Program Notes

by Phillip Huscher

Igor Stravinsky
Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Suite from The Firebird

Stravinsky composed The Firebird between November 1909 and May 1910; the ballet was first performed by Sergei Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet at the Paris Opera on June 25, 1910. The composer prepared three concert suites from the full score. The last of these, the 1945 suite performed at these concerts, calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, xylophone, piano, harp, and strings.

Performance time is approximately twenty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite were given at Orchestra Hall on February 11 and 12, 1921, with Frederick Stock conducting. Stravinsky himself conducted the suite at Orchestra Hall on five occasions: February 20 and 21, 1925; January 17, 18, and 22, 1935; February 27, 1940; November 7, 8, and 12, 1940; and January 12, 14, and 15, 1954. Our most recent subscription concert performances of the suite were given on October 9 and 11, 2003, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed The Firebird Suite at the Ravinia Festival on July 3, 1936, with Ernest Ansermet conducting and most recently on August 2, 2002, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting. Stravinsky conducted the suite there once, on July 21, 1962.

The Firebird opened on June 25, 1910; on June 26 Stravinsky was a famous man. The great impresario Sergei Diaghilev had predicted as much—at one of the final dress rehearsals he pointed to Stravinsky and said, “Mark him well; he is a man on the eve of celebrity.” Diaghilev was a good judge of such things, for in 1910 his circle included many of the most famous creative artists of the time. He was also, perhaps, excessively proud, for he had discovered Igor Stravinsky—or, to be more accurate, he was the one who put Stravinsky in the right place at the right time. The rest was all Stravinsky’s doing.

The right place was Paris in 1910. By chance, Diaghilev had heard Stravinsky’s music for the first time just two years before, at a concert in Saint Petersburg. He immediately invited the twenty-six-year-old composer to assist in orchestrating music for the 1909 ballet season in Paris. Stravinsky wasn’t Diaghilev’s first choice to compose his new ballet based on the Russian legend of the Firebird. He initially gave the job to Nikolai Tcherepnin, who promptly had a falling out with the choreographer Mikhail Fokine; then to Anatole Liadov, a prominent, though modestly talented Russian composer who declined, as did Alexander Glazunov and Nikolai Sokolov. Finally Diaghilev turned to the young, untested Stravinsky.

The Firebird was a spectacular success. (See Stravinsky’s account which follows.) According to Ravel, the Parisian audience wanted a taste of the avant-garde, and this dazzling music by the daring young Russian fit the bill. The Firebird was Stravinsky’s first large-scale commission, and, being an overnight hit, it was quickly followed by two more. The first, Petrushka, enhanced his reputation; the second, The Rite of Spring, made him the most notorious composer alive.

Both of those works were more revolutionary than The Firebird—less indebted to folk melody and the gestures of other masters—and spoke in a voice of greater individuality. But The Firebird is one of the most impressive calling cards in the history of music—a work of such brilliance that, if he had written nothing else, Stravinsky’s name would still be known to us today.

Stravinsky later called the Firebird orchestra “wastefully large” (even though he used it with formidable clarity and imagination), and in 1919, when he made his second concert suite from the complete ballet, he cut down the number of performers without lessening the music’s impact or daring. “For me,”
Stravinsky wrote, “the most striking effect in The Firebird was the natural-harmonic string glissando near the beginning, which the bass chord touches off like a catherine wheel. I was delighted to have discovered this, and I remember my excitement in demonstrating it to Rimsky’s violinist and cellist sons. I remember, too, Richard Strauss’s astonishment when he heard it two years later in Berlin.” The score is filled with delicious details, though none as novel as the one Stravinsky rightfully claimed as his own, and, in the closing pages, a magnificent sweep unmatched by much music written in the previous century and little since.

With The Firebird, Stravinsky found instant and enduring fame. “And, oh yes, to complete the picture,” he later wrote, “I was once addressed by a man in an American railway dining car, and quite seriously, as ‘Mr. Fireberg.’ ”

Igor Stravinsky on The Firebird
I had already begun to think about The Firebird when I returned to Saint Petersburg from Ustilug, in the autumn of 1909, though I was not yet certain of the commission (which, in fact, did not come until December, more than a month after I had begun to compose; I remember the day Diaghilev telephoned me to say go ahead, and my telling him I already had). Early in November, I moved from Saint Petersburg to a dacha belonging to the Rimsky-Korsakov family about seventy miles southeast of the city. I went there for a vacation, a rest in birch forests and snow-fresh air, but instead began to work on The Firebird. Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov (son of the composer) was with me at the time, and he often was during the following months; because of this, The Firebird is dedicated to him. The introduction up to the bassoon and clarinet figure at bar six was composed in the country, as well as notations for later parts. I returned to Saint Petersburg in December and remained there until, in March, I had finished the composition. The orchestra score was ready a month later, and the complete music mailed to Paris by mid-April. (The score is dated May 18, but by that time I was merely retouching details.)

The Firebird did not attract me as a subject. Like all story ballets it demanded descriptive music of a kind I did not want to write. I had not yet proved myself as a composer, and I had not earned the right to criticize the aesthetics of my collaborators, but I did criticize them, and arrogantly, though perhaps my age (twenty-seven) was more arrogant than I was. Above all, I could not abide the assumption that my music would be imitation Rimsky-Korsakov, especially as by that time I was in such revolt against poor Rimsky. However, if I say I was less than eager to fulfill the commission, I know that, in truth, my reservations about the subject were also an advance defense for my not being sure I could. But Diaghilev, the diplomat, arranged everything. He came to call on me one day, with Fokine, Nijinsky, Bakst, and Benois. When the five of them had proclaimed their belief in my talent, I began to believe, too, and accepted.

Fokine is credited as the librettist of The Firebird, but I remember that all of us, and especially Bakst, who was Diaghilev’s principal adviser, contributed ideas to the plan of the scenario; I should also add that Bakst was as much responsible for the costumes as Golovine. My own “collaboration” with Fokine means nothing more than that we studied the libretto together, episode by episode, until I knew the exact measurements required of the music. In spite of Fokine’s wearying homiletics, delivered at each meeting, on the role of music as an accompaniment to dance, he taught me much, and I have worked with choreographers somewhat in the same way ever since. I like exact requirements.

I was flattered, of course, at the promise of a performance of my music in Paris, and my excitement on arriving in that city, from Ustilug, towards the end of May, could hardly have been greater. These ardors were somewhat cooled, however, at the first rehearsals. The words “for Russian export” seemed to be stamped everywhere, both on the stage and in the music. The mimic scenes were especially obvious in this sense, but I could say nothing about them as they were what Fokine liked best. I was also deflated to discover that not all of my musical remarks were held to be oracular, and Pierné, the conductor, disagreed with me once in front of the whole orchestra. I had written “non crescendo,” a precaution common enough in the music of the last fifty years, but Pierné said, “Young man, if you do not want a crescendo, then do not write anything.”
The first-night audience glittered indeed, but the fact that it was heavily perfumed is more vivid in my memory; the gaily elegant London audience, when I came to know it later, seemed almost deodorized by comparison. I sat in Diaghilev's box, where, at intermission, artists, dowagers, aged Egerias of the Ballet, "intellectuals," balletomanes, appeared. I met for the first time Proust, Giraudoux, Paul Morand, St. John Perse, Claudel (with whom, years later, I nearly collaborated on a musical treatment of the Book of Tobit) at *The Firebird*, though I cannot remember whether at the premiere or at subsequent performances. At one of the latter I also met Sarah Bernhardt. She was thickly veiled, sitting in a wheelchair in her private box, and seemed terribly apprehensive lest anyone should recognize her. After a month of such society, I was happy to retire to a sleepy village in Brittany.

A moment of unexpected comedy occurred near the beginning of the performance. Diaghilev had had the idea that a procession of real horses should march on stage—in step with, to be exact, the last six eighth notes of bar eight. The poor animals did enter on cue all right, but they began to neigh and whinny, and one of them, a better critic than an actor, left a malodorous calling card. The audience laughed, and Diaghilev decided not to risk a repetition in future performances. That he could have tried it even once seems incredible to me now—but the incident was forgotten in the general acclaim for the new ballet afterwards.

I was called to the stage to bow at the conclusion, and was recalled several times. I was still on stage when the final curtain had come down, and I saw Diaghilev coming towards me, and a dark man with a double forehead, whom he introduced as Claude Debussy. The great composer spoke kindly about the music, ending his words with an invitation to dine with him. Some years later, when we were sitting together in his box at a performance of *Pelléas*, I asked him what he really thought of *The Firebird*. He said, "Que voulez-vous, il fallait bien commencer par quelque chose" [Well, you had to start with something]. Honest, but not extremely flattering. Yet shortly after *The Firebird* premiere he gave me his well-known photo (in profile) with a dedication "à Igor Stravinski en toute sympathie artistique." I was not so honest about the work we were then hearing. I thought *Pelléas* a great bore as a whole, and in spite of many wonderful pages.

*The Firebird: a synopsis of the complete ballet*

Fokine’s adaptation of the fairy tale pits the Firebird, a good fairy, against the ogre Kashchei, whose soul is preserved as an egg in a casket. A young prince, Ivan Tsarevich, wanders into Kashchei’s magic garden in pursuit of the Firebird. When he captures her, she pleads for her release and gives him one of her feathers, whose magic will protect him from harm. He then meets thirteen princesses, all under Kashchei’s spell, and falls in love with one of them. When he tries to follow them into the magic garden, a great carillon sounds an alarm and he is captured. Kashchei is about to turn Ivan to stone when the prince waves the feather; the Firebird appears. Her lullaby puts Kashchei to sleep, and she then reveals the secret of his immortality. Ivan opens the casket and smashes the egg, killing Kashchei. The captive princesses are freed, and Ivan and his beloved princess are betrothed.

The numbers of the 1945 suite are:

- Introduction
- Prelude and Dance of the Firebird
- Variations (The Firebird)
- Pantomime I
- Pas de deux (Firebird and Ivan Tsarevich)
- Pantomime II
- Scherzo (Dance of the Princesses)
- Pantomime III
- Rondo (Khorovod)
- Infernal Dance
- Lullaby (Firebird)
- Final Hymn
Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.