Igor Stravinsky, one of the most famous Russian composers of the 20th century, spent less than 30 years living in his home country. Having already moved to Montreux in 1910, he was effectively stranded in Switzerland (where he routinely wintered) upon the outbreak of World War I. The Russian Revolution of October 1917 extinguished any hope of returning to his homeland. In 1920, Stravinsky permanently relocated his family to France, but, by the mid-1930s, the looming presence of Nazism throughout Europe prompted yet another move, this time to the United States. He became an American citizen in 1946 and lived the rest of his life in the United States, ultimately dying in his newly-purchased Manhattan apartment at 920 Fifth Avenue. 

In 1906, he married his cousin, Katya (Katerina) Nossenko, and, struggling to overcome taboos against marriage between first cousins, Igor lied about their familial relationship to the village priest who married them. Sergei Diaghilev, a friend, invited Stravinsky to compose a new ballet for the Ballets Russes. The result, The Firebird, turned Stravinsky into a household name upon the Paris premiere in 1910.

The Ballets Russes, based in Paris, was a cross-cultural collaboration. Created by Russian-born Sergei Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes, was complemented by the music of Stravinsky, the set designs of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse and the costumes of Coco Chanel, representing an increasingly international world of art that arose in the 20th century. 

Fyodor Stravinsky, achieved significant acclaim in the late 1800s in Russia for his magnificent voice and powerful stage presence. Igor grew up attending his father's performances and meeting all the stars of the music scene in St. Petersburg. Despite an early interest in music, Igor's parents insisted he study law. At the University of Saint Petersburg, Stravinsky befriended his classmate, Vladimir Rimsky-Korsakov, whose father, Nikolai, was a celebrated composer. Igor sought out Rimsky-Korsakov for private composition lessons, but it was only upon the death of his father in 1902 that the young composer was able to pursue his chosen artistic career.

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The instant acclaim Stravinsky received from *The Firebird* did not assure future success: the riots accompanying the first performance of his new ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, on May 29, 1913 were terrifying. Problems were evident during rehearsals: dancers had difficulty understanding new steps that turned their feet in (instead of out), and the orchestra was not much better, struggling through a complex score. Word had gotten out that the new ballet was “difficult,” but none could have anticipated the violent audience response to the premier. People began hissing, then booing, then shouting, then screaming and fighting. Stravinsky fled backstage to find Nijinsky (the choreographer) standing on a chair, trying to shout the beats to the dancers. The theater manager went onstage between the first and second movements to urge calm, to no avail. The police had to be called. The next night was a bit better – at least the music could be heard – but Stravinsky was not in the audience. He had been admitted to the hospital with severe abdominal pains, ultimately diagnosed as typhoid.

As Stravinsky recovered from his illness, his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis, requiring extensive and costly treatments. By this time, World War I isolated the Stravinskys from their family in Russia and, with the Bolshevik takeover, Stravinsky moved his family to southern France. Igor spent most of his time in Paris, where he fell in love with a Russian émigré, Vera Sudeykin. The fact that Vera was also married was not seen as an impediment by the infatuated couple, and from that time forward, Stravinsky spent half of each year with Katya and the children, and the other half with Vera, either in Paris or on tour. When Stravinsky’s daughter, Milène, contracted tuberculosis, mother and daughter spent months in a sanitorium. Both grew increasingly frail, and died within four months of one another in November 1938 and February 1939.

The death of Stravinsky’s mother in June of 1939 left the composer overwhelmed by loss. When he was invited to deliver a series of lectures at Harvard, Igor and Vera left for Boston, where the city embraced them. They were married in Bedford, MA on March 9, 1940: as she was still married, Vera lied to the judge, insisting she had divorced her first husband in 1920. In 1944, at the height of World War II, the Boston Symphony mounted a concert for television. As a show of devotion to his new home, Stravinsky decided to rewrite the “Star-Spangled Banner” for the concert, to make it sound “more democratic.” His efforts backfired: BSO fans hated it, the media circulated stories of his disrespect for the anthem, and Boston Police Commissioner Thomas Sullivan nearly arrested him, claiming that Massachusetts law prohibited the rearranging of the anthem. Stravinsky hastily opted for a traditional version for his next concert.

Vera and Igor remained in the United States, becoming American citizens in 1946, and Igor went on to enjoy enormous success with operas such as *The Rake’s Progress* in 1951. Upon Stravinsky’s death in 1971 at the age of 88, Pierre Boulez, named as the new Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, offered a fitting tribute: “Something radically new, even foreign to Western tradition, had to be found for music to survive and to enter our contemporary era. The glory of Stravinsky was to have belonged to this extremely gifted generation and to be one of the most creative of them all.”
Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Stravinsky’s *Jeu de Cartes*, by the London Symphony conducted by Claudio Abbado: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj4bdWzTMck](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj4bdWzTMck)

For a truly unique experience, check out this recording of Stravinsky’s Symphony in Three Movements, and try following along with the score! [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB-NzpYwC3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB-NzpYwC3Y)

See the entirety of *Swan Lake*, performed by the Kirov Ballet, with the Kirov Orchestra performing the glorious music of Tchaikovsky: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJoB7y6Ncs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJoB7y6Ncs)

And for extra fun:

Honor the 100th birthday of Leonard Bernstein by watching him conduct Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9M2oTHa3GM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9M2oTHa3GM)

View a brief clip of the San Francisco Ballet performing Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, which caused riots at its 1913 premiere: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPpq44uEyXo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPpq44uEyXo)

Enjoy another brief clip of the San Francisco Ballet performing *The Firebird*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3G2kitXwSY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3G2kitXwSY)

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Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program?

Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Stravinsky’s clever, complex and tuneful *Jeu de Cartes* is ideally interpreted by Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra (DG); every strand of the music is clearly audible, yet the long line is also preserved.

The same composer’s magnificent Symphony in Three Movements, one of his most powerful yet melodic works, is beautifully interpreted by that master of twentieth century music, Michael Gielen, with the SWR Symphony Orchestra (HANSSLER); the digital sound is absolutely stunning.

The soaring ballet *Swan Lake* is one of Tchaikovsky’s greatest masterpieces, and who better to perform it than Charles Dutoit with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, with the typical resplendent sound (DECCA).