

## ASO Program Notes

# The Firebird Suite

Igor Stravinski (1882 - 1971)

Igor Stravinski was born in Russia and died in New York just short of his 89th birthday. His appeal to international audiences appears to have been built on three works for ballet, all composed before he turned 32. *The Firebird* was the first of these, premiering in 1916, the others being *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. In his later life Stravinski appeared to be somewhat embarrassed by *The Firebird*, feeling that it was a Romantic piece which had been outdistanced by the neoclassic movement following the First World War. Nevertheless, he conducted it more than a thousand times, and it was the piece he chose as the subject of his last recording as a conductor. He was 85 by then, and the piece was nearly 60 years old.

The plot of *The Firebird* is drawn from a collection of Russian fairy tales, arranged to reflect the interest in the supernatural at that time, and as an expression of Russian nationalism. In it, the czar's son, Prince Ivan, meets "a fabulous bird with plumage of fire" while on a hunting trip. Prince Ivan and the bird strike a deal, agreeing that the prince will allow the bird to be free and not hunted, in exchange for a magic feather which will protect him from harm. He goes to sleep, and when the sun rises he finds himself in the garden of an enchanted castle where thirteen beautiful princesses are playing. After they dance for him they warn him that he is in the domain of the evil sorcerer Kashchei, who is holding the princesses captive. Kashchei is in the habit of changing travelers to stone, but brave Prince Ivan decides to try to free the princesses anyway. He breaks into the castle, setting off an alarm of pealing bells. Prince Ivan is captured by monsters and Kashchei appears. Just as Kashchei is about to turn Prince Ivan into stone, Ivan remembers the magic feather. When he waves it, the firebird appears and makes the monsters dance madly until they are exhausted. The monsters and the sorcerer fall asleep to the strains of a lullaby, and the firebird leads Ivan to a giant egg, which holds the soul of Kashchei. Ivan smashes the egg, and Kashchei, the monsters and the castle vanish. The spell is broken, the princesses are freed and all those previously turned to stone are restored. Ivan claims the hand of a lovely princess and everyone celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

The music presents the themes and the audience is able to follow the story's action. The listener can clearly hear the firebird's theme, the dancing princesses, Kashchei the sorcerer's infernal dance, the lullaby which puts the monsters to sleep, and the finale, in which the mood changes from wonder to triumph to jubilation. The piece concludes with majestic chords, leaving the audience with Stravinski's intended feeling of a happily-ever-after ending.

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