Stravinsky – The Firebird (Finale)

Listening

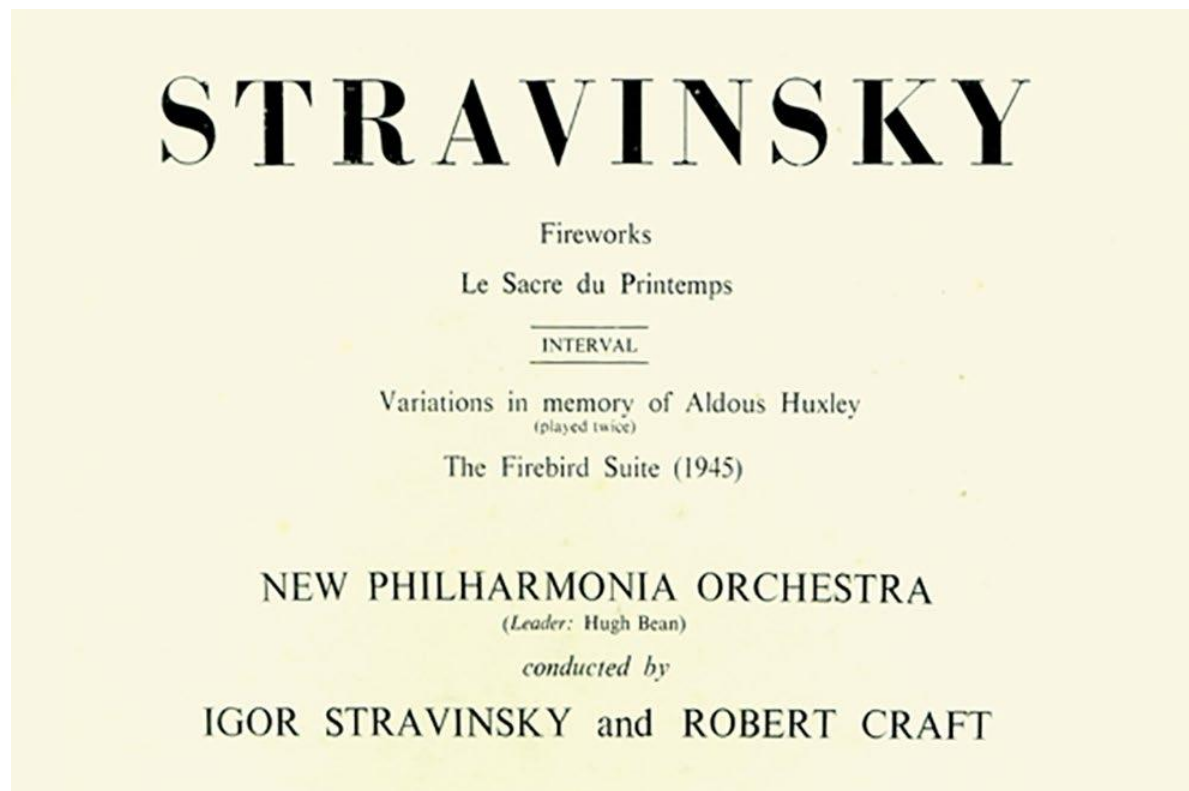**Orchestra Performance** ▶

Musical Score ▶

Context

Stravinsky was a Russian composer who lived between 1882 and 1971, who had a huge influence on classical music in the twentieth century.

The Firebird is a magical ballet written by Stravinsky in 1910. In a ballet there is dancing on stage with music, but no words are spoken. Stravinsky later edited the music to become an orchestral suite in 1919 – this means the music was made shorter, and the ballet dancing was removed. This enables orchestras to programme it in concerts.

This piece is the finale of the suite. It is a thrilling ending where the magical Firebird helps Prince Ivan to defeat the evil wizard and bring peace to the kingdom. It's a little bit like the plot of Wicked!

This piece was performed by the Philharmonia in their first concert in De Montfort Hall, Leicester, in 1995.

STRAVINSKY

Fireworks

Le Sacre du Printemps

INTERVAL

Variations in memory of Aldous Huxley
(played twice)

The Firebird Suite (1945)

NEW PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA
(*Leader:* Hugh Bean)
conducted by
IGOR STRAVINSKY and ROBERT CRAFT

Short 5-minute task: Musical Moods

Stravinsky's music is vivid, dramatic and full of musical colour. The finale has three main sections giving contrasting moods:

1. A gentle, shimmering beginning like the rising morning sun

2. A build up (called a crescendo) getting the audience excited as the music gets louder

3. A bold and joyful ending to celebrate victory

For this task, try playing 10-15 seconds of each section asking pupils:

- What do you think is happening in the story during this music?

- Is it quiet or loud (piano or forte)?

- Is it calm or exciting?

- Is the tempo fast or slow?

- What instruments can you hear?

For more practical reactions, ask pupils to respond in different ways, for example:

- 'Show me the music with actions only!' (e.g. wide eyes of surprise, big smile for triumph)

- 'Draw the music with your hands!' (e.g. swooping arms for the crescendo)

For the 3 sections, use 10-15 seconds of the clips below:

1. **A gentle, shimmering beginning** ▶

2. **An exciting crescendo** ▶

3. **A bold and joyful ending** ▶

Stretch and Challenge

- Ask students to justify their answers using musical vocabulary (e.g. 'as the tempo increases, the tension rises')
- Identify specific instruments ('The horn is playing the melody as a solo')
- Ask more demanding questions for example how the instruments are being played – string trills (rapidly alternating between two notes), string mutes (to make the sound quieter), harp slides (glissando).

Support and Scaffold

- Ask more entry level questions and give pupils options to choose from – for example 'is the music loud or quiet?' to support their understanding.
- Consider using visual cues – e.g. cards with 'happy/sad', 'loud/quiet', 'fast/slow' for pupils to choose from
- Give multiple choice for describing instruments – 'is the melody played by a brass or string instrument?'

Medium 20-minute task: Firebird Sounds

Divide the class into four different groups. Give each group a different role from the Firebird story and use any classroom instruments or body percussion to try and create the soundscape:

- Firebird (magical) – shimmering glockenspiel, vocal trills

- Prince Ivan (hero) – fanfares on brass, drumbeats or claps

- Evil wizard (danger) – low pitches sounds, stomps, clashes

- Final celebration (joy) – percussion (maracas, tambourines, triangles), rhythmic dancing

It is helpful if you have played the piece to students beforehand, so they have something to base their ideas on.

Ask the groups to then create a 15-30 second musical moment to represent their character, choosing the sounds they will use and the order they will perform in.

Make sure everyone in the group is contributing.

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage more able pupils to work in a structure – e.g. ABA where the opening ideas return at the end of their composition
- Add dynamics and changes in tempo to build contrast
- Add texture by layering ideas on top of each other.

Support and Scaffold

- Use pre-selected instruments e.g. 'shake the tambourine to make a magical sound'
- Use modelling from teacher or other pupils to give an example for pupils to follow

Longer 45-minute task: Firebird Story

This task looks for students to work in small groups to create and perform a musical version of *The Firebird* story, using sound effects, music and narration.

To start, outline the story of the Firebird:

1. Prince Ivan meets the Firebird – magical

2. The Firebird agrees to help Prince Ivan – they work together

3. The Evil Wizard appears – danger!

4. The Firebird casts her spell – magical, tension

5. Celebration – the kingdom is saved

Assign each group of students to one of the five scenes above. Students then work on creating a short performance (1-2 minutes) for their scene, which might include:

- Narration, drama or ballet

- Instrumental or body percussion/vocal sounds

- Changes in mood to help tell the story

- Art work using the template in the student resource

Then put the 5 scenes together as a class to give a whole-class performance of *The Firebird*.

The video from *Fantasia 2000* here might be useful. It uses music from earlier in the suite before ending with the **Finale ▶**

Stretch and Challenge

- Think about using motifs (recurring musical ideas, like in the Beethoven) to represent characters
- Use dynamic contrasts, tempo changes and silence for effect
- Add a conducting role
- Create a graphic score of their music using shapes to represent the different ideas

Support and Scaffold

- Structure the composition e.g:
    - 1. choose a low, slow sound
    - 2. add a high sound for magic
- Consider using sound buttons or recorded samples if you have the technology (e.g. keyboards) for this
- Pre-select sounds for pupils to experiment with

Listening Guide

Timings based on the video link at the top
of this section.

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
0:00-0.57	Shimmering strings (playing tremolo) with a quiet melody on a solo horn. Initially it is not clear what the beat of the music is. Harps slides (glissando) and string trills to make the dawn shimmer as the sun rises.
0.58-1:34	Music gradually crescendos (gets louder) with more instruments being added. The music gets increasingly excited. The beat of the music becomes clearer to hear. A sudden drop in dynamics at 1:30 builds tension even more.
1:35-end	Brass enter with a triumphant melody using a mirrored pattern (the beats work as 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 | 1 2 1 2 1 2 3 to keep us on edge!) This is very rhythmic and contrasts with the earlier sections. There are significant changes in tempo, shimmering trills, loud dynamics, and a triumphant close!

Links to other subjects

This piece can link well to these other areas of the
school curriculum:

Subject	Links
English	• Consider asking pupils to ask questions of different characters seen in the Firebird (character hot-seat!) with pupils answering the questions in character. • You could also ask pupils to write a creative response to the story – for example a poem or short story, exploring fairy tales as inspiration.
Art	• Consider asking pupils to colour in the firebird drawing in their student workbooks which could be used to display different art techniques.
History	• Consider comparing dance and storytelling traditions in different cultures – for example the Russian Firebird, the Chinese Dragon, West African trickster tales. • This piece was written in 1919 – during the First World War. As such there is a chance to look at the wider history of this period and how Stravinsky's music might reflect the challenges of the period.
PSHE	• The themes of the story link to bravery, kindness, trust, and good vs. evil. There is also a link about how we can use music (and art as a wider concept) to express ourselves, supporting our health and wellbeing.

The 1911 version of this piece was also used in the
BBC Ten Pieces ▶, and there are several different
activities there which you might find useful.