

Program Notes – Masterworks I Concert

de Falla: Ritual Fire Dance

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946) was one of Spain's leading composers, even though his compositions were rich in French influences and techniques. Frustrated with the music scene and cool receptions of his works in Spain, de Falla left in 1907 for Paris where he entered the world of Debussy and Ravel. He returned to Spain in 1914 during the First World War, and was met by a more welcoming public, possibly because of his success abroad.

It was in 1914-15 that de Falla composed the ballet *El amor brujo*, of which "Ritual Fire Dance" is the eighth of 13 movements. The dance is a short, energetic piece featuring many fast trills, ornaments, and lively rhythms. The piece has been arranged for various settings and chamber groups. "Ritual Fire Dance" is used in the ballet when the heroine dances around a fire hoping the flames will help rid her of memories of her dead husband.

Although eventually quite successful, de Falla's career was filled with missed opportunities, such as when he turned down Diaghilev's offer to compose *Pulcinella*, which instead went to Stravinsky. As a whole, *El amor brujo* was not viewed as a success, but "Ritual Fire Dance" alone is enough to assure de Falla's continuing fame. (JJ)

Stravinsky: Firebird Suite

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) was one of the most influential composers of the 20th century. Known for his obsession with order and structure, Stravinsky's music evokes these characteristics throughout. Over forty years after his death, his music still elicits strong emotions from listeners. Whether it is his use of complex harmonic structures or interesting and often opposing rhythmic elements, listeners are sure to have a strong reaction to any of Stravinsky's works.

An artist of the highest order, Stravinsky continually evolved throughout his lifetime to become an icon of the 20th century. At 27, Stravinsky composed *The Firebird* for Sergei Diaghilev's Russian Ballet in Paris, and it premiered in 1910. Though he had written large-scale works before, it was *The Firebird* that thrust Stravinsky onto the world stage—never to leave it again. Using sonorities that more closely resemble Debussy than his mentor (Rimsky-Korsakov), Stravinsky's ballet music and Fokine's choreography captivated the Parisian audience. *The Firebird* presented an exotic picture that the French audience associated with Russian culture at the beginning of the 20th century. His use of several color palettes transports the audience into the mystical world of this Russian fairytale, where chromaticism depicts the evil world of the magician Kashchei and more traditional diatonic material is used to represent the world of the good Prince Tsarevich. Throughout, Stravinsky mediates between these two worlds by using the interval of a tritone (augmented fourth) to enhance the exotic juxtaposition.

The story involves a heroic quest and noble love, in which the fabled Firebird saves the prince in his struggle with the evil Kashchei. The noble theme of the Firebird herself will certainly be familiar.

Although not Diaghliev's first choice to compose the music for *The Firebird*, the young Stravinsky was more than capable of completing the task. Luckily, the events that led to the pairing of Stravinsky and Diaghilev gave the music world one of its greatest masterpieces. (DP)

Yoshimatsu: "Cyberbird" for Saxophone and Orchestra

Takashi Yoshimatsu was born in 1953 in Tokyo and briefly studied engineering at Keio University before turning to composition. In his youth, his musical influences included playing in jazz and rock bands. His compositional output also includes symphonies, concerti, and dances. In general, he prefers a more lyrical, harmonically pleasing style over the atonal sonorities common in the 20th century.

Although "Cyberbird" is labeled as a saxophone concerto, Yoshimatsu himself has described the piece as a triple concerto due to the prominence of the piano and percussion parts. It uses the traditional fast-slow-fast concerto form but with an unapologetically contemporary articulation, borrowing rhythms, harmonies, and textures from rock, jazz, and Impressionism. The first movement, essentially an ABA form, begins with freely arching motives in the saxophone and piano, and then moves to a drivingly rhythmic section with jazz tonalities and a variety of colors, notably in the percussion. The second, gentler section evokes a bird floating on a beautiful spring day, while the final section contains chaotic, improvised sounds, gong, string effects, and a return to the opening material.

The second movement opens featuring the piano, followed by violin harmonics and impressionistic colors. Yoshimatsu creates a sense of height and flight by contrasting the upper strings and winds over a grounded foundation of cellos and basses.

The third movement opens with a repeat of the beginning material from the first movement, followed by features in the brass and strings. The energetic conclusion pays homage to rock's early influence on Yoshimatsu. (JL)

Respighi: The Pines of Rome

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) was not only a composer but also a teacher, pianist, and violist. In 1902-03, he played viola professionally in Russia and had a few but very influential lessons from Rimsky-Korsakov, around the same time that Stravinsky was under the master's tutelage.

Respighi's output includes opera, cantata, works for piano, orchestra, and songs for solo voice. Critics have judged his work as inconsistent, yet they have also praised his abilities to portray

nature through the colors of the orchestra. Tonight's symphonic poem is arguably his most popular work.

Pini di Roma followed on the successful heels of an earlier orchestral piece, *Fontane di Roma* (Fountains of Rome) and was paired with another similar work, *Feste romane* (Roman Festivals). These have become his "Roman trilogy." *Pines* was premiered in December 1924.

Each movement paints a picture. The first depicts children playing and singing among the pines of the Villa Borghese, the opulent estate of Rome's 17th-century ruling family. The second movement has been characterized as a "majestic dirge," and portrays a solitary church in a field dotted with pines, where the music descends to the catacombs beneath. A lighter mood returns for the third movement, "The Pines of the Janiculum," in which Respighi imagines a moonlit group of pines, serenaded by an innovation of the time, an actual recording of nightingales singing. The final movement presents an ancient procession of a Roman legion along the Appian Way, complete with marching cadences and added trumpets. Both the fiery sunrise and the victorious march of the soldiers bring this work and tonight's program to a grand and glorious finish. (JL and BP)

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