indeed found my title — *Petrushka*, the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries.

At first the score seemed to be taking the form of a concert work. Diaghilev noted this with distress when he visited Stravinsky to check on the status of their collaboration, which he thought was about springtime celebrations in pagan Russia. But once Stravinsky played him the first two movements, with their evocative quotations and bitonal bite, it was Diaghilev’s turn to jump for joy. He immediately sensed the choreographic possibilities in *Petrushka* and was happy to postpone *The Rite of Spring* to be their next project.

The scenario for *Petrushka* unrolls through four scenes set in St. Petersburg in the 1830s. In the first, crowds stroll through the Shrove-tide Fair on a sunny winter day as musicians compete to entertain them. A showman introduces the characters of a puppet show he is going to present: Petrushka, the Ballerina, and the Blackamoor. The puppets astonish everyone by stepping out from their little box-theater and dancing all on their own. The second scene takes place...
in Petrushka’s cell, where our principal puppet, now imbued with human feelings, bemoans his awkwardness. He loves the Ballerina, but she finds him repellent, and as the scene closes Petrushka hurls himself against the wall in despair. Scene Three is set in the Blackamoor’s cell, where that brutal character, decked out in his finery, proves irresistible to the Ballerina. Petrushka rushes in on their love scene, insanely jealous, but the Blackamoor throws him out. The concluding tableau is back at the fair, in the evening, where colorful characters again roam about. A commotion breaks out in the puppet master’s little theater; in another jealous encounter, Petrushka is slain by the Blackamoor, and the latter escapes with the Ballerina. Petrushka dies in the snow, but the puppet master assures the onlookers not to worry — that it was nothing more than

Views and Reviews

The critic M.D. Calvocoressi, an early champion of Stravinsky’s music, reported on Petrushka’s premiere in the Comoedia Illustré of July 11, 1911:

Even better than The Firebird, Petrushka is the work which continues the series of the most characteristic masterpieces of the Russian school…. Very refined yet bold even to the smallest detail, the music of Petrushka is at the same time quite muscular, of a remarkable sureness of line, of an intensity, of matchless color. There is nothing tentative, nothing unnecessary, nothing forced in the humor or emotion; in short, it is a masterful work and a delightful one.

The London Times, though positive, maintained a more tentative stance when the ballet opened at Covent Garden the following February:

It is all horribly macabre and extraordinarily effective. … The whole thing is refreshingly new and refreshingly Russian, more Russian, in fact, than any ballet we have seen. … The employment of Russian folk music in the scene in the fair is also most refreshing, and the way in which persistent rhythms bring out the character and movement of the crowd is something quite new. The orchestration is very brilliant throughout, a piano, xylophone, and celesta being employed as well as the usual orchestra. The ballet was very favourably received, though the house seemed a little puzzled by the newness of it all.
a puppet made of wood and sawdust. The crowds withdraw, but in the end Petrushka’s ghost gets the final word, jeering sardonically from the roof of the little theater.

In 1947, after Petrushka had long been established as a classic of ballet repertoire, Stravinsky revised his score, making its orchestra smaller and otherwise refining the piece in ways that seem biased more towards concert performance than toward the descriptive style of the ballet stage. In essence, what he initially conceived as a concert piece eventually evolved back into one. However, this concert returns to the composer’s initial orchestration, which is inventive and colorful to the point of extravagance.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (two doubling piccolo), four oboes (one doubling English horn), four clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), four bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two cornets, two trumpets (both doubling piccolo trumpet), three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, xylophone, orchestral bells, snare drum, celesta (four hands), piano, two harps, and strings.

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**At the Creation**

In 1911 Pierre Monteux was assistant conductor of the Concerts Colonne Orchestra, which had been engaged to play for the productions of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. He was assigned to lead the orchestra during rehearsals of their new ballet Petrushka. In his memoir It’s All in the Music, he recalled:

> At first, I wasn’t the least bit interested, I must say. However, as the rehearsals proceeded, I felt a certain fascination for the score, which presented great difficulties to the orchestra. … I think the composer, Igor Stravinsky, interested me as much as his music. He spoke perfect French, which facilitated matters, and knew exactly what he wanted to hear. … This very slight, dynamic man, twenty-nine years of age, darting like a dragonfly from one end of the foyer to the other, never still, listening, moving to every part of the orchestra, landing at intervals behind my back, and hissing semi-voce instructions in my ears, intrigued me. I should add that he in no way annoyed me, as I was by that time completely subjugated by the music and the composer. … After a few rehearsals … Igor Stravinsky declared to Diaghilev: “Only Monteux will conduct my work.”

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Stravinsky, with Vaslav Nijinsky of Ballets Russes as Petrushka, in 1911