

Stravinsky's Early Ballets

L'Oiseau de Fe (Firebird)

(See also [article by Jonathan Kramer](#).)

Begun in November 1909 and completed on May 18, 1910, this piece was dedicated to Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky's teacher, who had died June 21, 1908.

Stravinsky extracted three orchestral suites from the ballet.

1. The 1911 version requires a huge orchestra that includes 4 Wagner tubas.
2. The most famous and most performed suite is the [1919 version](#), which significantly reduced the size of the orchestra.
3. The third suite is the [1945 version](#), in which he reorchestrated the 1919 version and included 5 new sections not included in the 1911 or 1919 versions.

The suites became so famous and frequently performed that once a stranger came up to Stravinsky in an airport and asked, "Aren't you Mr. Firebird?"

The ballet is based on Russian folklore in which Katschei the Immortal, a fearsome ogre, is defeated by the Firebird.

Source: The Firebird legend originates in Slavic folklore, particularly Russian fairy tales, where it is depicted as a glowing, magical bird whose capture brings both blessing and peril. The bird embodies a dual nature: it can be a gift of fortune or a harbinger of doom to whoever captures it.

Synopsis of the ballet: Prince Ivan wanders into a magical garden ruled by the evil sorcerer Kashchei. There he captures the radiant Firebird, who pleads for freedom and gifts him a feather of protection. Ivan falls in love with a captive princess among Kashchei's enchanted retinue. When the sorcerer and his grotesque creatures attack, Ivan summons the Firebird. She enchants Kashchei's minions with a wild dance, then reveals the secret of his immortality: an egg containing his soul. Ivan smashes it, breaking the spell. Kashchei perishes, the captives are freed, and Ivan and the princess celebrate their triumph with a joyous finale.

Serge Diaghilev had originally commissioned a ballet for the Ballets Russes on this story from Anatol Liadov. Liadov was too slow and lost the commission. This was Stravinsky's first large-scale commission: he was 28 years old. The premiere was on June 25, 1910, by the Ballets Russes at the Paris Opera.

(See the info on Diaghilev at the end of this article.)

Compositionally, Stravinsky differentiated between the natural characters and events (Ivan, the Princess, the Finale's Hymn of Rejoicing) and the magical ones (the Firebird, Katschei, etc.) The natural scenes and characters were composed in a primarily diatonic style, while the magical or supernatural ones were cast in more chromatic music.

The orchestration is bright and brilliant. The rhythmic drive at times (for instance, in the Infernal Dance) presages the Rite of Spring, composed three years later.

According to the New Grove's:

It cannot be considered as a fully mature work, although it is a better and more original one than Stravinsky was later to rate it. This gives some indication of the difficulty he had from the first in finding and forming his individual voice. Style was to be at once a problem and a

creative stimulus for him at various periods throughout his long career—and not only because of the vicissitudes of his outward life, with its two exiles, unsettling though these undoubtedly were. For Stravinsky, as for many Russian composers before and since, history posed certain choices of outlook and allegiance, and in his case these were compounded rather than solved by a restlessly inquiring mind and an insatiable appetite for the sonorous raw materials of his art.

Here for the first time Stravinsky was faced with the challenge of composing an orchestral work nearly an hour in length, and of telling a dramatic story through it with no irksome formal constrictions. For the first time, too, he was stimulated to explore what turned out to be one of his most characteristic gifts, the ability to express physical gestures and movements (and the psychological states that prompt them) in purely musical terms—a gift in which he has had no rival since Wagner.

[Petrouchka](#)

(See also [article by Jonathan Kramer](#).)

Begun in August 1910 and completed in May 1911, *Petrushka* was first performed on June 13, 1911. This work proved just as popular as the *Firebird* had been, but it was undoubtedly a more original piece. Stravinsky revised this work for years; his final statement was the revised version of 1947. He extracted a [suite in 1911](#), but the suite most frequently performed is the one that was [revised in 1947](#).

After *Firebird*, Stravinsky and Diaghilev agreed to collaborate on a ballet that would depict pagan rites in prehistoric Russia—*The Rite of Spring*. But Stravinsky decided first to clear his head by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play an important part.

In composing the music, I had in mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, 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.

Stravinsky picked as his protagonist—and as title of the ballet—Petrouchka, the little puppet hero of every country fair. The great Nijinsky danced, "pantomimed" the title role.

Synopsis: At a bustling Shrovetide Fair in St. Petersburg, three magical puppets—Petrouchka, the Ballerina, and the Moor—are brought to life by a sinister Showman. Petrouchka, awkward yet deeply human, loves the Ballerina, but she is drawn to the Moor's exotic allure. Humiliated and rejected, Petrouchka rebels against his puppet-master, expressing anguish and rage. In a climactic struggle, the Moor kills him, and the crowd dismisses the tragedy as mere entertainment. Yet as night falls, Petrouchka's ghost appears above the booth, mocking the Showman, leaving the audience unsettled by the puppet's lingering spirit and the blurred line between artifice and humanity.

The most pungent dissonance is the so-called "[Petrushka chord](#)" ([and here](#)), a combination of C major and F# major triads—first heard in the clarinets just after the opening of the second scene. This symbolizes Petrouchka's insults to his audience. It reappears throughout the rest of the ballet and at its end—signifying that his ghost is still making mocking insults.

Despite this and other dissonances and the jagged rhythms, *Petrushka* contains many singable melodies. Some of these did not originate with Stravinsky. There are several Austrian waltzes, a French music hall song, and at least five Russian folk melodies!

The crowd scenes are amazingly diatonic, "often with extended ostinato effects—notably the accordion-like alternation of 3rds and 5ths—and internal pedals. [Much of the work features] a basic regularity of rhythmic pulse, [though at times it is] cunningly varied by episodes of calculated asymmetry and syncopation." (New Grove's)

The story of the little clown or the puppet, smiling on the outside, crying on the inside is common to many cultures—Pierre, Punch, Pinocchio, Pagliacci.

Le Sacre du printemps (The rite of spring)

(See also [article by Jonathan Kramer](#).)

Begun in the summer of 1911, it was completed on March 8, 1913. The first performance, conducted by Pierre Monteux in Paris on May 29, 1913, provoked the infamous riot!

This is one of the most revolutionary works of all time. In the words of Jonathan Kramer, "It reverberates in much of the music of today, both popular and concert!"

The subject of the ballet—concerning the ambiguous triumph and cruelty of spring and the process of natural renewal—was a perfect setting for primitivism. The harmonic germ of *The Rite of Spring* is again a bitonal combination of two adjacent chords—this time of E Flat major (with added minor 7th) and F Flat major. Rhythm is the most striking factor, yet it is not a contrived element at all, but rather grows naturally out of the harmonic tensions and the quite simple melodies or their radical transformations. After inventing the vocabulary of primitivism, which grew naturally from the plot of ancient pagan rites, Stravinsky moved on, never returning to write in that style again.

For Stravinsky, the choreography was a dimension of the music, and he worked very closely and specifically with Nijinsky, the choreographer. He

composed with visual elements in mind, and he wanted the dance to reinforce or move in counterpoint to the music. It required 120 rehearsals before the premiere!

The language of the piece can be characterized with these factors:

1. The orchestral palette is vivid! *The Rite of Spring* is one of the most colorful and imaginative scorings of all time, from the pungent opening bassoon in its highest register through the dense combinations of boisterous wind figurations to the soaring horns in the Ritual of the Ancients.
2. It is filled with simple, folk-like tunes (most with only 4 or 5 different notes) accompanied by biting dissonances or thick, shimmering textures.
3. Rhythm is primary, frequently elemental, exciting, and irregular. Melody and harmony are fairly simple and somewhat slow-moving, so that rhythm can be fully exploited.

This piece caused a stir like no other. Beginning with the orchestral introduction, the audience began to protest. At times the hub-bub was so loud that the dancers could not hear the music they were supposed to be dancing to. Afterwards, an angry mob pursued Monteaux through a back alley behind the theater. The experience probably caused Stravinsky to fall ill. He contracted typhoid fever a few days later and spent several weeks recovering in a nursing home.

Fifty years later, Stravinsky wrote the following in the manuscript of the score: "May whoever listens to this music never experience the mockery to which it was subjected."

Works Commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev

Following is a list of major works commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes, which became landmarks in 20th-century music and ballet.

Igor Stravinsky

- *The Firebird* (1910) – Stravinsky's breakthrough ballet, blending Russian folklore with dazzling orchestration.
- *Petrushka* (1911) – A vivid portrayal of a puppet's tragic fate, full of rhythmic innovation.
- *The Rite of Spring* (1913) – Revolutionary in rhythm and harmony; its premiere caused a famous riot.
- *Pulcinella* (1920) – A neoclassical reworking of Pergolesi, marking Stravinsky's stylistic shift.
- *Les Noces* (1923) – A ritualistic wedding ballet with voices, percussion, and pianos.

Claude Debussy

- *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1912, choreographed by Nijinsky) – Though not originally commissioned, Diaghilev staged its radical ballet version.
- *Jeux* (1913) – A modernist ballet about a tennis game, commissioned directly by Diaghilev.

Maurice Ravel

- *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) – A lush, impressionistic ballet score, one of Ravel's largest works.

Sergei Prokofiev

- *Chout (The Buffoon)* (1921) – A satirical ballet with biting harmonies.
- *Le pas d'acier* (1927) – Industrial-themed ballet reflecting Soviet modernity.
- *The Prodigal Son* (1929) – One of Diaghilev's final commissions, choreographed by Balanchine.

Other Notables

- *Parade* (1917) – Music by Erik Satie, scenario by Jean Cocteau, sets by Picasso.
- *La Boutique fantasque* (1919) – Music by Rossini (arr. Respighi).
- *Les Biches* (1924) – Music by Francis Poulenc, a witty, neoclassical ballet.