

# THREE RUSSIANS, THREE FATES

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

## TIMELINKS

1878

### **PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

Violin Concerto in D  
major, op. 35  
Treaty of Berlin divides  
Africa amongst European  
powers

1904-09

### **ANATOLY LYADOV**

*Baba-Yaga*, op. 56;  
*The Enchanted Lake*,  
op. 62;  
*Kikimora*, op. 63  
Czar Nicholas II dissolves  
Finland's legislature

1945

### **IGOR STRAVINSKY**

*The Firebird Suite*  
World War II ends

Two of the three Russian composers represented in this weekend's concerts are yoked by a strange occurrence, or rather a non-occurrence, which is perhaps what makes it strange. It's not based on what they did, mind you, but on what one of them did not do.

Anatoly Lyadov is considerably less well-known than Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky or Igor Stravinsky, and to some degree that may be his own fault. Though a composer of considerable skill and a professor (albeit an eccentric and pedantic one) at the St. Petersburg Conservatory whose students included Sergey Prokofiev and Nikolay Myaskovsky, Lyadov produced no works of substantial length and grandeur, as had a number of his contemporaries. Stravinsky, though an admirer of Lyadov, accurately characterized his oeuvre as "short-winded."

Lyadov was similarly critical of his comparatively meager output, admitting in his memoirs that his most remarkable feature is "laziness." Whether it was that particular character flaw that forever tied him to Stravinsky's name is uncertain.

What is known, however, is that in 1909, when Sergey Diaghilev, impresario and founder of Paris's Ballets Russes, was mounting a new ballet, *The Firebird*, he asked Lyadov to supply the score. Whether Lyadov turned down the commission or accepted it and simply failed to do the work in the time allotted is a matter of dispute. Diaghilev turned to the younger and much-less experienced Stravinsky instead, whose groundbreaking work brought him to instant international prominence.

Would Lyadov's *Firebird* have done even nearly as well as Stravinsky's? It's impossible to say, though it seems unlikely, since Lyadov never worked on so broad a canvas. Instead, he is remembered for a series of orchestral pieces—exquisitely wrought miniatures—based on Russian folk tales. We will visit three of these this weekend.

## ANATOLY LYADOV

*Baba-Yaga*, op. 56

Baba-Yaga is a witchlike figure out of Slavic folklore. She lives deep in the forest, in a hut that stands on chicken legs. She flies in a mortar and wields a pestle. Though she cuts a decidedly ominous and horrifying figure, she is not inherently evil, and is known to help some that encounter her, but, well, yes...consume others. So maybe she's more than a little evil.

Baba-Yaga made her way from folk tales into other forms of Russian art and at least one other notable classical composition. Prior to Lyadov's *Baba-Yaga*, Mussorgsky portrayed the Baba-Yaga legend in a section of his *Pictures at an Exhibition* titled "The Hut on Fowl's Legs."

In a fabulous (and fabulist) twist, the character, or at least the name Baba-Yaga has made the transition to contemporary folklore in the form of comic books, anime, video games, and movies.

Lyadov's version is brief but vivid and full of action, adventure, and intrigue.



### **Born**

May 11, 1855, St. Petersburg

### **Died**

August 28, 1914, Polinovka, in Novgorod District

### **First Performance**

Unknown

### **STL Symphony Premiere**

March 4, 1909, Max Zach conducting

### **Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

December 14, 2014, Steven Jarvi conducting

### **Scoring**

2 flutes  
piccolo  
2 oboes  
English horn  
2 clarinets  
bass clarinet  
2 bassoons  
contrabassoon  
4 horns  
2 trumpets  
3 trombones  
tuba  
timpani  
percussion  
strings

### **Performance Time**

approximately 4 minutes

**First Performance**

February 21, 1909, in  
St. Petersburg, Lyadov  
conducted

**STL Symphony Premiere**

January 19, 1962, Laszlo  
Somogyi conducting

**Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

October 31, 1999, at the Tilles  
Center in New York, Hans  
Vonk conducting

**Scoring**

3 flutes  
2 oboes  
3 clarinets  
2 bassoons,  
4 horns  
timpani  
bass drum  
harp  
celesta  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 6 minutes

**First Performance**

December 12, 1909, in  
St. Petersburg, Lyadov  
conducting

**STL Symphony Premiere**

February 16, 1912, with Max  
Zach conducting

**Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

January 23, 2004, Matthias  
Bamert conducting

**Scoring**

2 flutes  
piccolo  
2 oboes  
English horn  
2 clarinets  
bass clarinet  
2 bassoons  
4 horns  
2 trumpets  
timpani  
xylophone  
celesta  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 7 minutes

**ANATOLY LYADOV**

*The Enchanted Lake*, op. 62

Another charming miniature, *The Enchanted Lake*, though it derives from no specific folk-tale scene, was regarded by Lyadov as a “fable-tableau.” He wrote this description in a letter to a friend: “How picturesque it is, how clear, the multitude of stars hovering over the mysteries of the deep. But above all no entreaties and no complaints; only nature—cold, malevolent, and fantastic as a fairy tale. One has to feel the change of the colors, the chiaroscuro, the incessantly changeable stillness and seeming immobility.”

**ANATOLY LYADOV**

*Kikimora*, op. 63

*Kikimora* is based on another figure from Slavic folklore—this one a house spirit who lives behind the stove, or in the cellar. Like Baba-Yaga, she can be kind, doing housework and looking after the chickens, or malevolent, making noises and tormenting the children at night...and worse. She spins at night, and should someone happen to see her at her wheel, he or she will die.

Lyadov’s piece is at first slow and somewhat cryptic, reflecting the character’s upbringing in the mountains. Later, it becomes faster and more malevolent as the *Kikimora* gets up to her tricks. In the hushed ending, she fades away.

## PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35

**OF TIME AND THE CRITICS** Time has a way of silencing critics. Not all of them, of course, but it's not unusual for a piece of music to survive a critical drubbing dished out at its premiere, only to be reevaluated at a later date. For it to go on to become regarded as a masterwork, though, places it in more rarified air.

Such was the case with Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, which premiered in Vienna on December 4, 1881, with soloist Adolf Brodsky and the Vienna Philharmonic.

"Long and pretentious" is how the piece was dismissed by Europe's preeminent critic, Eduard Hanslick, who went on to say that it "brought us face to face with the revolting thought that music can exist which stinks to the ear....The violin is no longer played; it is tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue...." And of the finale, he wrote, it "transports us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian church festival. We see a host of savage, vulgar faces, we hear crude curses, and smell the booze."

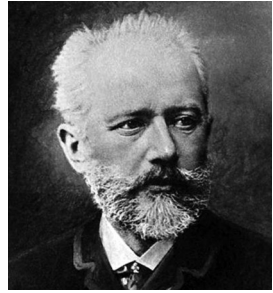
As they say, haters gonna hate.

Perhaps things would have been different had the Violin Concerto been premiered as intended, in March 1879, by violinist Leopold Auer, to whom it was originally dedicated. But he was no fan of the piece, either, and it has been said that he regarded the violin solo as being "unplayable," an assessment he later softened considerably. "What I did say," Auer claimed, "was that some of the passages were not suited to the character of the instrument, and that, however perfectly rendered, they would not sound as well as the composer had imagined."

In the end, Auer declared, "It is impossible to please everybody."

Which is true. Yet over the years, the Violin Concerto has been tamed by some who have played it and pleased many who have heard it.

**A PRODUCT OF A BAD MARRIAGE** Written in the aftermath of his ill-conceived marriage to Antonina Milyukova, which was so disastrous it led to a botched suicide attempt, Tchaikovsky poured his overflowing emotions into his work. This included the completion of his Symphony



### **Born**

May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

### **Died**

November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

### **First Performance**

December 4, 1881, Adolf Brodsky was soloist with the Vienna Philharmonic

### **STL Symphony Premiere**

December 1, 1906, soloist and conductor unknown

### **Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

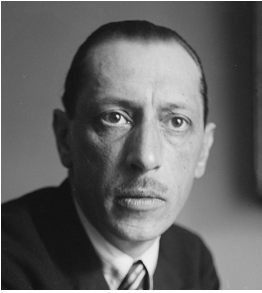
November 18, 2012, Vadim Gluzman was soloist, with Andrey Boreyko conducting

### **Scoring**

solo violin  
2 flutes  
2 oboes  
2 clarinets  
2 bassoons  
4 horns  
2 trumpets  
timpani  
strings

### **Performance Time**

approximately 33 minutes

**Born**

June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia

**Died**

April 6, 1971, New York City

**First Performance**

June 25, 1910, in Paris; Gabriel Pierné conducted the orchestra of the Ballets Russes

**STL Symphony Premiere**

January 12, 1923, Rudolf Ganz conducting the 1910 Suite

**Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

March 10, 2012, David Robertson conducted the complete version at Carnegie Hall

**Scoring**

2 flutes  
piccolo  
2 oboes  
2 clarinets  
2 bassoons  
4 horns  
2 trumpets  
3 trombones  
tuba  
timpani  
percussion  
harp  
piano  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 31 minutes

No. 4 and the opera *Eugene Onegin*. Next came the Violin Concerto, which he wrote in a mere 11 days. The scoring was completed a couple of weeks later.

Today, it seems that some (if not all) of Hanslick's criticisms say more about the critic than they do about the work in question, and that what he regarded as the Violin Concerto's failures are among its strengths: the difficulty of the solo part is a virtuosic challenge to be conquered; the music that surrounds it, meanwhile, with its lyrical charm and folklike themes—especially the distinctly Russian flavor of the finale—hardly constitute a vulgar display, but rather a reflection of the culture that birthed both Tchaikovsky and his Violin Concerto.

Though it endured extreme difficulty in earning its status, it has become one of the composer's most beloved works.

**IGOR STRAVINSKY***The Firebird Suite*

**STRAVINSKY'S LUCK** Stravinsky's stroke of luck (discussed above) of snapping up the commission—either refused or left to lay fallow by Lyadov—was the end point of a string of coincidences that brought the young composer and Diaghilev, the great ballet impresario, together to produce the first of several radical, groundbreaking collaborations, beginning with *The Firebird*.

Prior to working with Diaghilev, Stravinsky had only written a couple of pieces that showed flashes of his onrushing genius, *Scherzo fantastique* and *Feu d'artifice*, which Diaghilev happened to hear at a St. Petersburg concert in 1909. That led Diaghilev, who was on the lookout for exciting new composers, to ask Stravinsky to orchestrate two Chopin pieces for his ballet *Les Sylphides*. Diaghilev loved the resultant works and, when his previous plans for *The Firebird* began to unravel, he turned to Stravinsky.

**FOLK ART/MODERN ART** Based on a Russian folk tale, the ballet tells the story of Prince Ivan, who enters the magical realm of Kashchei the Immortal and encounters the Firebird, which he

captures and releases in exchange for its assistance. Ivan sees and falls in love with a princess, but is threatened by Kashchei. The Firebird enchants them all and makes them dance. Afterward, while they sleep, the Firebird reveals the secret to Kashchei's immortality, which Ivan destroys, freeing himself and the princesses from Kashchei's clutches.

Stravinsky's score makes references to the work of his teacher, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, but Maurice Ravel, who attended the ballet, wrote to a colleague, "This goes further than Rimsky." It was with the score's radical rhythmic shifts that Stravinsky made his mark.

The ballet was a rousing success and Stravinsky became an overnight sensation. He continued his collaborations with Diaghilev, scoring *Petrushka* in 1911 and *The Rite of Spring* in 1913, the premiere of which is legendary for the chaos that broke out in the theater between supporters and detractors of Stravinsky's revolutionary, visceral score.

Over the years, Stravinsky returned to *The Firebird* score and produced three suites, each revised to include or omit different material. They date from 1910, 1919, and 1945—the latter of which is presented in this concert.

It is a much shorter distillation of the full ballet, and it is said Stravinsky came to prefer this version, calling the original "too long and patchy." But its continuous movements retain the original's drama, color, and wild rhythmic invention.

Stravinsky went on to become one of—if not *the*—greatest composer of the 20th century. But *The Firebird* is where his legend truly begins.