

philharmonia orchestra

Stravinsky's The Firebird Suite – Transcription

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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.