



QUEENSLAND SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

CONNECT



Stravinsky, *Firebird*
Learning Resource

Australian Curriculum Links: Years 7–10, 11 & 12

Suitable for music specialists and general classroom teachers

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

BACKGROUND

The Firebird was composed by Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky.

It was composed as a ballet and orchestral work in 1910, however the version you will hear in the concert was created as a **suite** (a set of works) for orchestra in 1919. This suite is in six main sections, but the music is heard as one continuous work.

You can listen to the music [here](#).

The time stamps in this resource refer to this recording.

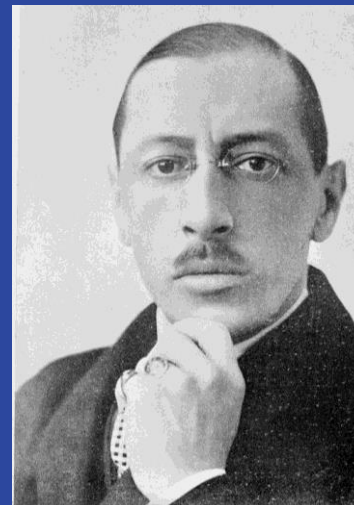


Igor Stravinsky

Russian-born composer. Born in 1882, died in 1971.

The Firebird was his first major work, which he composed at the age of 27.

It premiered at the Paris Opera in 1910 and the ballet was first performed in the United States in 1944.



Igor Stravinsky

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Stravinsky composed *The Firebird* for the *Ballets Russes*, a Russian ballet company which was based in Paris and led by Sergei Diaghilev. Diaghilev wanted to introduce Russian culture and stories to Europe through ballet.



Not only is *The Firebird* based on Russian folktales and a poem (selected by Diaghilev), but Stravinsky incorporates Russian folk music in the Suite.

The Firebird was the first collaboration between Stravinsky and Diaghilev. The pair went on to produce other well-known ballets such as *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring*, and *Pulcinella*.



Original costume design for *The Firebird*



Sergei Diaghilev

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

STORY

The Firebird is based on a Russian folktale about a firebird, a powerful female spirit bird whose magical feathers flicker and glitter like flames and provide protection to the earth. Diaghilev also based the plot of *The Firebird* on a Russian story called *Koschei the Deathless*. The third influence in the development of the story was an excerpt from a children's poem, *A Winter's Journey*:



And in my dreams I see myself on a wolf's back

Riding along a forest path

To do battle with a sorcerer-tsar (Koschei)

In that land where a princess sits under lock and key,

Pining behind massive walls.

There gardens surround a palace all of glass;

There Firebirds sing by night

And peck at golden fruit.

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

PLOT

The work begins in the garden of Koschei, the fearsome and immortal sorcerer. Prince Ivan, who has been hunting in the forest nearby, strays into Koschei's garden and spies the Firebird as she is picking golden apples from a magic tree. The prince captures the Firebird but agrees to set her free when she offers him a magical feather, a guarantee of her help if he ever needs it.

Soon, thirteen princesses who have been captured by Koschei enter the garden and dance, playing a game with the golden apples. Prince Ivan falls in love with one of them, and decides it is his mission to rescue the princesses. He confronts Koschei the next day, who sends his minions after the prince. Prince Ivan decides to call upon the Firebird for help, who rescues the prince by making Koschei and his minions dance an energetic dance which sends them into a deep sleep.

While they sleep, the Firebird shows the prince an egg which contains Koschei's soul. The prince destroys the egg, killing Koschei and freeing all those he held captive.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

INSTRUMENTATION

Strings

Violin, Viola, Cello, Double Bass

Woodwind

Piccolo 2 Flutes 2 Oboes and Cor Anglais
2 Clarinets 2 Bassoons

Brass

4 Horns 2 Trumpets 3 Trombones
Tuba

Percussion

Timpani Bass drum Cymbals
Triangle Xylophone Harp

Keyboard

Piano Celeste



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

INSTRUMENTATION – Strings



Violin



Viola



Cello



Double Bass

String Family

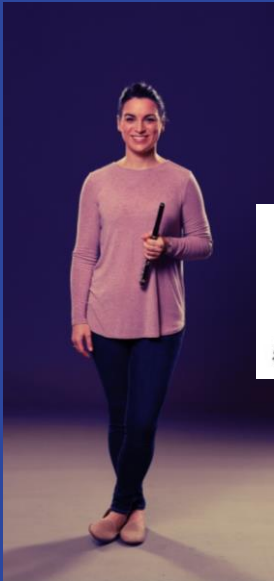
Sound is produced on string instruments either with a bow or by plucking the strings.



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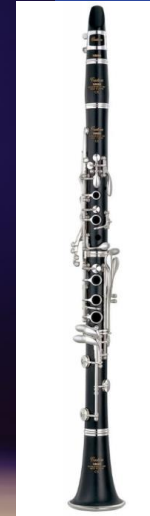
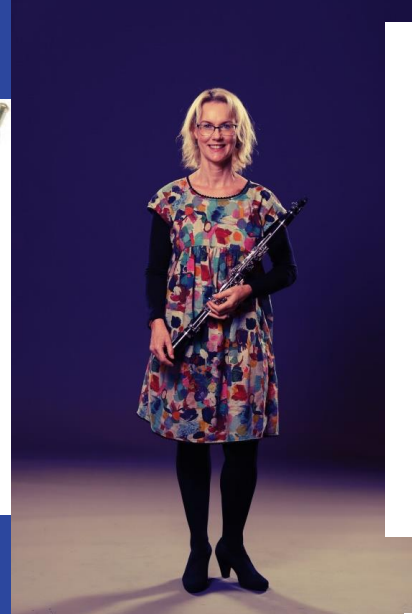
INSTRUMENTATION – Woodwinds



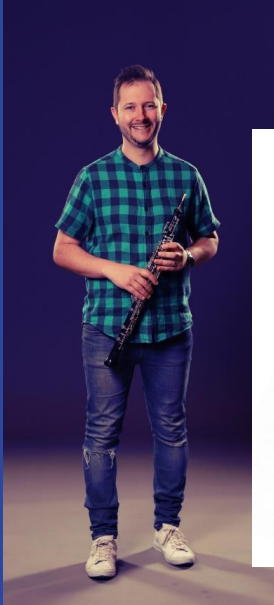
Piccolo



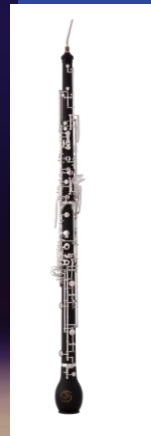
Flute



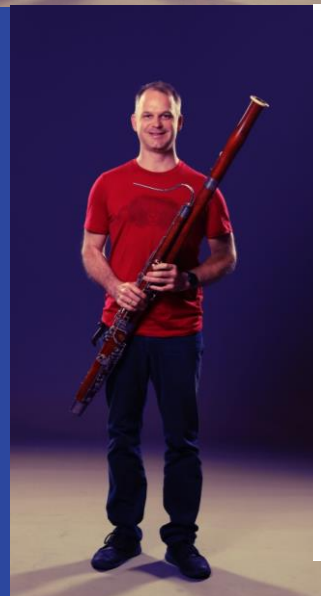
Clarinet



Oboe



Cor
Anglais



Bassoon



Woodwind Family

Woodwind
instruments
produce sound by
blowing air
through the
instrument.



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INSTRUMENTATION – Brass



French Horn



Trumpet



Trombone



Tuba



Brass Family

Brass instruments are made of metal.

The sound is created by the buzzing of the player's lips. Sound changes by the length of tubing used and how fast the air moves through the instrument



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INSTRUMENTATION – Percussion



Timpani



Xylophone



Triangle

The timpani and xylophone are two tuned percussion instruments. Instruments like the tambourine, triangle, and cymbals are examples of untuned percussion.

Percussion Family

Instruments in the percussion family create sound by being struck by sticks, beaters, mallets, or hands. Some instruments just make a sound (untuned percussion), while others can play different notes (tuned percussion).

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

MUSIC

The music for *The Firebird* was composed 102 years ago. Because the music was originally composed for a ballet, and there's no singing involved, different characters in the story are represented musically.

Human characters, such as Prince Ivan and the princesses, are represented by simple, **diatonic** melodies that are either based on or sound like folk tunes. Their music also includes some traditional Russian folk melodies, but most of the music was composed by Stravinsky.

Mythical characters, such as the Firebird and the sorcerer Koschei, are represented by **chromatic music**. Chromatic music can sound more unusual or complex.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

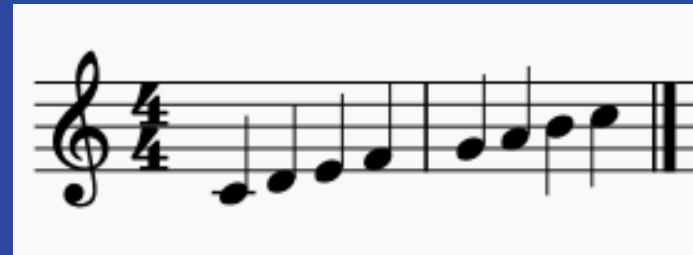


Diatonic and chromatic scale examples

Diatonic scale:

a scale using seven different pitches or notes.

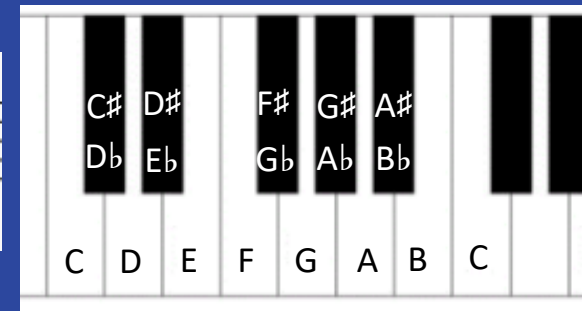
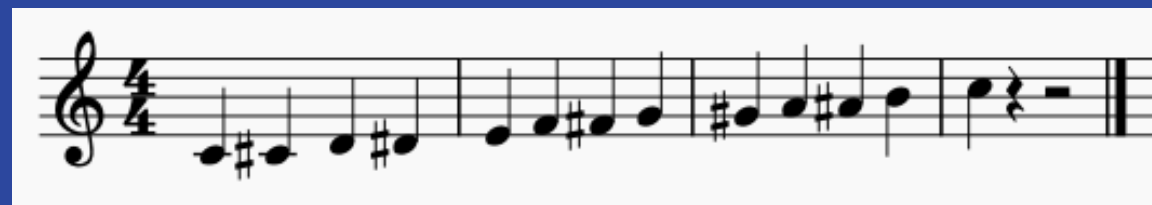
For example, in C major scale, the notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C.



Chromatic scale:

a scale using twelve different pitches or notes.

For example, in a C major chromatic scale, the notes are the same as a C major scale, but include the semitone intervals between each note.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction

The suite begins with a haunting, repetitive **ostinato**, representing the evil sorcerer Koschei.

An **ostinato** is a repeated musical pattern. The opening ostinato consists of six notes and is played in unison by cellos and double basses (joined by violas).

The ostinato can be heard from **0:00–0:18**.



Listen:
0:00–3:19

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction (continued)

The ostinato is heard throughout the Introduction. Not only does it drive the music forward, but its constant repetition also provides a sense of unity or familiarity, and a solid foundation for the addition of other musical layers.

However, Stravinsky's use of ostinato in the Introduction was not as simple as repeating these six notes. He showed innovation by extending this ostinato, adding in other notes within the six-note framework established at the beginning.

You can hear the ostinato and its extension from **0:00–0:35**.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction (continued)

The addition of notes to the main ostinato adds rhythmic interest to the music, and it also affects the tempo of the music.

The extra notes disrupt the evenly-spaced six-note ostinato from occurring on the downbeat. This tempo displacement creates a sense of unpredictability, and adds to feeling of unease throughout this movement.

Using the same ostinato over and over, and extending upon it, was something that Minimalist composers, such as Steve Reich and Terry Riley, adopted in the 1960s and 1970s.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction (continued)

The six-note ostinato is very harmonically interesting. It begins with the notes A \flat and D, which form a **tritone**.

A tritone is an augmented fourth or a diminished fifth interval. This is a harsh-sounding interval which is difficult interval to sing. Because of this it was termed *diabolus in musica* (devil in music) and avoided in the Medieval period. It is still referred to today as 'the devil's interval'. The tritone appears in a lot of jazz music, and Stravinsky's insistent use of it by way of the ostinato was innovative for its time.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction (continued)

The direction given to the string players in the Introduction is **con sord**, which indicates that instruments are to be played with a mute. The muted instruments adds to the eeriness of the music – by dampening the volume of the instruments it makes them sound more distant. Half of the double basses play **arco** (with the bow) and the other half play **pizzicato** (plucking the strings).

Bass drum **rolls** add to the suspense. A roll is a sustained sound achieved through rapid and continuous drumbeats.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

1. Introduction (continued)

The arrival of the woodwind and brass instruments signifies Prince Ivan's arrival into the forest. Ivan is represented by the noble-sounding horn, which often plays fragments of Russian folk song.

Shimmering and trembling (**tremolo**) strings, followed by fluttering upper strings and woodwinds, indicate the arrival of the Firebird. Repetitive leaps in the music represent the Firebird trying to escape being caught by Ivan. The firebird is also represented by **harmonic string glissandi**, which add to the magical sound of the music.



French horn

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

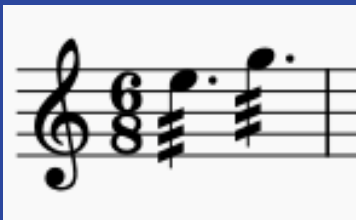
1. Introduction (continued)

Tremolo is the trembling, rapid repetition back and forth of a note, usually on a bowed string instrument.

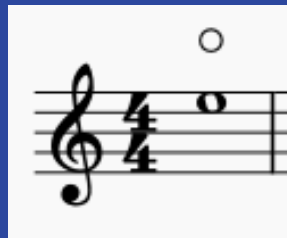
Harmonics are notes that are produced on string instruments by gently placing the finger on strings in certain places which produces a lighter, more ethereal sound. On string instruments, harmonics are indicated by a circle above the note intended to be played as a harmonic.

Glissando or glissandi (plural) is the upwards or downwards slide between notes.

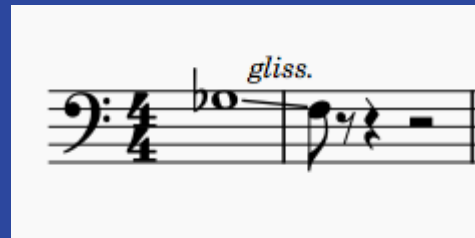
These three different techniques are notated as follows:



Tremolo



Harmonic



Glissando



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

2. The Firebird's Dance and Variation of the Firebird

The second section of the suite contains music which represents the Firebird in a number of ways.

Syncopated rhythms (which are irregular and characterised by having no clear beat) sound bird-like.

The Firebird's dance contains **chromatic** lines (which, as previously indicated, represent this otherworldly creature).

Glissandi and **tremolo** in the strings give a sparkling effect, like the wings of the Firebird.



Listen:

**The Firebird's
Dance:
3:20–3:37**

**Variation of the
Firebird:
3:38–4:53**



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3. Round of the Princesses

Under a sustained horn note, a flute duet and high-pitched violins make way for the entrance of the thirteen princesses, who are represented by lyrical woodwind solos. It begins with a beautiful oboe solo, accompanied by harp, which plays a folk-inspired tune that is then repeated in other woodwinds.

One of the princesses shakes some golden apples from the tree, and this is represented by **tremolo** (trembling) strings and a cymbal. Fast, fluttering music accompanies the princesses' game with the apples. The music stops when Prince Ivan reveals himself. Ivan's arrival is represented by solo horn. The Princesses invite him to a round dance, which can be heard in the music as a beautiful melody based on a traditional Russian folk song. At the end of the dance, Ivan has fallen in love with one of the princesses, but their kiss is interrupted by trumpet calls, signaling that the princesses are to return to Koschei.

Ivan decides to rescue the princesses, and when he arrives at Koschei's gate, Koschei's appearance is marked by a dramatic roll from the timpani and bass drum. The princesses try to help Ivan (indicated in the music by their woodwind solos), but Koschei begins to turn Ivan to stone, which is represented by waves of sound from the orchestra. Just before it's too late, Ivan remembers the magic feather gifted by the Firebird, and uses it to summon her.



Listen:
4:44–9:34

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

4. Infernal Dance

The start of this section is signaled by a loud, **sforzando** (to be played with strong emphasis) chord in the orchestra, which sounds like a lightning bolt. These musical lightning bolts occur at random times throughout (and are said to have startled the audience who first heard the music in Paris). Horn, bassoon, and tuba play a syncopated, driving melody.

The main melody of this section was taken from the opera, *Mlada*, by another famous Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, where it represented a witches' sabbath. The music is repeated in different ways, representing Koschei and his minions dancing over and over.



Listen:
9:35–13:59

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

4. Infernal Dance (continued)

The use of different rhythms and **syncopation** (off-beat rhythms) creates an unsettling effect, along with many instruments playing at a loud dynamics and with **accented** notes. Trombones play **glissandi**, representing Stravinsky pushing this instrument to its limit. The harp creates unusual **harmonics**.



Example of accent

The violas transport us to the next section, the Berceuse.

Stravinsky, *Firebird*

5. Berceuse

Exhausted from all their dancing, Koschei and his minions collapse, and the Firebird's gentle lullaby, a beautiful bassoon solo, lulls them to sleep.

The haunting bassoon melody is **chromatic**. The bassoon solo is accompanied by a mesmerizing **ostinato** (a repeated musical pattern) in the harp.

At the end of the lullaby, Koschei wakes up, but the Firebird shows Ivan where the egg is which contains Koschei's soul. Ivan tosses it around (represented by lurching sounds in the orchestra) before smashing it, which kills Koschei and sets of all his victims free.

A distant horn call signifies the spell being lifted and a new beginning. The section ends with **tremolo** strings.



Listen:
14:00–17:44



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6. Final

The final section of the work begins with a triumphant horn solo, based on a melody from a collection of folk songs composed by Rimsky-Korsakov, accompanied by **tremolo** strings. The horn music is repeated in violins, and the orchestra builds as more instruments are added. The horn music is transformed – going from a slow to a fast **tempo**, (and then back to a slow tempo for the end of the work), and its **rhythms** change. Repeated rising scales and **tremolo** strings add to the triumphant and joyous feeling in this section, which is a celebration of the liberation of Koschei's victims and a new beginning.



Listen:
17:55–20:58



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6. Final (continued)

The section ends with a brass **chorale** amidst shimmering, high-pitched strings and sparkling percussion, reflecting the glowing wings of the Firebird. In an orchestral setting, a **chorale** is a hymn-like section of music played by a small ensemble within the orchestra.

Dazzling, chromatic chords finish the work, reflecting the Firebird.



Stravinsky, *Firebird*

CURRICULUM LINKS

This resource responds to the following aspects of the Australian Curriculum

Years 7–10

- Analyse composers' use of the elements of music and stylistic features when listening to and interpreting music **(ACAMUR097)**
- Identify and connect specific features and purposes of music from different eras to explore viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples **(ACAMUR098)**
- Manipulate combinations of the elements of music in a range of styles, using technology and notation **(ACAMUM100)**
- Evaluate a range of music and compositions to inform and refine their own compositions and performances **(ACAMUR104)**
- Analyse a range of music from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their music making, and consider music in international contexts **(ACAMUR105)**

Years 11 & 12

Designs (Unit 1), Innovations (Unit 3), and Narratives (Unit 4) units of the Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority Music General Senior Syllabus.

2. Explain the use of music elements and concepts When students explain, they present descriptions and reveal relevant facts of music elements and concepts in repertoire or music sources.

4. Analyse music When students analyse, they examine and consider the constituent parts and the relationship between music elements, concepts and stylistic characteristics.

8. Evaluate music to justify the use of music elements and concepts When students evaluate, they make judgments about the ideas and concepts evident in music in relation to purpose and context, examining and determining the value or significance of music from various perspectives. When students justify, they give valid reasons or evidence to support a viewpoint, response or conclusion.





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