

in March, and the orchestration was complete a month later. The first performance took place in Paris on June 25, 1910, eight days after the composer's 28th birthday, and it was a huge success. Stravinsky would go on to write quite different music over the course of his long career, but the music from *The Firebird*—now a century old—remains his most popular creation.

a magical tale

The Firebird tells of a young prince, Ivan Tsarevich, who unknowingly pursues the magic Firebird—part woman, part bird—into the garden of the green-taloned Kastchei, most horrible of all ogres: Kastchei captures and imprisons maidens within the castle and turns all knights who come to rescue them to stone. Ivan captures the Firebird, but she begs to be released, and when he agrees she gives him a magic feather and vanishes. The prince sees a group of 13 princesses playing with golden apples, and when dawn breaks and they have to return to Kastchei's castle, he follows them. Instantly he is confronted by the hideous fiends who inhabit the castle and is about to be turned to stone himself when he remembers the feather. He waves it, and the Firebird returns, putting Kastchei and all the other ogres to sleep, and showing him where a magic egg is hidden in a casket. When Ivan smashes the egg, Kastchei and his fiends disappear, the petrified knights return to life, the maidens are freed, Kastchei's castle is transformed into a cathedral, and Ivan marries the most beautiful of the princesses.

the complete ballet music

These concerts present the score of *The Firebird* as it was performed at the premiere of the ballet in Paris in June 1910—about 45 minutes of music—rather than the more frequently performed 1919 suite in which the duration is more than halved.

The ominous *Introduction*, in the unusual key of A-flat minor, hints at the music that will be associated with the monsters; near the end of this section comes one of Stravinsky's most striking orchestral effects, a series of rippling string glissandos played entirely in harmonics. *The Enchanted Garden of Kastchei* leads to music that Stravinsky omitted from the suites, the *Appearance of the Firebird, Pursued by Prince Ivan*, full of trills and tremolos from the strings. The music proceeds without pause into the shimmering, whirling *Dance of the Firebird* and *The Firebird's Variation*, which contained Stravinsky's own favorite music from this score. But between these comes the unfamiliar *Capture of the Firebird by Prince Ivan*, full of quick-paced staccato writing that concludes with ringing horn attacks.

Appearance of the Thirteen Enchanted Princesses is marked by shimmering string chords, followed by a series of woodwind and violin solos and culminating in a flute cadenza. As Prince Ivan watches, the princesses engage in their *Game with the Golden Apples*, which bustles along energetically on its steady rhythmic pulse. Stravinsky was later critical of this movement, calling it too



Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882,
St. Petersburg, Russia
Died: April 6, 1971,
New York City

***The Firebird*, complete ballet (original 1910 version)**

Premiered: June 25, 1910

In 1909, following a successful visit of the Ballets Russes to Paris, the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev and his choreographer Mikhail Fokine made plans for a new ballet to be presented in Paris the following season, based on the old Russian legend of the Firebird. They at first asked Anatoly Lyadov to compose the music, but when it became clear that the notoriously lazy Lyadov would never get around to it, they decided to take a chance on a young composer who had orchestrated some pieces for the Ballets Russes the year before. His name was Igor Stravinsky, and he was virtually unknown.

Recognizing that this was his big chance (and terrified that he would not be up to the challenge), Stravinsky set to work in November 1909 at a dacha owned by the Rimsky-Korsakov family (to which he had gone, as he said, “for a vacation in birch forests and snow-fresh air”). He finished the piano score in St. Petersburg

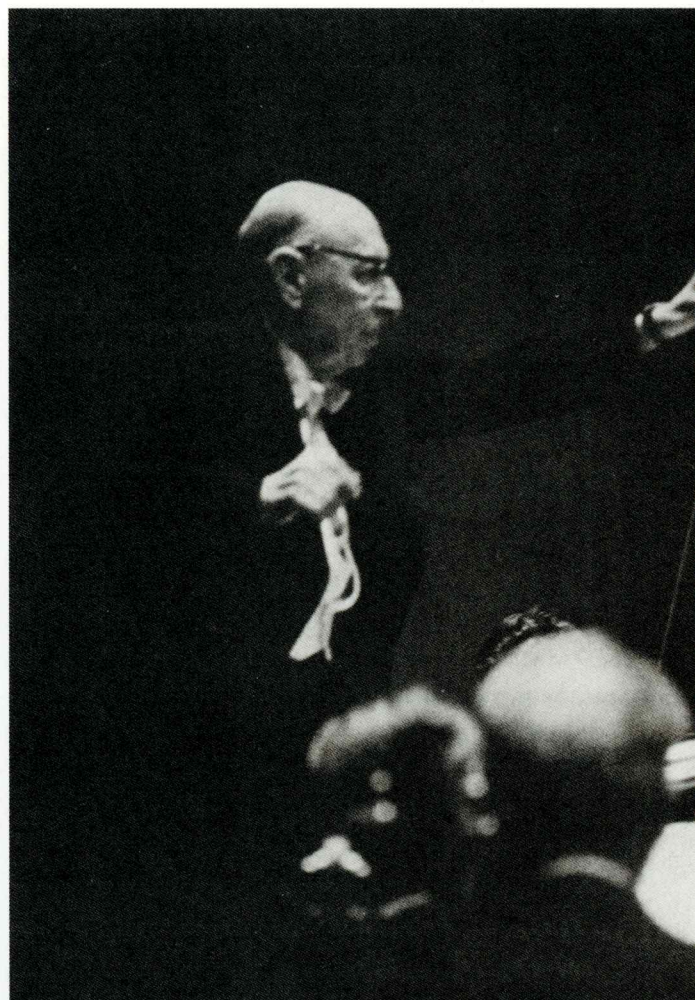
“Mendelssohnian-Tchaikovsky,” but it is brilliant music, and it makes an effective scene in the ballet. The *Sudden Appearance of Prince Ivan*, with its striking horn solos, accompanies Ivan Tsarevich’s entry into the garden. The music now proceeds into the familiar *Khorovod*, or *Round Dance*. One of the intentions of Diaghilev and Fokine had been to make *The Firebird* as “Russian” as possible, and in *The Princesses’ Khorovod* Stravinsky uses the old Russian folk-tune “In the Garden.” Announced by solo oboe as the 13 captive princesses dance in the castle garden, the melody is taken over by the violins and extended in the ballet’s most lyric section.

The *Khorovod* comes to a peaceful close, and it is here that listeners will find a long sequence of unfamiliar music. In the familiar suites, the *Khorovod* gives way to the *Infernal Dance of All Kastchei’s Subjects*, but in the complete ballet a number of scenes separate these two movements. *Daybreak*, with its fierce trumpet calls, leads to the *Magic Carillon*: bells ring wildly as Kastchei’s monsters appear—to violent music—and take Prince Ivan captive. Kastchei the Immortal then enters on a series of brass fanfares and threatens Ivan. The princesses intercede to little avail before the Firebird herself enters and gradually puts Kastchei’s minions to sleep. Only now does the great *Infernal Dance of All Kastchei’s Subjects* explode to life in one of the most violent orchestral attacks ever written. Sharply syncopated rhythms and barbaric snorts from the low brass depict the fiends’ efforts to resist the Firebird’s spell; without the slightest relaxation or slowing of tempo this dance powers its way to a dazzling (and ear-splitting) close on a great rip of sound. In its aftermath, solo bassoon sings the gentle, almost lugubrious *Berceuse*, the music with which the Firebird lulls Kastchei and his followers to sleep.

In the familiar suites, the *Berceuse* leads without pause into the *Finale*. In the ballet, however, Kastchei does not remain conveniently asleep but comes back to life to the sound of contrabassoons, then bassoons, then the entire wind and brass sections. The Firebird lulls him not to sleep but to death (deep string chords), and this leads through a magical passage for tremolo strings into the *Finale*. Here solo French horn sings the main theme, based on another Russian folksong, “By the Gate.” Beginning quietly, this noble tune simply repeats, growing in strength as it recurs, and the ballet drives to its magnificent conclusion.

Instrumentation: 3 flutes, piccolo (1 flute also doubling piccolo), 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon (1 bassoon also doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, xylophone, 3 harps, piano, celesta and strings; offstage: 3 trumpets, 2 tenor Wagner tuben, 2 bass Wagner tuben, bells

Program note by **Eric Bromberger**.



In 1940 and 1966 Igor Stravinsky conducted the Minnesota Orchestra, then known as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, in performances at the ensemble’s home of Northrop Auditorium. Pictured here is Stravinsky at the 1966 performance, at which he led his *Fireworks* and *The Fairy’s Kiss*.