

philharmonia orchestra

January 2009 – Podcast Transcription

Participants from Abu Dhabi Education Project

Welcome to the Podcast!

Adam Mackenzie – Workshop Musician

Welcome to the Philharmonia Orchestra's January podcast, coming to you from Abu Dhabi.

Education Project Participants

The orchestra are here for two concerts and are working with us to create a new piece of music based on Stravinsky's Firebird Suite!

We begin this month's podcast with a look at Stravinsky's piece.

Paul Rissmann – Education Animateur

The Firebird has been described as the greatest piece that Rimsky-Korsakov never wrote, because it clearly defines the moment when his young and relatively inexperienced composition student, Igor Stravinsky, overtook his teacher - by creating one of the most significant ballet scores of the 20th Century.

Paris was gripped by an ace troupe of Russian Dancers - the Ballet Russes. They were promoted by Serge Diaghilev, and they were the hottest ticket in town - with a buzz only comparable to a hit West End Show or Broadway musical.

Diaghilev commissioned the unknown 26-year-old Stravinsky to compose the score for *The Firebird* and it was an instant success - marking the beginning of one of the most fruitful creative collaborations ever.

Although designed as a Ballet, the music is so finely crafted that it works just as well as a concert performance - performed without dance.

The Firebird's story fuses together two Russian folktales, the sum of which would make a blockbuster movie.

The villain is an evil magician - King Kastchei - who lives in a dark and mysterious world, kidnapping Princesses and turning Princes into stone.

Stravinsky really captures Kastchei's evil spirit - and you can hear his menace right at the very beginning of the piece.

So the orchestra begin with a sinister sounding pattern, but why does the music sound so dark?

Musical Extract

Obviously the music is very low – it's played deep down in the cellos and basses, but the main reason is that Stravinsky uses a very specific set of notes - taken from the octatonic scale.

This is an exotic sounding scale, with its origins in 7th century Arabic music, and it gets its name because it contains 8 different pitches - rather than the 7 that you would find in a regular major or minor scale.

Here's a normal major scale: *Musical Extract*

And now here's the Octatonic scale, with its alternating series of semitones and tones: *Musical Extract*

Stravinsky uses interesting melodic ideas like this scale combined with extended playing techniques to create the most original textures. In the introduction there's a wonderful moment when he asks the string section to make the most unusual sound – and if you listen to this sound in isolation - you'd swear that it was electronic!

But that sound was invented almost 100 years ago, and is produced entirely by acoustic instruments.

It has the rather grand title of *Harmonic Glissando*. That means the musicians press lightly on their strings and then slide up and down the fingerboard to create the most amazing sound.

Musical Extract

What follows is one of the many examples of musical transformation in Stravinsky's music.

Remember the sinister phrase we met right at the very beginning of the score? Well here it is with an entirely different colour, sung out by the flutes and oboes in the woodwind section.

Musical Extract

King Kastchei's castle is surrounded by a huge enchanted garden. In addition to the thirteen princesses he's kidnapped – he also has captured a magical creature called the Firebird.

The 2nd movement of the Firebird suite begins with fast tremolos – with the musicians moving quickly from one note to the next, and it gives the impression that the firebird is trapped and trying to escape.

Musical Extract

The hero of our story is a young Prince called Ivan. When he sees the Firebird in Kastchei's garden – he tries to catch it.

Stravinsky underscores this action with some athletic music – perfect for dance. The music feels entirely unpredictable, as sounds leap out from all directions, then tumble downwards and race off. Not only do you hear that in the music, but you can see it clearly in the score.

Ivan captures the Firebird. In return for her release, she offers him one of her magical feathers. If Ivan is ever in trouble, he only needs to wave the feather in the air and the Firebird will come to his rescue. The Firebird then disappears and Ivan continues his journey through the magical garden.

The third movement features a beautiful melody describing the thirteen princesses held captive by King Kastchei. Gorgeous solo lines weave through the texture, for the oboe, cello, clarinet and bassoon.

Prince Ivan immediately falls in love with one of the princesses. The only problem is that, King Kastchei discovers Ivan in the garden and sends his henchmen to capture him.

The next movement is one of the most thrilling written for orchestra, called *The Infernal Dance of King Kastchei*.

Stravinsky was a really cunning composer because the movement you've just heard was wonderful and soft, which just makes this next movement all the more of a shock.

Musical Extract

The Infernal Dance is a showcase for Stravinsky's advanced orchestration techniques, but it is also great example of a musical Rondo.

The theme that you've just heard returns throughout the structure of the music, but so your ears never get tired of it – Stravinsky continually changes how it's played.

Musical Extract

The henchmen capture Ivan – and take him to King Kastchei. Sticking strictly with tradition, Ivan is about to be turned to stone. But then he remembers the Firebird's magical feather.

With one wave, the Firebird appears, and reveals Kastchei's weakness. His soul is encased in a casket, which if smashed will instantly kill him, and all his wicked magic will be undone. Ivan wastes no time, and fulfils his destiny to become a hero.

Adam Mackenzie

The orchestra are joined this month by pianist Boris Giltburg for a performance of Tchaikovsky's piano concerto.

We spoke to Boris to find out more about his life as a concert pianist.

Boris Gilrburg - Pianist

What's probably best about the piano repertoire is it's so huge, it's all encompassing and has such rich variety stretching back over 3 centuries. I think some of the greatest works the greatest composers have ever written are for the piano, it's almost endless – you can work your whole life and only scratch the surface of what we have.

The biggest challenge of the pieces you mentioned is that I have had to learn them as I have not played them before.

I also have a large amount of new solo repertoire this season which I will approach on its own terms, not trying to force it or impose something unnatural onto it. The music itself will help me change direction. For example when you play Gershwin, from the first note you are in a different world, in a different mood so you work differently. Besides being incredible music and possessing great depth it, by its nature, allows you more fun, it removes a lot of the limitations that may be more prevalent when playing Mozart or Beethoven.

I'm a heavy classical music fan – late Shostakovich Quartets, that type of thing. I like also opera and baroque music and of course jazz, which I unfortunately cannot play. I also like listening to vocal music very much: there is something very exciting and intimate in listening to the cooperation of a singer and pianist – it's one of the truest forms of chamber music. It's really a symbiosis of the two: it really is making music together.

Interviewer

"If you could curate a season of music here at the RFH, what kind of thing would you put on? Let's say you have a week."

Boris Giltburg

It's a tough question, there's so much that I like.

One major work would be Mass in Minor by Bach, or Britten's War Requiem. Perhaps a Shostakovich Symphony, not 5 or 7, but one listened to less frequently. Perhaps I'd put on a concert of Russian greats because they are not often done and I think they are incredible.

I'd probably play Bartok 3. It's one of my favourite concertos and I don't often get the chance to play it. It's one of the best piano concertos in the entire piano repertoire.

Adam Mackenzie

(audio only)

Boris Giltburg will perform Tchaikovsky's piano concerto in London on Thursday the 22nd of January.

James Ehnes was recently awarded a Gramophone Award for best concerto recording of 2008, for his performance with the Philharmonia Orchestra of Elgar's violin concerto.

James joins the Philharmonia again in January for a performance of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. We caught up with him to find out why he enjoys performing this piece so much.

Audio Extract – Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto

James Ehnes – Violinist

It's something I'm looking forward to a lot, because the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto is one of my favourite pieces. It's a piece that has had a prominent place in my life and my career, and I've not played it in London. So it's something that I think should be a lot of fun. For a violinist, the Tchaikovsky is one of the most fun pieces to play because it really shows off everything that the violin is good at. It's got lyricism, it's got incredible technical demands, it's great for the soloist and it's great for the orchestra, it's great for the conductor. It's an ideal piece with which to show off all the various facets of what we do.

It was a piece that was always around when I was a little kid. I grew up with a lot of music around me, my father's a musician, my mother has a ballet school, so there was always lots of music there as well. I don't know when I would have first heard the Tchaikovsky but when I first really listened to it I remember it was about 5th or 6th Grade at school, so I was about 9 or 10. It really had an enormous appeal to me from the beginning. I think it's a very unusual piece in a certain sense. When you know the piece well you think of it as, well maybe it's not fair to say bombastic, but a big powerful, virtuosic showpiece. Rip-roaring, big trumpet fanfares, that's the impression a lot of people have. But when you discover that piece for the first time and really listen to it, the opening is so gentle and

so unassuming; it's impossible to know what's going to come from that. I think that the concerto has amazing moments of intimacy that I think that are absolutely as important to its musical message as all the very extrovert and virtuosic writing.

I think Tchaikovsky's music in general has a special place in the concert hall. It's endlessly entertaining and it's the type of music that I think people that are not necessarily regular concertgoers can often really immediately gravitate towards Tchaikovsky's music. It does have an immediate appeal. But also, it has endless layers and amazing depth to it that I think will fascinate musicians through the course of their career.

One thing that I have a real issue with is, it seems to be a popular stance these days in the music industry that 'Haven't we had enough of this and haven't we had enough of this. We've heard this piece so many times and what is the point of playing this piece again or what's the point of recording this piece again?' Certainly the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto I think has taken criticism along those lines. People saying, 'well the last thing we need is another Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto.'

Audio Extract – Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto

When I play the Tchaikovsky concerto, when I perform it once, I can tell you that I've ran it through more than 50 times before the performance and I perform it many many times every year, for many years, and I'm not tired of it. So it makes me sad that there are people out there that say 'oh I'm sick of that, I'm tired of that', well, that's too bad for you but the other thing to consider is that, and the thing that I consider whenever I play the piece is that for most of the people in the audience, they might not have ever heard it at all. Or maybe they've heard it on a recording once, they've never heard it live, or maybe they haven't heard it in 10 years. That's an amazing thing as a performer, to have the chance to bring a wonderful piece of music like that to life for so many people for whom it might be something very new. That's a wonderful to gift to a performer, to have that opportunity, and it's a big responsibility as well. I think that helps keep me fresh each time I play it.

Adam Mackenzie

Audio only

James Ehnes will be performing Tchaikovsky's violin concerto in London on the 29th of January, conducted by Tugan Sokhiev.

His recording of the Elgar violin concerto is available to buy or to download through the Philharmonia shop at www.philharmonia.co.uk/shop.

Tugan Sokhiev will also conduct in London on Sunday the 31st, with a programme including Shostakovich's 2nd piano concerto and Rachmaninov's 2nd symphony.

This concert is preceded by a free Guest Music of Today performance, featuring a new commission by Priti Paintal. Bringing together members of the Philharmonia Orchestra and Indian musicians from ShivaNova, with interactive visual projection.

The young pianist Benjamin Grosvenor performs Grieg's piano concerto in Leicester's De Montfort Hall on the 20th, the Bedford Corn Exchange on the 23rd, The Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury on the 24th and in London on the 25th, conducted by Alexander Lazarev.

As well as the education project taking place here in Abu Dhabi, the orchestra continues with their Creative Orchestra series.

Audio only

The project will be taking place in Bedford during the February half term.

For further details and to sign-up for the free week of music, visit www.thesoundexchange.co.uk then go to 'live projects' then 'creative orchestra'.

Thanks for watching this month's podcast. We're off for our performance of the Firebird Suite now, but do watch again in February when we will be travelling to Vienna to find out more about the Philharmonia's series, Vienna: City of Dreams.