

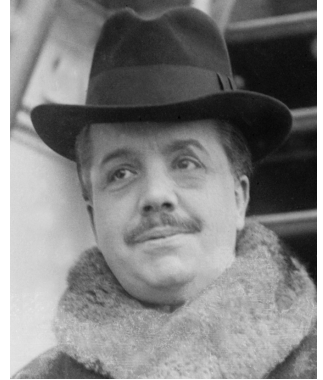
# Program Notes for Ballet Fans

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## THE FIREBIRD

The Firebird is a ballet based on Slavic folklore that premiered with great success in Paris in 1910. It was one of the first works created by the **Ballets Russes** (1909 - 1929), the most influential ballet company of the 20th century. The company was founded in St. Petersburg by its director, Serge Diaghilev, but never performed in Russia and never had a home theatre. Diaghilev was a master at discovering young talent - choreographers, composers, painters, writers, costume designers - and bringing them together with free rein to create. To name just a few: painters Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, fashion designer Coco Chanel, writer Jean Cocteau, composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, and dancers Ninette de Valois (founder of the Royal Ballet) and George Balanchine (founder of the New York City Ballet).



Serge Diaghilev, director  
of the Ballets Russes



Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird

The Firebird was born in just this fashion. It was a close collaboration between choreographer Michel Fokine, artists Alexandre Benois, Aleksandr Golovin, and Léon Bakst, and the then-unknown young composer **Igor Stravinsky**. The *libretto* (the story of an opera or ballet, from the Italian word for “little book”) combined two characters from Slavic folk tales: the Firebird, a creature of powerful magic, and Koschei the Immortal, a villain who has hidden his soul in an egg to cheat death. Parisian audiences were enraptured by Stravinsky's lush score, the rich sets and costuming of Golovin and Bakst, the exotic characters, and the dancing of prima ballerina Tamara Karsavina.



1910 sketch by A. Golovin of the scenery for *The Firebird*.

You will recognize the tree of golden apples at the bottom-left from our cyclorama (the screen at the back of the stage).

The dreamlike, shimmering, somewhat distorted quality is typical of late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, where the painter is not trying to depict what is actually there, but their subjective *impression* of what they see.

**OUR VERSION:** As with all great ballets, *The Firebird* has been rechoreographed many times. For our version, we have made three small story changes to fit our group of young dancers. First, the original hero, Prince Ivan, has been transformed into two heroines, Princesses Anna and Anastasia. We have taken their names from Slavic history: they were the daughters of Yaroslav the Wise, 11<sup>th</sup> century Grand Prince of Kyiv and ruler of Kyivan Rus (which then encompassed Ukraine, Belarus, and most of European Russia). Second, the 13 princesses enslaved by Koschei in the original ballet have been replaced by five *mavka*, forest spirits from Slavic folklore. Third, in our version, Koschei's imprisonment of the *mavka* causes a blight on the forest. The health of the forest is restored when he is defeated, and we feel that this element offers a note of hope to our young dancers and viewers, who face the

challenge of sustaining, in our technological age, the environment on which we all rely.

## CINDERELLA

The score for the ballet *Cinderella* was written by **Sergei Prokofiev**, who was born in 1891 in the Donetsk region of modern-day Ukraine. It was commissioned by the Bolshoi ballet in 1941, but interrupted by World War II, and not completed until 1945. The ballet's performances by the Bolshoi in November 1945 delighted war-weary Muscovites eager for the happy ending of the main character and the comic antics of the stepsisters and stepmother. The ballet was reorchestrated in 1948 by Frederic Ashton of the Royal Ballet, who shortened the score and cast himself and fellow dancer Robert Helpmann to perform a slapstick rendition of the stepsisters. The ballet has been reimagined many times since, from Rudolf Nureyev's version set in 1930s Hollywood, with the prince as a movie star, to Alexei Ratmansky's modern version, with a living room set of bare metal scaffolding.



Sergei Prokofiev (left) and Igor Stravinski (right) in 1920s Berlin.

**OUR VERSION:** Prokofiev structured his sweeping, two-hour score in the style of the grand Tchaikovsky ballets of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*). For example, the royal ball in Act II features a series of *divertissements*: dances that are not part of the main plot but meant to entertain (hence “diversions”). They are often performed by dancers playing visitors from foreign lands. 19<sup>th</sup>



century audiences would have found this element both familiar and charmingly exotic. In the spirit of entertaining you with unusual treats, we have selected the music for our divertissements from other composers: the English Quadrille, French Galop, and Austrian Ländler are from Jacques Offenbach's exuberant "Gaité Parisienne", while the Ukrainian Tanets is from "La Bayadère", a 19<sup>th</sup> century grand ballet by Ludwig Minkus.

## AN EASTER EGG FOR BALLET FANS

The portrait of Cinderella's mother that you will see in Acts I and III is a painting of **Lucile Grahn**, a Danish ballerina from the romantic era (the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century). Grahn's best known appearance was in 1845 in London, when she was one of the four soloists in the **Pas de Quatre** by famed French choreographer Jules Perrot. This divertissement was a sensation as it brought together four of the five greatest ballerinas of the era. The painting below, which is the most iconic image from the romantic era of ballet, shows the dancers: from left to right, Carlotta Grisi, Marie Taglioni, Lucille Grahn, and Fanny Cerrito. **Marie Taglioni** in the centre was the first ballerina to master the pointe shoe.



"Pas de Quatre", 1845 lithograph by A.E.Chalon