

The Firebird



a study guide

New York Theatre Ballet

After a very successful first season in Paris, Serge Diaghilev, the director of the Ballet Russes, began to prepare the repertoire of new ballets for the 1910 season. Diaghilev decided to commission a work drawn from Russian Folklore. He decided on **The Firebird**, a story about a magical bird of Russian folktales. After Anatol Liadov, a famous composer turned him down, he asked a talented student composer, Igor Stravinsky, to write the new score. Stravinsky had never before created music for a ballet.

The ballet had its world premiere on June 25, 1910 at the Paris Opera. Diaghilev also commissioned costumes designed by the painter Leon Bakst and sets were created by Alexandre Golovine. On the opening night, Michel Fokine, the choreographer of **The Firebird**, danced the role of Prince Ivan with Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird.



A famous Firebird was Margot Fonteyn (1954). Tamara Karsavina, the first Firebird, taught Margot Fonteyn the role. You can still see her performance on video.

In 1949 George Balanchine created a new **Firebird** ballet for Maria Tallchief.

In 1970 George Balanchine returned to **The Firebird** in collaboration with Jerome Robbins. New sets were created by Marc Chagall. The role of the Firebird was danced by Gelsey Kirkland.

Other famous birds in ballet

The Swan Queen in Swan Lake
The Bluebird in Sleeping Beauty

The ballet and its music were an immense success!

Can you make up a dance about birds?

What steps will you use? How will you move your arms so they look like wings? Are you a big or small bird? Are you a crow, a sparrow, an ostrich, a pigeon, a duck?

NYTB's The Firebird

Choreography by **Richard Holden**
(after Michel Fokine)

Music by **Igor Stravinsky**

Costumes By **Sylvia Taalsohn Nolan**

Set Design by **Gillian Bradshaw-Smith**

The Characters

The Firebird

Ivan Tsarevitch

The Beautiful Tsarevna

The Immortal Kostchei

The Bolibotshki Monster

The Enchanted Princesses

The Story

In the dark garden of the Immortal Kostchei, a tree glows, laden with golden fruit. The Firebird appears, attracted by the tree, and is pursued by Ivan Tsarevitch. He captures her and refuses to release her. She offers one of her magic feathers as ransom and promises to return to aid him if he waves it when in danger. He frees her and she flies away.

Four maidens, led by the beautiful Tsarevna, appear and enter the garden. Ivan conceals himself to watch as they gather golden apples. Attracted by the Tsarevna, he emerges from his hiding place. She warns him to leave as he is trespassing in the garden of the magician Kostchei, but he expresses his love for her and refuses. Ivan opens the gates and a monster rushes from the castle followed by Kostchei. Kostchei captures Ivan and tries to turn him into stone, but Ivan waves the magic feather. The Firebird appears and forces Kostchei and the Bolibotshki Monster to dance until exhaustion, and then puts them to sleep. Ivan is instructed to steal the egg which contains Kostchei's soul. He throws it to the ground, breaking the spell over the princesses.

The princesses celebrate their freedom from Kostchei's enchantment, and the Tsarevna and Ivan are married, blessed by the Firebird.



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We'd love to hear from you. Please submit your comments, or ideas for a new ballet to the address above!

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New Words

Adage Slow sustained movements in ballet.

Audition To try out for a role, a trial performance where a dancer is judged on his/her ability. All of the professional dancers audition to become members of New York Theatre Ballet. All of the child dancers audition to attend Ballet School NY, the official school of NYTB.

Choreographer The person who is responsible for creating the ballet and for integrating the dance, music, décor, story, costumes and lighting.

Premier Danseur A male dancer of the highest ranking.

Repertoire The collection of dances performed by a ballet company.

Studio The place where dancers study dance, practice, and rehearse their art form. New York Theatre Ballet and Ballet School NY has studios at 30 East 31st Street in New York City.

Technique The method and procedures of classical ballet training to get the desired results: the dancers ability to perform the steps and movements correctly. New York Theatre Ballet trains in the Cecchetti system.

The Cecchetti System Who was Enrico Cecchetti? One of the most frequently asked questions by ballet students has to do with training methods. Many know that they study "Cecchetti" or "RAD" or "Vaganova", and so on. But many do not know what this means.

Cecchetti is not French and is not choreography. Enrico Cecchetti was born in 1850 and died in 1928. He was the developer of one of the most influential ballet instruction methods of the 20th century. He was born into a family of dancers who lived in Rome. As a child, Cecchetti toured the U.S. and most of Europe with his family. After his debut in St. Petersburg in 1887, he stayed and became ballet master to the Imperial Theatre in 1890. He had a very important teaching career in the Imperial Theatre School until 1910, when he accepted the position of Ballet Master to Diaghilev's Ballet Russes.

Cecchetti's Legacy Maestro Enrico Cecchetti will always be remembered through the teaching method he developed. He learned from the masters; he assimilated and applied the theories they taught. From his own experiences as a dancer and a teacher and from his associations with other dancers, artists and musicians, he continued to learn, sharing his knowledge and wisdom throughout a career that spanned nearly eight decades.

Cyril Beaumont, a world-renowned dance historian said, "What impressed me most about the Cecchetti method of teaching was the way in which each exercise played a definite and planned part in the student's technical development. There is nothing haphazard about the system, nothing which depended on the teacher's mood of the moment. There is a definite plan to daily classes."



What Would You Like to Know About Ballet?

How do the dancers make up the steps?

They don't make up the steps. Ballet steps are similar to words. Just as you use your words to make sentences and paragraphs, choreographers combine steps to express feelings, ideas and tell stories.

How long does it take to become a ballet dancer? Usually it takes about ten years of study to become a ballet dancer. Just like athletes, dancers spend almost every day in class or practicing their steps and dances.

Can children dance in ballets? New York Theatre Ballet uses children in many of their ballets, including **Carnival of the Animals**.

Do dancers get nervous before they perform? Even though the New York Theatre Ballet dancers tour all over the world and give hundreds of performances, they still get a little nervous. But when they hear the music for their entrance the nerves go away and they give the most generous and best performance they can for the audience.

Lighting Stage lights are hung above the stage and in the auditorium. They can create impressions such as sunrise or sunset.

The Publicity A month before the performance the publicity officer sends out press releases to newspapers, magazines and TV stations announcing the performance dates.

Dress Rehearsal On the day before the first performance the dancers, stage manager, lighting designer, choreographer all meet on stage and discuss last minute details. The dancers walk through the ballet without the music to get used to the stage. Afterwards, they run the ballet in costumes and perform it as though there was an audience.

What Happens Backstage The entire cast must be backstage one hour before the beginning of the performance. First they put on their make-up and then fix their hair. They put on their costumes about 20 minutes before the performance and put on their shoes last. Some dancers might glue or sew them to their tights to make them extra secure.

On Tour New York Theatre Ballet spends a good part of the year on tour in the U.S.A and in Europe. Programs are usually worked out at least a year ahead of the first performance. Everything travels with the Company: costumes, scenery, dance floor, sound equipment and lights. Each dancer packs their own theater case with their dance shoes, practice clothes, make-up, hair supplies, first aid supplies, good luck charms and anything else they might need to use at the theater.