

## Suite from *The Firebird*

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

transcribed by Thomas Knox\*

One hundred years ago, Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev commissioned a young and relatively unknown countryman named Igor Stravinsky to compose the musical score for a ballet that would mark a turning point in the careers of both men. Diaghilev was born into a family of wealth and influence in 1872, and was raised in an environment that emphasized the study and appreciation of the arts. Although he had no special talent in any specific artistic discipline, his refined aesthetic sense and unique artistic vision became evident while he was still a student in St. Petersburg. Although he was ostensibly a student of law, Diaghilev also pursued lessons in singing and composition, but after being told by his teacher Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov that he had no potential as a composer, he turned his focus to arts administration. In 1899 he was appointed a director in the Russian Imperial theater system, but his strong artistic opinions and intractability on a variety of issues led to his dismissal in 1901. Thus exiled from the Russian artistic mainstream, Diaghilev sought new frontiers and found a particularly fertile one when he brought a collection of Russian art to Paris for a special presentation at the Petit Palais. When he saw the degree to which the Parisians were smitten with the distinctly Russian qualities of the art on display, Diaghilev decided to expand the parameters of his offerings. He returned to Paris in 1907 with a highly successful series of five concerts of music by Russian composers and built upon the success of this venture with another concert series in 1908 that included a full production of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Goudunov* featuring famed Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin.

Ballet was first included in Diaghilev's Parisian series in 1909, the official birth year of the famed Ballet Russe, but the early productions mostly utilized recycled music from existing scores. While critics were impressed with the quality of the dancing and overall production values of the Ballet Russe, they felt the music did not measure up. To address this shortcoming Diaghilev considered commissioning a variety of established composers including Nikolay Tcherepnin, Anatoly Lyadov, Alexander Glazunov, and even the non-Russian Maurice Ravel. In a letter to Lyadov, Diaghilev conveys this concern and also proposes a libretto that he thinks would be ideal for the 1910 season:

I need a *ballet* and a *Russian* one—the *first* Russian ballet, since there is no such thing—there is Russian opera, Russian symphony, Russian song, Russian dance, Russian rhythm—but no Russian ballet. And that is precisely what I need, to perform in May of the coming year in the Paris Grand Opéra and in the huge Royal Drury Lane Theatre in London.

The ballet needn't be three-storied—and the libretto is ready—[Mikhail] Fokine [Diaghilev's choreographer] has it and it was cooked up by us all collectively. It's *The Firebird*, a ballet in one act and perhaps two scenes.

For a variety of reasons, neither Lyadov nor the other composers on Diaghilev's short list were commissioned to create *The Firebird*. Instead, he turned to twenty-seven year-old Igor Stravinsky. Diaghilev had first learned of Stravinsky when he heard a performance of his *Fireworks* in St. Petersburg early in 1909. Impressed with the colorful scoring of the composition, he hired Stravinsky to make orchestrations of several piano works for the Ballet Russe. Although these transcriptions were successful, it still must have required a tremendous

leap of faith (if not desperation) for Diaghilev to entrust this project, about which he had such high hopes, to the largely unproven composer. But Stravinsky came highly recommended by several composers in whom Diaghilev had tremendous faith. The terms of the commission may have been a factor as well, for more accomplished composers were likely to be put off by the looming deadline (the work was due in less than six months from the date of the commission) as well as the collaborative nature of the project.

It was a marvelous opportunity for a young composer, although in later years Stravinsky claimed that he was not excited about the project. Stravinsky biographer Stephen Walsh asserts that this reflection may have been somewhat disingenuous:

[Stravinsky's] later remark about having been "less than eager to fulfill the commission" can certainly be taken with a pinch of salt, and so can his observation that "*The Firebird* did not attract me as a subject." The evidence is that he applied himself to it diligently, and without protest. Not only did he manage to compose three-quarters of an hour of sumptuously orchestrated music in less than six months—which was quick by any standards and a much higher rate of production than would later be normal for him—but he accepted a collaborative element in the writing which would have been dust and ashes for him later on.

Indeed, Fokine met with Stravinsky regularly throughout the compositional process to discuss each scene and demonstrate the dances he planned to choreograph. For these sessions Stravinsky improvised music on the piano that reflected Fokine's movements and approximate the musical atmosphere that he hoped to provide with his final score. Although Stravinsky was not fond of this process, nor of the requirement to compose what he called "descriptive music," it is difficult to argue with the results; a score that revealed the distinctly Russian influence of composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, and even Alexander Scriabin, but that also hinted at a new and thoroughly original voice that would soon achieve recognition in its own right.

In the context of history, the sensational impact of *The Firebird's* première has been somewhat overwhelmed by the riotous reception for *The Rite of Spring* a few years later, but it is important to remember what an event this opening really was. Even during rehearsals, it was understood by many that Stravinsky was on to something new. (During rehearsals Diaghilev told cast members to "Mark him well, for he is a man on the eve of celebrity.") The pre-première buzz about the ballet attracted many leading members of Paris's artistic intelligentsia, and the ballet proved so popular that extra performances had to be added. Not surprisingly, there was also an immediate interest in crafting a concert suite, the first of which was created and conducted by Alexander Ziloti, the Russian conductor who had conducted the St. Petersburg première of *Fireworks*. His 1910 suite, which ends with the Infernal Dance, was taken on tour through Russia and, much to Stravinsky's surprise and disappointment, the reception in his musically conservative homeland was considerably less enthusiastic than he enjoyed in the more progressive Paris. Stravinsky was frustrated, and in a letter to a friend asked: "Why is it necessary to approach my music with a conservative yardstick? Probably so as to beat me on the head with it. Let them beat!"

By the time Stravinsky created the 1919 concert suite familiar to most modern audiences, much in his life had changed. Although he had achieved substantial international fame, a variety of circumstances (not the least of which was World War I), had made him desperate for money. A newly published suite drawn from *The Firebird* seemed to be a potential money-maker, but

several legal and logistical complications limited his ability to profit from such an endeavor. In a clever maneuver that presaged Stravinsky's lifelong penchant for manipulating the law in order to maximize his income, the composer reasoned that if he reordered the movements and re-orchestrated enough of the score (although much of this re-orchestration had already occurred), he could republish the music as a new work in a country such as Britain. Not coincidentally, this country just happened to be the home of J. & W. Chester Music, with whom the composer had recently begun to publish. Otto Kling, Stravinsky's representative at Chester, was not entirely convinced by Stravinsky's logic and demanded that the composer assume all liabilities. This proved to be prescient on the part of Kling, for the lawsuits surrounding the publishing rights of Stravinsky's early works continued for decades. None of these legal issues dampened the enthusiasm for The Suite from *The Firebird*, which has become a staple in concert halls throughout the world. Thomas Knox's setting for band was completed in 1982 at the request of then-Marine Band Director Colonel John Bourgeois and has been an important part of the band's repertoire ever since.