

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY

MARCH 3, 2024

HOW “SUITE” IT IS

PROGRAM NOTES

The seventeen-year-old **Felix Mendelssohn** and his sister, Fanny, spent many days reading Shakespeare in the German translations by Schlegel and Tieck. As a result, the inspired composer wrote the overture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Written first as a piano duet, it was first performed for the great pianist Moscheles by the composer and his sister on November 19, 1826. Mendelssohn quickly orchestrated the work and it was first presented in that form in February, 1827.

The overture, for all its lightness and grace is a very compact work. The four magical chords that open it set the mood for the fairy tale that follows. It established the thematic material quickly and introduces other themes pertinent to the subject matter of the Shakespeare play. Of this permanently youthful music Sir George Grove wrote that Mendelssohn had “brought the fairies into the orchestra, and fixed them there.”

Seventeen years later, King Frederick William IV of Prussia commissioned the composer to write more music for a complete performance of the play. Mendelssohn wrote twelve new numbers, which with the overture comprise the complete incidental music to the Shakespeare play. Astonishingly, despite the many years separating the composition of the overture and the rest of the music, the composer matched the styles flawlessly.

The first production with this new music was given at the New Palace of Potsdam, on October 14, 1843. The first concert performance took place in London in the following May with Mendelssohn conducting. For the standard concert suite, Mendelssohn chose five purely instrumental movements: Overture, Scherzo, Intermezzo, Nocturne, and the Wedding March.

Maurice Ravel never married and had no children on his own. He was however quite attached to Jean and Mimie, the son and daughter of his close Parisian friends, Ida and Cipa Godebski. Neither child was particularly musical although they did take piano lessons from an early age. Mimie loathed practicing. Ravel wrote some piano four-hand works the kids could play together. He based them on some of their favorite stories and titled the whole suite *Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose Suite)*. He had hoped they would learn them and play them in concert, but Mimie's obstinance ruled that out. The honor went to two other youngsters in 1910. In 1912, Ravel orchestrated the five movements.

The first is “Sleeping Beauty's Pavane”, a brief section for flute. “Tom Thumb” follows, featuring the oboe. Tom is lost in the woods and has been leaving a trail of crumbs which are eaten up by lustily cheeping birds. “Laideronette (Little Ugly), Empress of the Pagodas” presides not over Eastern temples, but over “pagodes”, little animals who play music through nutshells. The fourth piece is a lazy waltz, “The Conversation of Beauty and the Beast”. The beast is intoned by – what else? - the contrabassoon. The last section is the “The Fairy Garden Awakes”.

In 1910, the impresario Diaghilev was looking for a composer to write the music for his new ballet, *The Firebird*. His first choice was Anatol Liadov, but that indolence left Diaghilev having to find someone else who could work under a tight deadline. He chose the still unknown 26-year-old **Igor Stravinsky**, who completed the entire 45-minute ballet in six months. The first performance, at the Paris Opera on June 25th, 1910, was an immediate and overwhelming success with both critics and public. *The Firebird*, in the form of the several suites the composer extracted, was no less successful in the concert hall. The suite from 1919 is the one most commonly played.

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The story was adapted by choreographer Michael Fokine from Russian sources. The suite follows the outline of the story quite well. In briefest outline, it tells how Prince Ivan, wandering in a dark enchanted forest, beholds a fabulous bird whose feathers are plumes of fire, eating golden fruit from a silver tree. Prince Ivan tried to catch the Firebird, but only manages to pluck one flame from her coat. The hero wanders further into the forest until he comes to the domain of the demon called Kastchei, the Deathless, so-called because his life doesn't reside in his body but in an egg hidden in his castle. Ivan watches the grave dance of a bevy of princesses, held in a trancelike spell by Kastchei. Suddenly Kastchei and his demons surround the prince with murderous intent, but the flame from the Firebird's coat protects him, and the Firebird herself appears at the height of the battle to lend him her assistance. The Firebird leads Ivan into the castle, where he finds the egg and breaks it. Instantly, the castle and the demons disappear and the princesses are released from their spell. The prince is married to the most beautiful of the princesses amid great rejoicing.

~Marty Haub