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Stravinsky in Los Angeles: Flight of The Firebird

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Hollywood Bowl performance of Firebird | Photo: Otto Rothschild Collection/The Music Center Archives.

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As 1940 began, Europe found itself sinking deeper into war. German forces pushed outward, claiming territory in other nations as part of their growing empire. It was clear nowhere in Europe would be free from the horrors of the war's violence. Igor Stravinsky, by then a lauded composer, found himself stymied in an attempt to make a living as his work fell under a formal Nazi ban, preventing new commissions from coming out of most of the continent.

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Philharmonic. Stravinsky, perhaps sensing the tremendous value of his participation in the Bowl's "Firebird," saw an opportunity in the invitation. He agreed, on the condition Bolm would sponsor citizenship for Stravinsky and his wife Vera, allowing them to make a permanent home safe from the conflict on the European continent.

Secure in the knowledge they'd be putting down roots in Los Angeles, the Stravinskys looked around town for a place to live. They made the rounds of Los Angeles's social circles, where Stravinsky's international celebrity gave them access to parts of the city reserved for the most famous of its residents. Over the course of some months, they found a charming one-story house in Beverly Hills, hobnobbed with everyone from the luminous Marlene Dietrich to gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, and even charmed the cantankerous Edward G. Robinson.

Left to right: Igor Stravinsky, Adolph Bolm and Nana Gollner. | Otto Rothschild

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ambience, the 18,000 audience members lit matches and held them overhead, giving the Bowl's seating area a moody, flickering glow that set the tone for the show.

With the successful Hollywood Bowl performance coming just days after the Stravinsky's initial citizenship review hearing, it was appropriate for the composer to establish himself in his new home with the piece that launched him to stardom 30 years earlier.

In 1909, Ballets Russes founder Serge Diaghilev sought out his first commission for his dance company, a new piece to be called "The Firebird." Though he initially arranged for this work to be completed by the composer Anatoly Lyadov, Lyadov's slow progress worried him and, just six months before the premiere, Diaghilev handed the project over to a 27-year-old Stravinsky, whose Scherzo fantastique and Fireworks impressed Diaghilev greatly.

Stravinsky was then a virtually unknown composer, but an upstart who demonstrated exceptional promise in the eyes of those who had encountered his work. The son of the principal bass in the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, the young Stravinsky grew up surrounded by music but only began his own studies with piano lessons at age nine. Stravinsky pursued a formal law degree following his primary education, more to please his parents than himself; ultimately, he had little interest in law and took private composition lessons on the side.

Fortunately for him, however, one of his classmates was Vladimir Rimsky-Korsakov, son of one of Russia's most beloved composers, and Stravinsky had occasion to meet the elder Rimsky-Korsakov on a family vacation in 1902. After hearing some of Stravinsky's work, Rimsky-Korsakov dissuaded him from entering the Saint Petersburg Conservatory where he taught, but instead

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Of the commission by Diaghilev, Stravinsky wrote in his autobiography, "It was highly flattering to be chosen from among the musicians of my generation," and he worked strenuously to complete the ballet by the deadline. By March of 1910, the short score was completed, with the orchestral score following just a month after.



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[Listening Guide: Stravinsky's The Firebird Suite](#) from [Philharmonia Orchestra](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The Firebird premiered at the Paris Opera House on June 25 of that year and received rave reviews from the very beginning. The dancers of the Ballets Russes were only in their second year of performance together, adding to the awe and sense of triumph from the audience. "I recall that on the first night, Debussy came on stage and complimented me on my score," Mr. Stravinsky wrote of the event. "That was the beginning of friendly relations [lasting] to the end of his life."

The Philharmonia Orchestra is a leading orchestra in the world, performing at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and the Royal Albert Hall.

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Although Stravinsky would go on to enjoy tremendous success with *The Firebird*, he went immediately back to work after its premiere, not content to rest on his laurels. Stravinsky loathed the idea of sitting still artistically and challenged himself throughout his career to keep his sound new. While this flummoxed some critics who felt his work lacked consistent focus, the ongoing process of artistic self-renewal was at Stravinsky's core, ultimately setting the tone for the composition of *The Firebird* and the great pieces that followed it.

Even as Europe recovered from the ravages of the Second World War, the Stravinskys opted to keep Los Angeles as their home base. They traveled often, launching a series of international excursions in support of his work, and sustained the hectic schedule for most of the rest of their lives. By the late 1950s, the pair were traveling so frequently they found themselves touching down in Los Angeles for only a few days before they jetted off to another place, often for quite extended periods of time.

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Esa-Pekka Salonen at rehearsals at the Bolm studios | Otto Rothschild Collection/The Music Center Archives.

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Of all the places he called home, Stravinsky remained committed to Los Angeles the longest, spending nearly three decades of his life here. He composed his final work here, a setting of Mrs. Stravinsky's favorite poem, "The Owl and the Pussy-cat." Perhaps he stayed because he sensed the city's spirit of renewal suited his own. Like Stravinsky, Los Angeles will always reinvent itself.

The Colburn Orchestra performs The Firebird with guest conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen at Walt Disney Concert Hall on April 24.

Learn more about Igor Stravinsky's life, work, and legacy by reading books contributing to this article:

Stravinsky, Igor. Stravinsky: An Autobiography. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936.

Taruskin, Richard. Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Words through Marva. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Walsh, Stephen. Stravinsky: The Second Exile: France and America, 1934-1971. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Wenborn, Neil. Stravinsky. New York: Omnibus Press, 1999.

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