

Le Baiser de la fée (The Fairy's Kiss)

IGOR STRAVINSKY

B. June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov), Russia

D. April 6, 1971, New York

Composed in 1928, revised in 1950. Premiered on November 27, 1928 at the Paris Opéra with the composer conducting

Scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, harp, and strings (approx. 43 minutes).

Stravinsky's oeuvre is usually divided into three periods – the early Russian works, the neoclassical works of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, and the late serial works. Throughout all of these periods, one genre persisted as a source of inspiration for Stravinsky – the ballet. If the early Diaghilev ballets (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) established Stravinsky as a major composer, the middle-period ballets demonstrated Stravinsky's relationship with music from earlier eras in music history. The most famous of these middle period dance works, *Pulcinella* (1919–20), was also a Diaghilev enterprise; while waiting for the production of *Les Noces* (The Wedding), Diaghilev suggested that Stravinsky arrange some pieces thought to be by the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–36). While Diaghilev probably had simple arrangements in mind, Stravinsky ended up doing much more and the result is a kind of hybrid, with baroque melodies and harmonies filtered through the rhythmic, harmonic, and coloristic prism of Stravinsky's music.

In 1928, Stravinsky was presented with another opportunity to mine the works of an older composer for the ballet *Le baiser de la fée* (The Fairy's Kiss). This work was commissioned by Ida Rubinstein, a former *Ballet russes* dancer, who had recently founded a new ballet company in Paris. The set designer was another of Stravinsky's old collaborators, Alexandre Benois, who co-wrote (with Stravinsky) the scenario, and designed costumes and sets for the premiere of *Petrushka*. It was Benois who suggested that Stravinsky should use piano pieces and songs by Tchaikovsky as source material for the new ballet. Only later did Stravinsky begin to consider the subject of the ballet and the fairy-tale ballets of Tchaikovsky led Stravinsky to the magical stories of the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen.

Stravinsky settled on Andersen's tale *The Ice Maiden* (1861), which he changed only slightly for the ballet scenario. The first scene (The Lullaby in the Storm) tells of a mother and her child caught in a storm. The mother is separated from her infant son, and he is carried to the Fairy (the title character), who kisses him on the forehead and leaves. The kiss imparts special powers to the infant, which enable him to survive. Villagers appear and, although the mother has been lost in the storm, find the child alive. The music for the first scene features snippets from several Tchaikovsky pieces, but these are woven together so skillfully by Stravinsky that they meld together seamlessly. Most of the melodic and harmonic material is taken directly from Tchaikovsky, but Stravinsky

composed the transitions and other bits in imitation of Tchaikovsky, with the end result that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

The second scene (A Village Fête) is a peasant dance, featuring a young man and his fiancée. As the dance ends, everyone departs except the young man, who remains alone on the stage. The Fairy appears, disguised as a gypsy woman, and dances for the young man. She slowly puts him under a kind of trance, telling him about his future and promising him great happiness. The music for the second scene brings some interesting developments – the idea of a peasant dance seems to have stirred echoes from Stravinsky's early ballets (particularly *Petrushka*). Pulsating rhythmic patterns and occasional biting dissonances alternate with Tchaikovsky waltzes throughout this enchanting scene.

The third scene (At the Mill) opens with the Fairy leading the young man to his fiancée. They arrive at the mill, where the girl is playing games and dancing with her friends. This starts as a pastoral movement, with lilting melodies and simple accompaniment – though the constant tremolos in the strings seem to portend something ominous. The dancing and games break the peaceful mood, and a lively *pas de deux* ensues. The Fairy disappears, and the girl goes with her friends to put on her wedding veil. The young man is left alone, but soon the Fairy reappears wearing the wedding veil – her arrival is announced in the music with a threatening rising figure in the low strings. He embraces her, thinking it is his bride, but suddenly the Fairy throws off the veil. This is the dramatic high point of the music, as he realizes his mistake, but is powerless against the Fairy. She takes him away to a faraway land where she will kiss him again, sealing his fate.

The final scene (The Lullaby of the Land Beyond Time and Place) features the Fairy's sprites in a slow dance of tranquility – the string tremolos seem to remind us of how the young man ended up here, instead of with his bride. The Fairy appears with the young man, and she kisses him to the sound of her haunting lullaby.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Stravinsky's *The Fairy's Kiss* March 17-18, 2000, with Roberto Abbado conducting.

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Stravinsky, *The Fairy's Kiss*, Neeme Jarvi conducting the Scottish National Orchestra, Chandos 8360.

Program notes written by Tim Sullivan, doctoral candidate in Music Theory at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.