EIJI OUE
MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

STRAVINSKY

THE SONG OF THE NIGHTINGALE

THE FIREBIRD SUITE

THE RITE OF SPRING

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STRAVINSKY

THE FIREBIRD SUITE

(1919 REVISION)

Igor Stravinsky celebrated his 28th birthday only weeks before the unveiling of *The Firebird* at the Paris Opéra on the night of June 25, 1910. "Take a good look at him. He is a man on the eve of celebrity," the impresario Serge Diaghilev told Tamara Karsavina, who danced the title role. He was right: the premiere took Paris by storm, and the composer became famous, rich and influential to the end of his days. Assembling what he called a "wastefully large orchestra," Stravinsky produced an iridescent score that vindicated Diaghilev's high expectations, and which elicited a twinge of envy from Debussy, who pointed out that here is music is not the mere servant of the dance, but its catalyst. Twenty-five years after Stravinsky was laid to rest beneath a spartan tomb on San Michele, Venice's burial island, down the path from where Diaghilev's remains lie beneath an ornate monument, *The Firebird* remains one of his most loved works.

It had taken only a single encounter with Stravinsky's earlier *Fireworks* to persuade Diaghilev to give the youthful composer a commission. The assignment called for a score that would follow nearly bar by bar the action of a scenario Michel Fokine had worked out on the Russian legend of the Firebird. So flattered was Stravinsky that he suspended his work on the opera *The Nightingale* to deal

with the new work. ". . . I remember the day Diaghilev telephoned me to say go ahead, and my telling him I already had," Stravinsky recalled in 1919, the year he produced a second concert suite (the first, dating from 1911, adhered more or less to the ballet), slightly modifying the opulence of the original. There was to be yet a third version, this labeled a "ballet suite," which he prepared in 1945 for the same reduced orchestra as the 1919 version, making only small revisions. Unwilling to discuss these reconsiderations, Stravinsky curtly dismissed the topic: "I have already criticized *The Firebird* twice . . . in my revised versions of 1919 and 1945, and these direct musical criticisms are stronger than words."

Even the less extravagantly orchestrated suites are faithful to his original conception, which manipulates the bright prisms of orchestral color he had learned to use from Rimsky-Korsakov, to whose son Andrev the ballet was dedicated. In *The Golden Cockerel* of his teacher, he also found the way to musically differentiate between the human and supernatural elements: diatonic motifs for the humans, contrasted with chromatic arabesques for the magical characters. The opening notes of the score, deep in muted strings, generate the figure out of which develops the Firebird subject, which undergoes myriad permutations as it welds the score into a unified whole. One of the composer's most ingenious strokes is the natural string glissando (produced by isolating the overtones and suppressing the fundamentals) that is touched off by a bass chord as the Firebird takes wing. The rustling sound evokes the rapid beating of wings—a sound that astonished Richard Strauss when he heard it two years later in Berlin. Across the years, the score has sparked the imagination of visual artists, though Stravinsky grumbled when it was borrowed for a film about the moon: "Eerie it may be, but I scarcely thought, in 1910, that I was composing music for Utah landscapes."

The fairy tale is easily traced in the course of the suite, whose dark strain at the opening places the story in the gloomy environs of the green-taloned Kashchei, the embodiment of evil. Into the enchanted gardens wanders Prince Ivan, who hears beating wings and glimpses the Firebird (a sheen of harp and piano) as she flutters about a tree bearing golden apples. Incandescent strokes of woodwind color illumine her balletic display. In contrast, the Dance of the Princesses (a traditional Russian Khorovode, or Ronde) is a gentle, willowy interlude launched by flutes; its folkish strain prophesies the great song at the end.

A single oboe introduces the fluid melody associated with thirteen captive princesses who are under the spell of Kashchei. Falling in love with the fairest of them, Ivan vows to free them by storming the monster's castle.

With a sudden crash in the orchestra, Kashchei's slaves surround the ogre in a barbaric dance, their frenzy spurred by a pounding drumbeat hinting at the savagery Stravinsky would unleash in his 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring*. Gritty harmonies intensify the malice of the syncopated tune.

Just as the Prince is about to be transformed into a pillar of stone, he remembers the magic feather and summons the Firebird. At her command, Kashchei and his retinue dance until they collapse, whereupon the Firebird reveals the secret of the ogre's immortality: an egg that must be smashed in order to destroy his soul. Her tale is cast as a Berceuse, a lullaby introduced by the bassoon above a gently rocking figure. Once the captives have been freed, soft string tremolos form a bridge to the majestic finale, whose fervent hymn of thanksgiving is intoned by the horns and spreads exultantly throughout the orchestra. Before the bell-like tolling of the close, Stravinsky offers a final glimpse of the Firebird in flight.

The Song of the Nightingale

Stravinsky's symphonic poem *The Song of the Nightingale* originated as a condensation of his first opera, which was simply called *Le Rossignol (The Nightingale)*. Based on a gentle story by Hans Christian Andersen, this fairy tale opera dates to the youthful period when he was still working under the guidance of Rimsky-Korsakov, himself the creator of operas on exotic subjects. Stravinsky had fairly well dealt with the first of his three acts (so short as to be more like three scenes in a single act) when his work was interrupted by the commission from Diaghilev to compose *The Firebird*, and in the wake of its enormous success came the other early ballets. The opera had been abandoned.

Towards the end of the summer of 1913, shortly after the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, the newly founded Free Theatre of Moscow asked Stravinsky to complete *The Nightingale* for its stage. Although he had misgivings about retreating to a work predating the advances in his style, he was tempted by the 10,000-rouble fee. Proceeding with the task, he completed the work in the winter of 1914. But before the opera got to the stage, the Moscow Free Theatre folded, whereupon Diaghilev seized the opportunity to produce the work at the Paris Opéra, where it debuted under Pierre Monteux on May 26, 1914.

Three years later, Diaghilev proposed mounting *The Nightingale* as a ballet, with the singers seated in the orchestra pit. Stravinsky countered that he had already been thinking of transforming the score into a symphonic poem by dropping the first act and combining, with major cuts, music of Acts II and III, which, in his opinion, were more homogenous. He promptly adapted a scenario from Andersen's fairy story to serve the ballet, which was unveiled by the Ballets Russes in Paris on February 2, 1920. The choreographer was Leonide Massine,

and the conductor was Ernest Ansermet, who in 1919 had already led a concert performance of Stravinsky's "poème symphonique" in Geneva with his newly organized Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Best of all, for Stravinsky, were the ballet's scenic designs, created by Henri Matisse in the most perfect realization of the composer's fantasy.

Since the principal role of the opera begins with a magical bird, the part was much more easily realized in a purely instrumental form: in the symphonic poem, a solo flute, and later a solo violin, replace the singer, allowing a considerable expansion of vocal line. This Stravinsky did, meanwhile adjusting the entire orchestration to produce a transparent texture, with opportunities for solo and ensemble display.

The scenario in brief: There once was a Chinese Emperor who lived in a splendid palace made of porcelain, with extraordinary flowers growing in the garden; beyond the garden in the wood lived a nightingale that sang so charmingly that all who heard its song forgot their troubles. A fisherman puts down his nets just to listen. A Chinese march signals the entrance of the Emperor to his court.

The Nightingale sings so gloriously that tears come to the Emperor's eyes. But soon envoys arrive from Japan, bringing a mechanical nightingale as a gift from their Emperor. As soon as the artificial bird is wound up, it sings gloriously, and no one notices as the living nightingale disappears out the open window.

In the final scene, the Chinese Emperor lies behind the curtains of his bed, scarcely breathing; Death sits upon his chest, wearing the Emperor's golden crown, and holding his sword in one hand, his banner in the other. Now the mechanical bird refuses to make music, but outside the window the real nightingale pours out his eloquent song. Death listens and urges him on, but the bird

agrees to do so only on the condition that Death return the crown, sword and banner to the Emperor. Death yields these treasures for the song, and floats out the window in the form of a mist. In the gleam of the morning sun, the Emperor awakes, refreshed and restored. When the courtiers come to pay respects to their presumably dead Emperor, they are astonished to find him alive and in full regalia. Meanwhile, the friendly nightingale has returned to the freedom of the wild, and is once again singing for the fisherman.

The Rite of Spring

Stravinsky scarcely needed more than *The Firebird* to assure his fame, but he followed it with *Petrouchka* exactly a year later, and then, in 1913, delivered the ballet that caused a riot: *The Rite of Spring,* which premiered on May 29, 1913, under the baton of Pierre Monteux. Punches were thrown, umbrellas were brandished, and catcalls, whistling and booing threatened to drown out the clashing dissonances and fierce sonorities emanating from the pit of the Théâtre des Champs Elysées on that historical night. The audience was caught off guard as the pounding, primitive rhythms violated every lyrical image of springtime and dismissed conventional notions of nature's beauty. Ironically, when this work, subtitled *Pictures of Pagan Russia,* was presented in concert version a year later, the fury had already passed, and the composer was carried off triumphantly on the shoulders of the crowd. In little more than 30 minutes of music that captures the barbaric spectacle of ancient times, Stravinsky altered the course of music. Debussy, whose *Jeux* had created a stir of its own, was initially excited by

what he heard, but when he saw how quickly a younger generation responded to Stravinsky, he felt betrayed and abandoned.

The initial impulse for *The Rite of Spring* struck the composer while he was finishing *The Firebird*. In his *Chronicle*, he describes his vision: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." He described his dream-like inspiration to the impresario Serge Diaghilev, who, quick to perceive its potential for the ballet, encouraged him to get started right away. But not until the following summer—after *Petrouchka* was on the boards—did Stravinsky undertake his first sketches, collaborating with his friend Nicholas Roerich, a painter, archeologist and authority on the early Slavs. Addressing Diaghilev, Roerich outlined the scenario:

"In the ballet of *The Rite of Spring* as conceived by myself and Stravinsky, my object is to present a number of scenes of earthly joy and celestial triumph as understood by the Slavs . . . My intention is that the first set should transport us to the foot of a sacred hill, in a lush plain, where Slavonic tribes are gathered together to celebrate the spring rites. In this scene there is an old witch who predicts the future, a marriage by capture, round dances. Then comes the most solemn moment. The wise elder is brought from the village to imprint his sacred kiss on the new-flowering earth. During this rite the crowd is seized with a mystic terror . . . . After this uprising of terrestrial joy, the second scene sets a celestial mystery before us. Young virgins dance in circles on the sacred hill amid enchanted rocks; then they choose the victim they intend to honor. In a moment she will dance her last dance before the ancients clad in bearskins to show that the bear was man's ancestor. Then the greybeards dedicate the victim to the god Yarilo."

Even as Stravinsky was putting the final touches to the score (the manuscript is dated March 8, 1913), Nijinsky, the choreographer, began rehearsing his dancers. The number of rehearsals is legendary—estimates run as high as 200, an astonishing number in light of the fact that the notorious ballet initially survived only a half-dozen performances. Meanwhile, Monteux rehearsed the orchestra, of which Stravinsky gloated after his triumph the following year: "It is precisely because I consider all of the instrumentalists to be equally important that I write difficult music for each one of them."

The composer declared himself in no position to judge the opening night performance, for at the first outburst of derisive hooting—already in the prelude—he left the auditorium in disgust to join Nijinsky in the wings. He recalled in his *Autobiography*: "I had to hold Nijinsky by his clothes, for he was furious, and ready to dash on the stage at any moment and create a scandal. Diaghilev kept ordering the electricians to turn the lights on or off, hoping in that way to put a stop to the noise. . . . .Oddly enough, at the dress rehearsal, to which we had, as usual, invited a number of actors, painters, musicians, writers, and the most cultured representatives of society, everything had gone off peacefully, and I was very far from expecting such an outburst."

Nowadays it may be hard—especially for those who first encountered Stravinsky's violently syncopated rhythms in the sound track for the 1941 Disney film, *Fantasia*—to understand what all the fuss was about. That Stravinsky amassed a colossal battalion of instruments for *The Rite of Spring* would hardly seem daring after Wagner, Mahler and Strauss, but the way he used these forces was revolutionary, exploiting registers that formerly had been off-limits and combining seemingly incompatible timbres. Promoting the percussion to equal status with the other sections of the orchestra, he unleashed the battery with a

vengeance, for rhythm governs the work. Coupled with clashing keys and aggregate dissonances, the barbarism that was shocking at the beginning of this century still seems surprisingly modern at its close.

The ballet is designed in two parts: first, *The Adoration of the Earth*, which evokes an impressionistic atmosphere as it opens with a bassoon solo cast in a high, eerie register—"the awakening of nature," Stravinsky said, "the scratching, gnawing, wiggling of birds and beasts"; Part Two, *The Sacrifice,* begins equally impressionistically, with an introduction originally labeled "Pagan Night." These preludes offer almost the only moments of respite in a work that assaults the ear as its ritual fury mounts. The ferocity is magnified by jolting offbeat accents and complex, asymmetrical patterns, the meters at times changing almost bar by bar. Owing to the studies of musicologist Richard Taruskin, it has come to light that much of the melodic content is folk in origin, including the bassoon theme, which comes from Lithuania.

The full ballet score is used for all concert performances. Stravinsky never deemed a concert suite necessary, and he made relatively few revisions over the years, these mostly for the 1921 revival of the ballet. Another instance of rescoring dates from 1943, for a planned performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra that did not then materialize, although these changes were put into print in 1945.

– Mary Ann Feldman

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THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

The Minnesota Orchestra, founded in 1903 as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, has long been recognized as one of America's leading symphony orchestras. Since 1995 the Minnesota Orchestra has been guided by Eiji Oue, who carries on the tradition embodied in the ensemble's roster of celebrated music directors: Edo de Waart (1986-95), Sir Neville Marriner (1979-86), Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1960-79), Antal Dorati (1949-60), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1937-49), Eugene Ormandy (1931-36), Henri Verbrugghen (1923-31) and Emil Oberhoffer (1903-22).

The Minnesota Orchestra's radio history began in 1923 with a national broadcast under guest conductor Bruno Walter and continues today with a broadcast series produced by Minnesota Public Radio for the Public Radio International network and carried on 160 stations in the United States as well as on the cable system of WFMT, Chicago's commercial fine arts radio station. Historic recordings of this orchestra, which date back to 1924, include releases for RCA Victor, Columbia, Mercury "Living Presence" and Vox Records. In recent seasons they have been augmented by discs on the Telarc, EMI/Angel, CBS, Philips and Virgin Classics labels.

This release and *Exotic Dances from the Opera* (RR-71) represent the Minnesota Orchestra's debut on Reference Recordings.

Eiji Oue (AY-jee OH-way) became the ninth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 1995. This disc along with *Exotic Dances from the Opera* (RR-71) marks the recording debut of this gifted conductor, who is quickly developing a prominent identity in the international musical world.

Before joining the Minnesota Orchestra, Eiji Oue served as music director of Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic from 1991 to 1995. For four years prior to the Erie post, Oue was associate conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic. He has guest conducted widely throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Eiji Oue

A native of Hiroshima, Japan, Eiji Oue studied at the Toho School of Music, where he began his conducting studies with Hideo Saito, who had been the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Oue first came to the United States in 1978 when Ozawa invited him to spend the summer studying at the Tanglewood Music Center. He subsequently studied at the New England Conservatory of Music where he was awarded an artist diploma in conducting. While at Tanglewood, Oue became a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. During the summer of 1990, Oue assisted Bernstein in the creation of the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, serving as resident conductor for the Festival Orchestra.

Eiji Oue has won numerous honors and awards, among them the Koussevitsky Prize at Tanglewood in 1980 and both first prize and the Hans Haring Gold Medal in the 1981 conducting competition at the Salzburg Mozarteum. And some honors are unofficial: the family of Leonard Bernstein presented Oue with the baton and concert jacket from the maestro's last concert.

REFERENCE RECORDINGS RR-70CD

STRAVINSKY

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3 Variation of the Firebird 4 Round Dance of the Princesses
5 Infernal Dance of King Kashchei 6 Berceuse 7 Finale

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8 Presto 9 Chinese March
10 Song of the Nightingale 11 Game of the Mechanical Nightingale

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Adoration of the Earth 15:23

12 Introduction 13 Auguries of Spring—Dance of the Adolescents
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17 Procession of the Sage 18 Adoration of the Earth (The Sage) 19 Dance of the Earth

The Sacrifice 18:02

20 Introduction (The Pagan Night) 21 Mystic Circles of the Young Girls
22 Glorification of the Chosen One 23 Evocation of the Ancestors
24 Ritual Action of the Ancestors 25 Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)

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