Stravinsky was the third in a family of four sons, and he had a comfortable upbringing in St Petersburg, where his father was a Principal Bass at the Mariinsky Theatre. In 1902 he started lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov, but he was a slow developer, and hardly a safe bet when Diaghilev commissioned The Firebird. The success of that work encouraged him to remain in western Europe, writing scores almost annually for Diaghilev. The October Revolution of 1917 sealed him off from his homeland; his response was to create a rural Russia of the mind, in such works as the peasant-wedding ballet Les Noces (1914-23). Before that was completed, a ballet based on 18th-century music, Pulcinella (1919–20), opened the door to a whole neoclassical period, which was to last three decades and more.

He also began spending much of his time in Paris and on tour with his mistress Vera Sudeikina, while his wife, mother and children lived elsewhere in France. Up to the end of the 1920s, his big works were nearly all for the theatre (including the nine he wrote for Diaghilev). By contrast, large-scale abstract works began to dominate his output after 1930, including three symphonies, of which the first, Symphony of Psalms (1930), marks also his reawakened religious observance.

In 1939, soon after the deaths of his wife and mother, he sailed to New York with Vera, whom he married, and with whom he settled in Los Angeles. Following his opera The Rake’s Progress (1947–51) he began to interest himself in Schoenberg and Webern, and within three years had worked out a new serial style. Sacred works became more and more important, to end with Requiem Canticles (1965–66), which was performed at his funeral, in Venice.

Thursday 21 & Sunday 24 September

LSO SEASON CONCERT
STRAVINSKY

Stravinsky The Firebird (original ballet)
Interval – 20 minutes

Stravinsky Petrushka (1947 version)
Interval – 20 minutes

Stravinsky The Rite of Spring

Sir Simon Rattle conductor

LSO Discovery is delighted to be a beneficiary of this year’s Lord Mayor’s Appeal. Following Sunday’s performance there will be a collection in aid of the appeal – please give generously. Visit thelordmayorsappeal.org to find out more.

Thursday 21 September broadcast live on BBC Radio 3

Sunday 24 September live streamed on the LSO’s YouTube channel and on classicfm.com

Sunday 24 September generously supported by Reignwood

Thursday’s concert ends approx 9.45pm
Sunday’s concert ends approx 8.45pm

INTRODUCTION from Paul Griffiths

Writing back to a Russian friend in 1912, as he worked in Switzerland on The Rite of Spring, Stravinsky remarked: ‘It is as if twenty and not two years had passed since The Firebird was composed.’

This evening we have the rare opportunity to relive those packed and extraordinary two years in two hours, following the composer as he moves from fairytale in The Firebird through street theatre in Petrushka to prehistoric sacrifice in The Rite of Spring – all within the boundaries of Russia, which, even though he spent most of his adult life abroad, in spirit he never left.

These are all ballet scores, made for spectacle – the spectacle, in Petrushka, of a puppet brought to life by Vaslav Nijinsky, the outstanding male dancer of his time (or perhaps any) and the eventual choreographer of The Rite. Stravinsky’s theatre, however, was fundamentally the orchestra, with its instruments and groups responding to one another, its capacity to create whole worlds of rhythm and colour. Listen. Hold still. The mind will dance.
hird in a family of four sons, he had a comfortable upbringing in St Petersburg, where his father was a Principal Bass at the Mariinsky Theatre. In 1902 he started lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov, but he was a slow developer, and hardly a safe bet when Diaghilev commissioned The Firebird. The success of that work encouraged him to remain in western Europe, writing scores almost annually for Diaghilev. The October Revolution of 1917 sealed him off from his homeland; his response was to create a rural Russia of the mind, in such works as the peasant-wedding ballet Les Noces (1914-23). Before that was completed, a ballet based on 18th-century music, Pulcinella (1919–20), opened the door to a whole neoclassical period, which was to last three decades and more. He also began spending much of his time in Paris and on tour with his mistress Vera Sudeikina, while his wife, mother and children lived elsewhere in France. Up to the end of the 1920s, his big works were nearly all for the theatre (including the nine he wrote for Diaghilev). By contrast, large-scale abstract works began to dominate his output after 1930, including three symphonies, of which the first, Symphony of Psalms (1930), marks also his reawakened religious observance. In 1939, soon after the deaths of his wife and mother, he sailed to New York with Vera, whom he married, and with whom he settled in Los Angeles. Following his opera The Rake’s Progress (1947–51) he began to interest himself in Schoenberg and Webern, and within three years had worked out a new serial style. Sacred works became more and more important, to end with Requiem Canticles (1965–66), which was performed at his funeral, in Venice.

FAMOUS STRAVINSKY QUOTES

I haven’t understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it.

Art is the opposite of chaos. Art is organised chaos.

Lesser artists borrow, great artists steal.

Too many pieces of music finish too long after the end.

The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one.

I never understood the need for a ‘live’ audience. My music, because of its extreme quietude, would be happiest with a dead one.

One has a nose. The nose scents and it chooses. An artist is simply a kind of pig snouting truffles.
Programme Notes

Igor Stravinsky  The Firebird  1909–10  /  note by Paul Griffiths

1  Introduction

First Tableau
2  The Enchanted Garden of Kashchei
3  Appearance of the Firebird, pursued by Prince Ivan
4  Dance of the Firebird
5  Capture of the Firebird by Prince Ivan
6  Supplication of the Firebird – Appearance of the Thirteen Enchanted Princesses
7  The Princesses’ Game with the Golden Apples
8  Sudden Appearance of Prince Ivan
9  Round Dance of the Princesses
10  Daybreak – Prince Ivan Penetrates Kashchei’s Palace
11  Magic Carillon, Appearance of Kashchei’s Monster Guardians, and Capture of Prince Ivan – Arrival of Kashchei the immortal – Dialogue of Kashchei and Prince Ivan – Intercession of the Princesses – Appearance of the Firebird
12  Dance of Kashchei’s Retinue, enchanted by the Firebird
13  Infernal Dance of All Kashchei’s Subjects – Lullaby – Kashchei’s Awakening – Kashchei’s death – profound Darkness

Second Tableau
14  Disappearance of Kashchei’s Palace and Magical Creations, Return to Life of the Petrified Knights, General Rejoicing

‘Well,’ said Debussy to the young composer who thus burst into Paris and into history, ‘you have to start somewhere’.

...or all its dry wit, the above comment was apropos. Stravinsky was 28 when The Firebird had its first performance, in Paris on 25 June 1910, and had written quite a lot of music before, but in many respects this was indeed where he began. It was the first of his works to be played outside Russia, and has remained the earliest in regular performance. Also it was – like the imperial realm in which it was written, and whose richly varied musical culture it commemorated – a place to move on from. Thus, while it certainly marks an arrival, of a composer brilliant and alert, immediately identifiable, it is also an adieu, to the late Romantic Russia in which that composer had been raised as a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov (whose later music, still very recent, was a potent influence). The Firebird – or phoenix, born from flames, a symbol of regeneration – was altogether a fitting subject. Rimsky-Korsakov is there in the fire and the feathers, the highly chromatic harmony and the sumptuous orchestration. But the figure wearing his musical clothes, and moving with a quickened, edgier pulse, is Stravinsky.

It might, though, never have happened. The impresario Serge Diaghilev had his own reasons for wanting to present his company under the banner of rebirth: this was his second Ballets Russes season in Paris, and he was determined to have a new work. (His 1909 season had been of ballets already in the repertory of the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg or adapted from it.) Michel Fokine, his company choreographer, was the obvious person to create the dance. But who should write the music? Diaghilev was certainly aware of Stravinsky, who had contributed two arrangements for Les Sylphides in the first Ballets Russes season. However, he seems to have gone first to Alexander Tcherepnine, then to Anatoly Lyadov, and only towards the end of 1909, with the opening night little more than six months away, to Stravinsky.

Stravinsky seized his opportunity, producing a 45-minute score of sensational magnificence. Fokine – with the help of Léon Bakst, who designed the Firebird’s vibrant costume – offered the Parisian public a dazzling spectacle, featuring himself as Prince Ivan, his wife Vera Fokina as the leading princess...
and Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird. But Debussy was by no means the only observer to notice, besides the wonder onstage, the music. Soon it leapt out of the theatre pit. Before the year was out Stravinsky had created a concert suite, which he was to revise in 1919 and again in 1945. This, however, omits some extraordinary passages, besides missing the grand sweep of the complete score, which unfolds as follows.

THE MUSIC

A short orchestral introduction contrasts Russian with exotic harmonic worlds, night with brilliance (featuring string harmonics), in a depiction of the enchanted garden of the ogre Kashchei. The Firebird enters, pursued by a prince, Ivan; she performs a solo dance, music of shimmering and lustre appropriate to a fantastic and flighty creature. Ivan gives chase and captures her, and she begs for release in a passionate slow waltz.

He lets her go, and they both slip aside as 13 princesses come delicately into the garden and, in a scherzo, toss golden apples to one another. The game comes to a sudden stop when Prince Ivan steps forward, his presence nobly intoned by a horn. But the princesses recover to execute a khorovod, or round dance: like the prince, they prove their Russian blood in their music, which is based on traditional dances and folksongs, very much in the tradition of Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky.

As dawn comes, with trumpet calls, Ivan enters Kashchei’s palace. But he is not unnoticed. Magic bells start to sound and Kashchei’s guardian monsters hobble forward, followed by Kashchei himself, with a brassy outburst that leaves the stillness of unease. Kashchei roars at his uninvited guest, and silences the princesses, who try briefly to intercede, with the charms of their khorovod. It is time for the Firebird to return, and she does so, leading Kashchei and all his retinue into an Infernal Dance, quick and various and weird. Stamping rhythms suggest the approach of The Rite of Spring, which the composer was soon to begin.

Having danced themselves into exhaustion, the forces of evil are caused to sleep by the Firebird’s lullaby, again in a distinctly Russian tone. Very soon, though, Kashchei is awake again, and it is the prince’s turn to save the day by smashing the magic egg that had given him life. Quietly the scene changes. Kashchei’s palace disappears, and the previous heroes who had ventured in, all turned to stone, come back to life. Bell sounds ring out in jubilation, and time slows into a swinging pattern to create the first of the composer’s concluding apotheoses – a musical type that would echo through his output and still be there 55 years later at the end of his Requiem Canticles.

DIAGHILEV & THE BALLET RUSSES

The company is widely regarded as the most influential of the 20th century, in part because it promoted ground-breaking artistic collaborations among young choreographers, composers, designers, and dancers, all at the forefront of their fields. Diaghilev commissioned music from Stravinsky, Debussy and Prokofiev, artwork from Vasily Kandinsky, Alexandre Benois, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, and costume from Léon Bakst and Coco Chanel.
Programme Notes

Igor Stravinsky

Petrushka 1910–11, rev 1947

note by Paul Griffiths

1. The Shrovetide Fair
2. In Petrushka’s Cell
3. In the Blackamoor’s Cell
4. The Shrovetide Fair (Evening)

Once he had arrived in Paris with The Firebird, Stravinsky stayed. The success of his first score for Diaghilev meant there would have to be another, and he immediately started work on what would emerge as The Rite of Spring. But then, according to his own account, he got sidetracked:

‘I wanted to refresh myself by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part ... In composing the music, I had in mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life.’

Continuing this story, he tells how he was visited by Diaghilev – both of them were living on the Swiss riviera, around Lake Geneva – and the great impresario smelt a show in the air: the music his young composer was playing him would have to be a ballet.

composer was playing him would have to be a ballet, not some kind of piano concerto. A puppet, did he say? Well then, that was it: Petrushka, the story from the Russian fairs, about a thing of wood and string that does indeed gain human feelings, with tragic consequences.

However unlikely this narrative may be in terms of chronology, it serves to show the weight Stravinsky wanted his ballet scores to have as self-sufficient music. It also shows how the drama on stage was equalled for him, if not surpassed, by a drama happening within the score – the drama of a piano playing tricks on the orchestra, of figures and instruments in liaison and combat. The puppet-piano in the second scene he saw as ‘exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet’.

Other dramas here have to do with the treatment of what, in his later conversations with Robert Craft, he called the ‘Russian export style’. The Firebird had been an unashamed instance, as had most of the other scores Diaghilev had brought to Paris so far, including Borodin’s Polovtsian Dances and Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sheherazade. But Petrushka looks at that style with ironic detachment. The fanfare-like gesture at the start of the second scene is a speeded-up version of a theme that had been luscious in Sheherazade. In the first scene, when Petrushka and his fellow puppets perform a Russian Dance, the music offers a machine-made portrait of national style. Again in the last scene, the different dances interlock like cogwheels in a piece of machinery, so that the human spectators at the fair seem more artificial than the painted dolls in the Showman’s booth.

By the time he was composing this, Stravinsky was full of enthusiasm. In January 1911, following a Christmas visit to St Petersburg, he wrote to a friend: ‘My last visit to Petersberg did me much good, and the final scene is shaping up excitingly ... quick tempos, concertinas, major keys ... smells of Russian food – shchi [cabbage soup] – and of sweat and glistening leather boots.’

The quick tempos, the concertinas and the major keys are all easy to hear; the cabbage soup, the sweat and the boots might need a little bit of imagination. The first scene features mechanical rhythms, sharp cuts from one kind of music to another, and textures built from accumulations of rotating motifs. Tunes are spliced together, or placed with accompanying figures that are just spinning on the spot. Almost anything can happen, provided it happens on time.

Events in the first scene turn from the general to the specific. At first the musical activity is that of the excited crowd at the St Petersburg Shrovetide Fair, with instruments (a hurdy-gurdy, two musical boxes) and dancers among the throng. Attention focuses cinematically on the Showman and his three puppets: Petrushka, the Ballerina and the Blackamoor. In a magical passage the Showman charms them into life, and they step down from their stage as they give their Russian Dance.

The second scene conveys Petrushka’s bitterness and despair, which he feels at his dependence on the Showman and at his unrequited love for the Ballerina. She visits him, but flies at the violence of his advances.

The musical magic, though, is all his own, presented, in Paris on 13 June 1911. Starring roles when the ballet was first presented, in 1911, were those of the Ballerina and the Blackamoor, first worked out by Michel Fokine, who did the choreography, and by Konstantin Makovsky, who created the scenario and the designs. Stravinsky was full of enthusiasm. In January 1911, following a Christmas visit to St Petersburg, he wrote to a friend: ‘My last visit to St Petersberg did me much good, and the final scene is shaping up excitingly ... quick tempos, concertinas, major keys ... smells of Russian food – shchi [cabbage soup] – and of sweat and glistening leather boots.’

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The second scene conveys Petrushka’s bitterness and despair, which he feels at his dependence on the Showman and at his unrequited love for the Ballerina. She visits him, but flies at the violence of his advances.
In the third scene she goes to his rival, the magnificent Blackamoor. Their love-making is witnessed by Petrushka, who rushes in and is promptly ejected.

The last scene returns to the world outside, now to observe individuals and groups, each defined by characterful, folksy music. Everything comes to a stop when the puppets burst out. With his scimitar the Blackamoor kills Petrushka, but the Showman reassures everyone that these are only puppets, and the crowd disperses in the evening snow. The Showman goes to drag the ‘corpse’ away, stopping in amazement when he sees Petrushka’s ghost sneering at him.

Where Stravinsky had written The Firebird as a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, now he was part of a new entourage, Diaghilev’s, working with colleagues whose talents sharpened his own: Alexandre Benois, who created the scenario and the designs, Michel Fokine, who did the choreography, and the dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina, who were in the starring roles when the ballet was first presented, in Paris on 13 June 1911. The musical magic, though, is all his own, made more streamlined in his 1947 revision.
Stravinsky’s third project for Diaghilev loomed even before the first, *The Firebird*, was finished: it was to be an enactment on the modern stage of the spring rituals of the ancestral peoples of north-east Europe. The guiding spirit was Nicolas Roerich, a Russian artist-archaeologist-ethnologist-seer then in his mid-thirties, who planned the scenario and, in due course, designed the sets and costumes for what was finally called, in Russian, *Vesna svyashchennaya* (Holy Spring), and entered history as *Le Sacre du printemps*, or *The Rite of Spring*. Roerich and Stravinsky started work in the spring (fittingly) of 1910, but by autumn the composer had set aside his sketches to concentrate on *Petrushka*, and he did not return to the project until the summer of 1911, after *Petrushka* had reached the stage as the star item of Diaghilev’s third Paris season. By the end of September – writing from his home in Clarens, on Lake Geneva, where most of the composition was done – he was able to report good progress to Roerich, and to remark how ‘the music is coming out very fresh and new’. In the spring of the following year he played through what he had composed, which included the whole of the first part, to Diaghilev and Nijinsky. All seemed set for a premiere the coming summer. However, Michel Fokine, Diaghilev’s choreographer, was fully occupied with preparing *Daphnis et Chloé*, to Ravel’s music, so Stravinsky’s new score would have to remain silent another year.

By the time rehearsals began in January 1913, Diaghilev had given the task of choreographing ancient rites – and modern rhythms – to Nijinsky, who had made his debut as a dance inventor with *L’après-midi d’un faune*, to Debussy’s Prélude, the year before. In March Pierre Monteux, who was to conduct, began rehearsals in Paris, and wrote to the composer, in Switzerland:

‘What a pity that you could not ... be present for the explosion of *The Rite*.’

But Stravinsky was certainly there two months later, for the premiere on 29 May 1913, when the explosion of the music from the pit of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was answered by an outbreak from the auditorium. By all accounts – and there were many – the performance was accompanied by shouts, catcalls, derisory comments, angered ripostes and even fistfights. But then, how should people have sat calmly while the world was changing?

The performance was accompanied by shouts, catcalls, derisory comments, angered ripostes and even fistfights. But then, how should people have sat calmly while the world was changing?
Stravinsky realised that *The Rite* was unrepeatably rhythmic. However, the work’s most essential and radical qualities – pulsing rhythm, repetition, the use of rhythmic shape as theme, the creation of continuity through breaks, the evocation of antiquity by modern means – stayed with him right through the half-century and more of his composing life to come. More than that, they are with us still, for composers in every generation have gone on living in the long summer this spring ushered in.

*The Rite of Spring* is machine-like, too, in its form, being made of bits and pieces, with abrupt cuts from one thing to another. To that extent it is one of the first pieces of music made like a film. There are no developing themes; instead sections are related at the most fundamental levels of their musical scale (often one of the old scales of eastern European folksong), rhythmic unit and tempo. The climax in each of the two parts comes when pulsation becomes rampant, in the ‘Dance of the Earth’ and the ‘Sacrificial Dance’. Ritual is re-created as arithmetic. We know that spring is brought about not by human sacrifice but by the rotation of our planet – by, indeed, the ‘dance of the earth’, a dance of force and distance and angle. But spring’s creation of new life does indeed entail death, the death of what was. So it is here, as musical ideas are beaten to death in these great culminations of sound, and as the late Romantic orchestra, the orchestra of Mahler and Richard Strauss, discovers unsuspected powers.

An ‘Introduction’ also opens the second part, ‘The Sacrifice’, this time with wafting harmonies from different groups, altogether suggesting a forest of colour. Trumpets sound a warning note, and horns announce the folksong-like theme of the ‘Mystic Circles of the Young Girls’, a theme taken up by strings and passed around the orchestra. But the peaceful atmosphere is interrupted again by brass warnings, and a steady barrage of drumming leads into the quick slicing movements and rushes of ‘Glorification of the Chosen One’. The end is being prepared. Almost all the wind instruments lift their voices together in ‘Evocation of the Ancestors’, followed by ‘Ritual Action of the Ancestors’, which begins ominously and develops immense power. Its energy is left swilling around a few low woodwind instruments, then slips away into the ‘Sacrificial Dance’. Unprecedented, even within this score, for its rhythmic savagery, driven by a pulse that refuses to stay still, here the music ends – indeed, forcibly ends itself. □
London Symphony Orchestra on stage 21 & 24 September

Leader
Roman Simovic

First Violins
Carmine Lauri
Lennox Mackenzie
Clare Duckworth
Nigel Broadbent
Ginette Decuyper
Gerald Gregory
Maxine Kwock-Adams
Claire Parfitt
Laurent Quenelle
Harriet Rayfield
Colin Renwick
Sylvain Vasseur
William Melvin
Shlomy Dobrinsky
Eleanor Fagg

Second Violins
David Alberman
Thomas Norris
Sarah Quinn
Miya Väisänen
David Ballesteros
Matthew Gardner
Julian Gil Rodriguez
Naoko Keatley
Belinda McFarlane
Iwona Muszyńska
Paul Robson
Louise Shackelton
Helena Smart
Hazel Mulligan

Violas
Edward Vanderspar
Gillianne Haddow
Malcolm Johnston
Anna Bastow
Regina Beukes
Lander Echevarria
Julia O’Riordan
Robert Turner
Heather Wallington
Jonathan Welch
Samuel Burstin
Stephen Doman

Cellos
Tim Hugh
Alastair Blayden
Jennifer Brown
Noel Bradshaw
Eve-Marie Caravassilis
Daniel Gardner
Hilary Jones
Amanda Truelove
Victoria Simonsen
Morwenna del Mar

Double Basses
Colin Paris
Patrick Laurence
Matthew Gibson
Thomas Goodman
Joe Melvin
Jani Pensola
Nicholas Worters
Benjamin Grifffiths

Flutes
Gareth Davies
Alex Jakeman
Julian Sperry

Piccolos
Sharon Williams
Patricia Moynihan

Oboes
Olivier Stankiewicz
Rosie Jenkins
Maxwell Spiers
Ruth Contractor

Cor Anglais
Christine Pendrill

Clarinetts
Andrew Marriner
Chris Richards

E-flat Clarinet
Chi-Yu Mo

Bass Clarinets
Katy Ayling
Duncan Gould

Bassoons
Rachel Gough
Daniel Jemison
Joost Bosdijk

Contra Bassoons
Dominic Morgan
Martin Field

Horns
Timothy Jones
Laurence Davies
Angela Barnes
Alexander Edmundson
Jonathan Lipton
Michael Kidd
Brendan Thomas
Sarah Willis
Tim Ball

Trumpets
Philip Cobb
David Elton
Gerald Ruddock
Niall Keatley
Robin Totterdell
Paul Mayes
Christian Barraclough

Bass Trumpet
Philip Goodwin

Trombones
Peter Moore
James Maynard

Bass Trombone
Paul Milner

Tubas
Ross Knight
Patrick Harrild

Timpani
Nigel Thomas

Percussion
Neil Percy
David Jackson
Sam Walton
Tom Edwards
Jeremy Cornes
Jacob Brown

Harps
Bryn Lewis
Nuala Herbert
Imogen Barford

Piano / Celeste
Philip Moore
Simon Crawford-Philips

London Symphony Orchestra on stage 21 & 24 September
London Symphony Orchestra

Debussy

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