

Ballet: The Firebird

Choreography: Michel Fokine

Composer: Igor Stravinsky

The Story

With low, dramatic music, the curtain rises on a mysterious scene; a beautiful garden filled with mystical creatures and guarded by towering walls and a gate. Beyond the gate is a palace, and in the center is a glittering tree of golden apples, but in the shadows of the garden are many statues, eerily lifelike. Suddenly, a young man appears climbing over the high wall. He is Prince Ivan, and while hunting he has stumbled into this magical realm of the evil sorcerer Kashchey! As Ivan looks around the garden in wonder, fluttering music announces the arrival of the Firebird as she flies into the garden.

A good spirit whose magical feathers can bestow beauty and protection to the earth, the Firebird dances in a carefree flurry across the stage. Knowing she is magical, Prince Ivan chases and captures the Firebird, but she begs him to let her go. When he does, she rewards him with one of her magical feathers, promising to repay him the kindness he has shown her.

Next, Prince Ivan hides as thirteen princesses enter the garden to pick golden apples from the tree. They are being held captive by the sorcerer Kashchey and are under his spell! The Princesses are surprised when Prince Ivan reveals himself, but soon invite him to join them in their games and dance. Prince Ivan falls in love with the youngest princess, but before they kiss, a loud trumpet call summons the princesses back to Kashchey's palace.

Prince Ivan vows to free his beloved from the sorcerer's spells, but as he touches the gate to leave, alarm bells clang, and the Prince is quickly captured by Kashchey's minions! The evil sorcerer himself appears. Many have tried to rescue his princesses before, but Kashchey has turned them all into stone statues!!

Just as he is about to turn the Prince into stone, Ivan remembers the Firebird's feather and uses it to summon her. In a flash of fiery lightning, the Firebird appears and uses her magic to cast a spell on Kashchey and all his minions. They start to dance, and can't stop! Exhausted from dancing, they fall over into a deep sleep. The Firebird warns Ivan that Kashchey cannot be killed because his soul is kept in a magic egg. She leads Ivan to a tree stump where the egg is hidden, and Ivan smashes it.

At once, all of Kashchey's evil magic is undone. The princesses and mystical creatures he has held captive are freed, and Kashchey and his minions are killed. The stone statues become human again, and all celebrate the victory over Kashchey, thanks to the Firebird's magic!

The History

At a time when Russian culture, music, and opera were very popular in France, Serge Diaghilev, the ballet master of the Ballet Russes company in Paris, decided to write a ballet with strong Russian themes. Mixing two popular Russian fairy tales- “The Legend of the Firebird” and the tale of “Koschei the Deathless” - he created this dramatic, fiery ballet!

Diaghilev first asked three different famous Russian composers to compose music for his piece, but they all refused. Remembering a talented youth who had orchestrated for one of his ballets the year before, Diaghilev next asked a young man named Igor Stravinsky. Igor was only 27 years old and relatively untested as a composer, but he eagerly agreed and immediately got to work!

Igor Stravinsky worked directly with Michel Fokine to create music that was set to the ballet’s choreography, which drew inspiration in many places from Russian folk dancing and the fairy tales it was based on. The music Stravinsky created for Firebird launched him into fame, and he became Diaghilev’s star composer.

In France, “The Firebird” was a huge success. Audiences and critics loved its opulent backdrops and costuming and praised Stravinsky for his music. In Russia however, reactions were mixed, with some criticizing the ballet’s music for a lack of creativity. Today, “The Firebird” is widely known and performed by many ballet companies across the globe, including in Russia, England, and America.