

Firebird, City Center, New York – review

By Apollinaire Scherr

A performance for children, featuring a puppet ‘Firebird’, with plenty for adults to admire



‘Firebird’

©Deborah Grosmark

Yet another reason to never grow up (if you live in New York, anyway): the extraordinary performances for children here.

The Little Orchestra resembles Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts of the 1960s except for very young people – six and up officially, though no one was checking. Besides the suspiciously tiny kiddies clamped to their mothers’ sides this weekend, I spied a scatter of unaccompanied adults.

Sign up now



FirstFT is our new essential daily email briefing of the best stories from across the web

The main attraction of the all-Russian concert was a Bunraku-style puppet *Firebird*, which the conductor and ebullient MC David Alan Miller built up to with a bright medley of tunes that encapsulated Stravinsky’s Russian influences. The not especially little orchestra – in full view onstage, with instruments gleaming – romped through enough Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov to leave us primed to hear the folk elements, the imagism and lyrical beauty in the *Firebird* score – and see them in the dancing puppets and puppeteers.

The changes that the director and puppet designer Chris Green has wrought on the original, 1910 libretto sit well with a modern audience more sympathetic to animal rights than royal prerogative. But it’s the dreamlike music, rather than an itch to update, that drives this adaptation. The firebird, a beaky head attached to two streams of diaphanous golden cloth, whirled in the wind to her looping, trilling melody. She

was as immaterial as light. Her evil opposite, the immortal wizard Kaschei, was weightless too, but from being hollow at heart. Ivan and his princess-wife possessed a touching herky-jerkiness – all knee and hand and elbow and chin – that conveyed reverence for custom and passion for each other.

It makes sense that puppets, with their animistic roots, suit Stravinsky in mystical mode, but surprisingly the looming puppeteers enhanced the magic. With the help of choreographer David Neumann, their human heft – three of them for every puppet half their size – brought out their charges' precious otherworldliness. And as dance chorus they thickened the prevailing mood. When Kaschei's soul exploded, they crouched down to provide a path home for Ivan, his mission accomplished, but also to mourn, hands shielding eyes: death is sad even when the dead were bad. And they turned the garden enchanted – forming a human tree, each hand sprouting a golden leaf.



littleorchestra.org

Content recommended for you

Related articles

Alibaba seeks \$8bn from maiden bond sale	A touch of evil tarnishes reforms in Mexico
Labour leader Miliband turns to Nietzsche	Forex rigging probes by the DoJ and EC target at least 12 banks
Financial task force warns on banks' approach to de-risking	Regulation: Banks count the risks and rewards
Mind Candy reveals scale of its struggle to shift to mobile	Net neutrality debate raises big questions for Comcast's big deal
Labour calls for review of pension reforms	A Midsummer Night's Dream (As You Like It), Barbican, London – review

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/0776ed68-55bf-11e3-96f5-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2014** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.