

Parallel Worlds: notes on the historical context and the music in *The Firebird*

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The Firebird of Russian folklore ... 'gorgeous yet enigmatic, a thing of preternatural, elemental freedom, she personified the indifference of beauty to the desires and cares of mankind. In this she was the very symbol of arts for arts' sake' (Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Tradition*).

'Art for art's sake' was an obsession for a group of young (mostly visual art) artists in St Petersburg in the 1890s. Reacting against the artistic realism that had prevailed since the 1860s, they aimed to separate art and design from social or political goals. They were aware of the artistic movement sweeping Europe, Art Nouveau, with its florid lines and integrated structures. Individually, they knew Europe well. Most of them were fluent in French and English and well-acquainted with galleries in Venice, Paris and London. Yet St Petersburg in the 1890s was unique. Russia was still a feudal society on a grand scale and, in St Petersburg in particular, art and the aristocracy were intertwined almost as much as in Florence in the 16th century. The breadth and depth of this patronage by the aristocracy and the 'Establishment' can't be underestimated and it plays out in every aspect of *The Firebird*, including Stravinsky's music.

In 1898 this group of young artists founded an art movement, *Mir iskusstva* ('World of Art') with patronage from Princess Maria Tenisheva, herself a singer and artist, and the railway tycoon, singer and conductor, Savva Mamontov. In 1899 the members launched a magazine under the same name. When Princess Tenisheva and Mamontov withdrew their funding, none other than Tsar Nicholas II stepped in and guaranteed the review for five years. A few short years later, in the new ballet of *The Firebird* we find a hero, Ivan 'Tsarevich' – a crown prince – and a heroine, 'Tsarevna' – a crown princess. St Petersburg was full of princes, princesses and business magnates (who might like to be ennobled) and many of them took art extremely seriously. Despite the quote from Taruskin above, you could say that the other bird in *The Firebird* is the double-headed eagle within the Imperial coat of arms. Perhaps the imperial eagle even lives within the all-powerful firebird who saves the young aristocrats. At the end of the ballet, beneath her benevolent gaze, the status quo is reinstated in a grand coronation and wedding march. Dreams of a happy future, perhaps. When *The Firebird* premiered, Tsar Nicholas's only son, Alexei Tsarevich was, at the age of 6, Russia's great hope. It was kept secret that he was afflicted with Haemophilia, and the portrayal of a strong Tsarevich who wins, marries and rules was no doubt welcome to the nobles in the know.

Among the many members of *Mir iskusstva* were Alexandre Benois and Leon Bakst. Both were supremely talented painters and stage designers, and Benois in particular was keen on ballet. At first they organised successful art exhibitions of Russian and Finnish art, including one in the Tsar's Winter Palace in St Petersburg. Then, when a young art administrator, Sergei Diaghilev, became involved, *Mir iskusstva* moved its attention to Paris where Diaghilev organised an exhibition of Russian art in 1906, followed by performances of Russian music (mostly opera) and then a wildly successful run of *Boris Godunov* in 1908. The annual 'Saison Russe' was becoming a high-profile Russian export.

When another Russian prince withdrew his funding for the next season, which was to have featured more opera, Diaghilev turned to ballet as a cheaper alternative and created the 'Ballets Russes'. The fact that there were no contemporary ballet scores to rival the profiles of Benois and Bakst or the choreographer, Fokine, didn't worry him unduly. But when the Ballets Russes presented Russian ballet 'scenes' in 1909, using scraps of Russian music sewn together, the Parisian critics were less than kind. Diaghilev accepted the criticism and his colleagues no doubt reminded him of their early idealism, of *Mir iskusstva's* 'indifference to realism or representation, its love of the decorative, the exotic, the magical, above all its enthusiasm for a kind of Wagnerian 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in which

every element would contribute in equal measure to a completely rounded artistic impression' (Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring*). Many of its members were now throwing their energies into the Ballets Russes. Looking ahead to the 1910 Paris season they enthusiastically engaged in the search for contemporary Russian ballet scores.

Before approaching the 27 year old Igor Stravinsky Diaghilev asked other composers, including Anatoly Lyadov. The emphases in his letter to the older composer speak for themselves: '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 songs, Russian dance, Russian rhythm – but no Russian ballet.' This would be a decidedly Russian 'World of Art'! In the event, the final scene of *The Firebird* would look like a glossy advert for Imperial Russia, with a backdrop of castles and Russian Orthodox Church cupolas commanding the stage. There would be plenty of modernity to appeal to the fashionable Parisian audiences, but these same audiences were not impartial to a heady dose of mystical imperialism either. (In *How the French Think*, Sudhir Hazareesingh explores the French Republic's very conscious fusion of monarchy and church within its secular vision of social equality.)

The Firebird story was infused at parlour meetings at which Diaghilev's grandmother presided over the tea samovar. It was an impressive team of friends and colleagues who gathered there. The writers included Remizov and Potyomkin; the painters included Bakst, Golovin, Stelletsy and Benois, and the choreographer was Fokine. The composer was Tcherepnin, Benois' brother-in-law, who had already composed for Diaghilev. The unsung and absent hero in all these conversations and the rehearsals that followed is the young American dancer from Oakland, San Francisco: Isadora Duncan. *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* all owe so much of their power to her. The classically-trained Fokine had been blown away by Duncan's expressive and grounded approach to dance at her performances in France and Russia. He integrated her movements into classical ballet's more airborne physical language, and the knock-on effects are everywhere, including in Stravinsky's music.

Meanwhile, the tea-drinking artists consulted several published folk tales to concoct a plot to serve their purpose. Some of these stories included the figure of the Firebird, others, the immortal demigod Kashchei – whose immortality lies in an egg and who turns people to stone – and still others included his nemesis, the archetypal Russian hero, Ivan Tsarevich. By the time Stravinsky came along, in the autumn of 1909, the story was complete. But Stravinsky insisted on changing the ending to the grand and ritualistic summation mentioned above. This did not go down well with Fokine, for whom classical ballets ended with a divertissement of lively dancing. Now the composer was demanding that the stone statues be transformed to life (just before Alison's horn solo) and a slow and stately march be employed to celebrate the coronation and marriage of the Tsarevich and Tsarevna. The video link below shows just how stately and simple the end of the score is when combined with the stage action. When it came to it, on the day before the performance, Fokine produced a large number of amateur dramatists to act as assembled nobles for this scene. Costumes had to be cobbled together from the previous season's production of *Boris Godunov*. This made the ending even more stately and Imperial. In fact at first sight it is one of the most socially conservative endings imaginable! Or is it ritual dressed up as Empire? Or both?

It cannot be underestimated how into his own heritage and land Stravinsky was at this stage in his life. He 'steeped himself in Russian material, striving to become a vessel of primitive energies' (Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*). On one occasion he described his Russian homeland as a force of 'beautiful, healthy barbarism, big with the seed that will impregnate the thinking of the world' (Alex Ross, quoting from Stravinsky's contemporary, Romain Rolland. We have to bear in mind the context of a statement like that, though: what a fantastic thing for a young composer to say in Paris!) There is also the upright political and musical Establishment of which he was undoubtedly a part. His father

was an extremely respected opera singer at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg from a lineage of Polish landowners, and on Igor's mother's side his grandfather was a nobleman and all his maternal uncles were landowners. His family heritages lay in Polish and Lithuanian areas, rich in folklore and folk music in which he was interested. Later in his life he would play down this enthusiasm. For example, in his memoirs he would claim there was only one folk song in *The Rite of Spring* when in fact there are six, all from the same collection of Lithuanian folk songs. As it happens, Lithuania was the last nation in Europe officially to give up paganism in favour of Christianity, in the 14th century, but we don't know if that was relevant to him. What we do know is that he was happy to talk about Russian 'barbarism' in the quotation above, and to report that, while still composing *The Firebird*, he had a vision of pagan sacrifice that was the seed for *The Rite of Spring*. Clearly he was interested in paganism and ritual.

The ending of *The Firebird* can be seen as his first foray into the theatricality and spaciousness that ritual lends. Notice how the organic pace of the ballet stops and is replaced by unapologetic repetition of the folk song introduced by the horn. This tune is taken from Rimsky-Korsakov's *100 Russian Folk Songs* and, so far, I haven't been able to find the text for it. If you know it please tell me! It is repeated *eleven* times. There is almost a sense of incantation in celebration and memory of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, who had died the previous year. Also the repetition is deeply Russian. Bartok was to explain in a lecture in the US in the 1940s that melodic and rhythmic repetition is a characteristic of Russian folk music and that Stravinsky's use of *ostinati* (repeated patterns) was therefore only a natural treatment of his material. This ritual use of repetition finds a larger voice in *The Rite of Spring* and continues in later works such as the *Symphonies of Psalms*. It is only when the massive brass chords have dissipated at the end of *The Firebird* that we might remember that the *other* place in *The Firebird* where there is this ritualistic repetition – so much in miniature as to be easily missed – is the very beginning of the ballet.

Before we look at that, here then is the full ballet

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_WJnRF5o0g in a reconstruction of the original 1910 version.

It gives an amazing insight into the dazzling sets and costumes of the painters Golovin and Bakst. Does *The Firebird* achieve its goal of Art for Art's sake? Is it 'a completely rounded artistic impression'? If the Parisian reviewers had complained in 1909 that the Ballets Russes performances featured music that did not match the other elements, now Henri Gheon could salute in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*: 'the most exquisite marvel of equilibrium that we have ever imagined between sounds, movements and forms'. He called it a 'danced symphony'. For the music critic, Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, Stravinsky was the only composer for the Ballet Russes, so far, 'who has achieved more than mere attempts to promote Russia's true musical spirit and style'. Bear in mind, though, that Calvocoressi was a friend of Diaghilev and a promoter for the Ballets Russes in Paris! When Rachmaninov heard *The Firebird* for the first time and it came to the final section, he said, 'Great God! What a work of genius this is! This is true Russia!'

Notes on the music

In the aftermath of the first performances of *The Firebird* Stravinsky was praised as the latest and for some the brightest in a long line of Russian colourist composers in the nationalist tradition. *The Firebird* score is very Russian and it is also very French. There is deep homage in it to Rimsky-Korsakov, his revered teacher who had died and whose family he knew well and cared for deeply. Their opinion meant a lot to him. Then there is another hero of his, Tchaikovsky, plus elements of Glazunov and Scriabin, and finally a large dose of Ravel. After attending *The Firebird* in Paris Ravel wrote to a colleague, 'This goes further than Rimsky... come quickly'. Stravinsky knew and admired

Ravel's works. Listen to the end of Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* and then listen to the end of the *Infernal Dance*.

The very beginning of *The Firebird* says so much. From the first notes we sense his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov whose son Andrei he loved (the score is dedicated to Andrei) and in whose family dacha in the woods seventy miles from St Petersburg it was started when Igor and Andrei went there for a holiday in November 1909. Stravinsky recollected the time in the Rimsky-Korsakovs' dacha: 'I went there for a vacation, a rest in birch forests and snow-fresh air, but instead began to work on *The Firebird*. Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov (son of the composer) was with me at the time, and he often was during the following months; because of this, *The Firebird* is dedicated to him. The introduction up to the bassoon and clarinet figure at bar seven was composed in the country, as well as notations for later parts.' These later parts include the Rondo (Khorovod) which, in Barry's oboe solo, quotes a Russian folk tune from Rimsky-Korsakov's collection, *100 Russian Folk Songs*. Rimsky himself had used this in his *Sinfonietta on Russian Themes Op. 31* ('In the garden by the green grapevine there wandered a handsome young man').

In particular, Stravinsky uses Rimsky Korsakov's signature symmetrical, tone-semitone scale. It was often called the 'Korsakovian scale' at the time and is now sometimes called 'octatonic' because it has 8 steps rather than 7 as in a major or minor diatonic scale. The scale is made up of alternating tones and semitones and can start with either a tone or a semitone. Rimsky frequently used it to represent the magical, mystical and fantastical. *Scheherazade* is full of it. As early as 1911 the Russian theorist Boleslav Yavorsky described the Korsakovian scale as the 'diminished mode'. This is because of the stability of the diminished 5th within both versions of the scale (e.g. in the D scale: D E F G Ab Bb Cb C# D and D Eb F Gb Ab A B C D). Because the scale is symmetrical, the diminished 5th accrues power at the hinge-point or heart of the scale.

Rimsky was a profound influence on everyone, not least because of his book, *Principles of Orchestration* – a bible for any composer then and now. Still, there is something beautiful about Stravinsky starting the piece that, in Paris, was to make him famous overnight, deep in the Russian countryside at the Rimsky-Korsakovs' dacha, quoting the Korsakovian scale. It is so evocative of both the wintery woodland surrounding him, and also the woodland scene in which the young Ivan Tsarevich embarks on his hunting escapade.

With a pianissimo bass drumroll the opening sequence from the cellos and basses – Ab Fb Eb D F G – forms this descending Korsakovian scale – Ab G F E D – but it's not quite that simple. There is an added Eb. When we hear it in its melodic shape – bearing in mind that D is the lowest note in the sequence – it is the *Eb shifting to D which creates the spookiness*. That is the portal between the real and the magical. And yet the Korsakovian scale creates ample spookiness on its own. Why add to it? What does the Eb represent?

In the second bar a first-inversion D minor triad (F A D) is embraced before the sequence continues and the beginning of the melody now becomes displaced by half a bar (wonderfully unnerving). Here is the sequence from the beginning (|| = barline): Ab Fb Eb D F G Ab Fb Eb D F G || Ab Fb Ab F A D Ab Fb Eb D F G || This inclusion of the D minor triad instantly says, 'if you were in any doubt, the key of D is important'. It also introduces one other note foreign to the Korsakovian scale: A (more on that shortly). The D minor triad sets us up for the first moment of arrival and release in the piece, when the strings play their D major glissandi over an accented D major chord in root position in the double basses. Stravinsky wrote later, 'the most striking effect in *The Firebird* was the natural-harmonic string glissando near the beginning, which the bass chord touches off like a catherine wheel. I was delighted to have discovered this, and I remember my excitement in demonstrating it to Rimsky's

violinist and cellist sons.’ The key of D represents magic in the piece, as we will discover. But in the meantime... to go back to the opening 6 bars composed in the dacha:

There is still the question of these two extra notes: Eb and A. They might cause us to doubt that he is in fact using his master and Andrei’s father’s scale. If we are in any doubt about this, in the fifth and sixth bars two trombones enter, playing another Korsakovian collection of notes (Ab Bb Cb Db). It instantly becomes apparent that we have just completed a complete Korsakovian scale starting on D. (In its ascending form: D E F G Ab Bb Cb C# D). The only other notes that have been played so far are the Eb and the A.

The Eb is *the Firebird*. Her first entry hints at this via D# (Eb) minor and, if we were in any doubt, her epic lullaby (with Zoe’s bassoon solo) at the end of the ballet is in Eb minor. A is apollonian desire and stems from the D ‘magic’ triad: desire that is magical and dangerous. A is exposed as the very highest note within the catherine wheel frisson of the string harmonic glissandi. And straight after the Firebirds’ entry we plunge into a kind of music that Stravinsky would never write again: the sensuous pas de deux (Barry’s low oboe solo) between her and Ivan: in A major. Rimsky Korsakov had synaesthesia and saw different notes as colours. A for him was rosy – and none of the other pitches were related to red or fire, only A. In his *Principles of Orchestration* he also gave specific characteristics to the lower and upper ranges of each woodwind instrument. His word for the lower range of the oboe? ‘Wild’. These are affectionate nods to the master. But there’s a deeper meaning to these ‘additional’ notes of Eb and A. What Stravinsky has done is introduce a hidden Korsakovian scale of Eb right at the beginning of the piece, represented by Eb and its heart of A. This perfectly captures the tension between the real and magical worlds and between conflicting desires. (D Eb F G Ab A Bb Cb C# D Eb.)

In Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Principles of Orchestration* he gave the characteristics of the low register of the clarinet as ‘ringing, threatening’, and the upper register as ‘piercing’. Meanwhile the low register of the bassoon was, for him, ‘sinister’, and the upper, ‘tense’. In bar seven of *The Firebird* the bassoons and clarinets enter in their lower registers and duly create a threatening and sinister atmosphere! In these and many other ways he *explores* his teacher’s thoughts. Meanwhile Stravinsky singled out the Rondo (Khovorod) as particularly indebted to another hero of his, Tchaikovsky. This is the movement mentioned earlier which begins with the flute duet and the folk song from Rimsky-Korsakov’s *100 Russian Folk Songs*, played by Barry. A ‘Khovorod’ is a very common Russian circle dance in which, usually, one person stands in the middle. It is associated with flirting and courtship. You can feel the circle turn again and again in the music, and you can see the choreography in the video from 19:50. Yes, it is like a very tender bit of Tchaikovsky. And yet Stravinsky would have known the origins of the dance. It was originally part of a pagan rite to worship the sun god, Yaril. Stravinsky is cleverly combining the courtly and the pagan, and preparing us for the more overt paganism of the Infernal Dance – one of the most modern bits in the score.

After his instant celebrity Stravinsky immediately began to distance himself from some of the less modern and more romantic elements of *The Firebird*. When he was preparing the piano version for publication, for example, ‘timidamente’ and ‘sostenuto mystico’ were ditched. One of the abiding features of *The Firebird* is the very long phrases in the expressive passages. Compare these to the phrase lengths in *Rite of Spring*! In the Infernal Dance we find Stravinsky flexing his rhythmic muscles in a way that we recognise from his later works. It is amazing how percussive his string writing is. Half way through (in the video just after 33:00) it drops to quiet and we get some Stravinsky that we recognise from later scores. But then, just as it is starting to sound *exactly* like *Petrushka*, he starts a drawn out and feverish accelerando.....and it turns into a combination of Ravel’s *Rapsodie Espagnole* and *La Valse* (not that it had been written yet!). When he was writing *Rite of Spring* a year later he would only permit one accelerando of four bars, just before the eleven ‘stabs’, and two others of

one bar each that are more like musical commas. Within a short time he was referring to the orchestration of *The Firebird* as 'wasteful'. It was certainly epic! Triple woodwind, onstage Wagner tubas, three harps, piano, and horses! He made a suite in 1911 using the same orchestration, but for the 1919 (and 1945) suites he trimmed it right down.

Whatever Stravinsky said later about *The Firebird* being 'Rimsky-Korsakov with pepper' it was born of a deep need for the Rimsky-Korsakov family's affection and approval. They were part of the 'Establishment' and he courted and cared for them; this wonderful family with whom his father had worked when creating the role of King Frost in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, *The Snow Maiden*. Igor was sad that the dedicatee, Andrei, wasn't at the premiere (though he did make it to one of the later performances) and, when the 1911 suite was finally performed in St Petersburg and the Rimsky-Korsakov family attended but didn't write with their opinions (negative or positive) he was wounded to the quick. St Petersburg was once again unique in its response: the critics weren't kind. Stravinsky touched on this in a letter to Andrei at the time. '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! If only they would beat! Soon you'll be saying the same. I began with your health, and end with your burial. I'm sorry.'

Not one to be bowed down for long, Stravinsky was soon writing *Petrushka*, about a puppet that comes to life. Stravinsky was a keen fitness enthusiast. He did gymnastics daily with Katya his wife, took his health and strength seriously and was proud of his physique. But was he a dancer? I'd love to know..! His friend and fellow composer, Nicolas Nabokov, wrote, 'His music reflects his peculiarly elastic walk, the syncopated nod of his head and shrug of his shoulders, and those abrupt stops in the middle of a conversation when, like a dancer, he suddenly freezes in a ballet-like pose and punctuates his argument with a broad and sarcastic grin'.