

Sunday Matinee

THE FIREBIRD

Sunday, January 18, 2026 @ 3 p.m.

Alexander Shelley, conductor
Fowler Amusement, visuals
Pacific Symphony

STRAVINSKY *The Firebird*

- Introduction
- Kastchei's Enchanted Garden
- The Firebird Enters, Pursued by Ivan Tsarevich
- The Firebird's Dance
- Ivan Tsarevich Captures the Firebird
- The Firebird Begs to be Released
- Entrance of the Thirteen Enchanted Princesses
- The Princesses Play with the Golden Apples (Scherzo)
- Ivan Tsarevich Appears
- The Princesses' Khorovod (Round Dance)
- Daybreak
- Ivan Tsarevich Enters Kastchei's Palace
- Entrance of Kastchei the Immortal
- Dialogue between Kastchei and Ivan Tsarevich
- The Princesses Plead for Mercy
- The Firebird Enters
- Dance of Kastchei's Retinue under the Firebird's Magic Spell
- Infernal Dance of Kastchei and His Subjects
- The Firebird's Lullaby
- Kastchei Awakens
- Kastchei's Death
- Kastchei's Spell Is Broken

Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall



ARTISTIC AND MUSIC DIRECTOR DESIGNATE



One of the foremost conductors of his generation, Alexander Shelley is “a natural communicator, both on and off the podium” (*The Daily Telegraph*). A passionate and articulate advocate for the role of music in society, Shelley has spearheaded multiple award-winning and ground-breaking projects,

unlocking creativity in the next generation and bringing symphonic music to new audiences.

With a conducting technique described as “immaculate, everything crystal clear” (*Yorkshire Post*), and with a “precision, distinction and beauty of gesture not seen since Lorin Maazel” (*Le Devoir*), Shelley is known for the integrity of his interpretations and for his creative programming, having led over 50 major world premieres, highly praised cycles of Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms symphonies, and operas, ballets, and multimedia productions.

Shelley appears regularly across six continents with the world’s finest soloists, including Emanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Renée Fleming, Hilary Hahn, Thomas Hampson, Daniel Hope, Lang Lang, and Itzhak Perlman. He is a regular guest with renowned orchestras of Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australasia, including Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; the Helsinki, Hong Kong, Luxembourg, Malaysian, Oslo, Rotterdam, and Stockholm philharmonic orchestras; and the São Paulo, Houston, Seattle, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Montreal, Toronto, Munich, Singapore, Melbourne, Sydney, and New Zealand symphony orchestras.

In 2024, Shelley was appointed to become Pacific Symphony’s third artistic leader, taking the title of Artistic and Music Director, beginning in the 2026–27 season. He is serving as Artistic and Music Director Designate during 2025–26. The 2025–26 season marks Shelley’s 11th and final as Music Director of Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO). He has recently been appointed Principal Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra Ireland, beginning in 2026–27; this season, he assumes the position of Principal Conductor Designate, leading the orchestra at the National Concert Hall, Dublin. Since the 2024–25 season, Shelley has been the Artistic and Music Director of Artis–Naples, in Florida, where he provides artistic leadership for the Naples Philharmonic and oversees the entire multidisciplinary arts organization. He has also served as Principal Associate Conductor of London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra since 2015.

Highlights of Shelley’s 2025–26 season with Pacific Symphony include concerts with Pablo Sainz-Villegas, performing Arturo Márquez’s guitar concerto *Mystical and Profane*; pianist Gabriela Montero, performing her “Latin Concerto”; violinist

Aubree Oliverson, performing Korngold’s Violin Concerto; and a special program for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the U.S., with Conrad Tao performing Gershwin’s Piano Concerto.

To celebrate his 11-year tenure at NACO, Shelley leads the orchestra in a semi-staged production of *Tosca*, featuring soprano Ailyn Pérez; Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5, “Emperor,” with Lang Lang; Joshua Bell’s *The Elements*, commissioned from five of today’s leading American composers; Gershwin’s Piano Concerto, with Hélène Grimaud; a Brahms and Schumann program featuring violinist James Ehnes; and the orchestra’s first-ever performances of Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, “Resurrection.”

With the Naples Philharmonic, season highlights include *African Queens*, a powerful work for soprano and orchestra by seven American composers, sung by soprano Karen Slack; *Perú Negro*, by Jimmy López, the composer’s homage to his Afro-Peruvian heritage; the world premiere of a newly commissioned work by Raven Chacon, the first Native American to win a Pulitzer Prize for Music (2022); and Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

Additional highlights this season include Shelley’s debut with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, with James Ehnes giving the U.K. premiere of James Newton Howard’s Violin Concerto No. 2. He also debuts with the Dortmunder Philharmoniker, with David Fray performing Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor.

During his tenure at NACO, Shelley’s programming has been credited for turning the orchestra “almost overnight... into one of the more audacious orchestras in North America” (*Macleans*). Together they have undertaken major tours of Canada, Europe, and to Carnegie Hall. In 2025, they embarked on a monumental tour, returning to Japan for the first time in 40 years and making their Republic of Korea debut. *Poema: Ad Astra*, the first volume of a NACO recording project pairing Strauss tone poems with contemporary works, was released in January 2025; the second volume is scheduled for release in fall 2025.

Shelley’s operatic engagements have included productions with the Royal Danish Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, and Opéra National de Montpellier. His eight-year tenure as Chief Conductor of the Nürnberger Symphoniker, which concluded in 2017, was hailed as a golden era for the orchestra.

Born in London to concert pianists, Shelley studied cello and conducting in Germany and gained widespread attention when he was unanimously awarded first prize at the 2005 Leeds Conductors Competition, with the press describing him as “the most exciting and gifted young conductor to have taken this highly prestigious award.”

Igor Stravinsky

Born: Jun. 16, 1882 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971 in New York, NY

Suite from *The Firebird*



Composed: 1910

Premiered: Jun. 25, 1910 at the Opéra de Paris, conducted by Gabriel Pierné.

Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: (1945 Version) Dec. 4, 2021, in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall with Markus Stenz conducting.

Instrumentation: Four flutes including piccolo, four oboes including English horn, four clarinets including bass clarinet and e-flat clarinet, four bassoons including contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, three harps, celesta, piano, three trumpet, two tenor Wagner tuba, two bass wagner tuba, and strings.

Approximate duration: 57 minutes.

Four years before *The Rite of Spring* made Stravinsky an international celebrity, the success of his ballet score for *The Firebird* secured his future as a composer. Though the commission came from Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russe in 1908, it could not have happened without Stravinsky's teacher, mentor and friend, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Stravinsky stayed with Rimsky-Korsakov and his family in Heidelberg in the summer of 1902, and it was the eminent composer's suggestion that Stravinsky not enter the conservatory in Saint Petersburg, but rather take private lessons in composition. With the death of Stravinsky's father that year, the relationship with Rimsky-Korsakov grew closer, and in 1905 he began taking lessons with the master twice each week, continuing until Rimsky-Korsakov's death in 1908.

Stravinsky made every musical influence his own, but in early compositions such as the *Scherzo fantastique* and *Feu d'artifice* his debt to his mentor is especially evident. At first these early works were hardly performed, but by chance, the sparkling, elegant *Feu d'artifice* ("Fireworks") came to the attention of the producer-choreographer Sergei Diaghilev, director of the prestigious Ballets Russe. Diaghilev wanted a modern, distinctively Russian voice for a new ballet,

The Firebird, and he thrived on risk. He commissioned the unknown Stravinsky, and the result was a hit for both artists.

In 1908, before he began work on *The Firebird*, there was little external evidence of Stravinsky's potential to become one of the giants of Western music. He was 26 and was still greatly influenced by Rimsky-Korsakov's iridescent harmonies and traditional virtuosity. Earlier, without a major commission, Stravinsky had accepted a suggestion from Rimsky for an opera based on an enchanting tale from Hans Christian Andersen, *Le Rossignol*. But after a year's work, the serendipitous commission for *The Firebird* prompted him to set *Le Rossignol* aside.

Suddenly, Stravinsky was in a hothouse of international talent. The Ballets Russe's dancers included Vaslav Nijinsky and Bronislava Nijinska, its settings and costumes were designed by such artists as Pablo Picasso and Leon Bakst, and its productions embodied all the artistic richness and ferment of Paris in the Art Deco era preceding World War I. With characteristic boldness, Diaghilev had given Stravinsky this assignment based on a single hearing of a rather slender score; its success made the composer's reputation overnight. It was the beginning of a transformative musical journey that continued with *Petrushka* and the epoch-making *The Rite of Spring*. In less than five years, this astounding collaboration caused sophisticated Parisians to riot at the sound of a new and revolutionary kind of music far beyond anything Rimsky-Korsakov imagined.

"Shimmering" is a word often used to describe the ethereal beauty of Stravinsky's score for *The Firebird*. But when balletomanes first encountered it in 1909, both the look and the sound of this work had the power to shock. Where 19th-century ballets were dominated by elegance and picturesque delicacy on stage and in the pit, *The Firebird* substituted a story rooted in folk traditions that seemed primitive by comparison, even including human sacrifice. The music booms with emphatic percussion and is not afraid of dissonance. Yet it also shines with melodies that are almost magical, capturing the sense of human awe in the midst of nature's eternal vastness. In his next two ballets, Stravinsky would go even further in combining sophisticated musical craft with folk elements that seemed shockingly primitive to his contemporary listeners.

"For me, the most striking effect in *The Firebird* was the natural-harmonic string glissando near the beginning, which the bass chord touches off like a Catherine wheel," Stravinsky wrote. "I was delighted to have discovered this, and I remember my excitement in demonstrating it to Rimsky's violinist and cellist sons." The equally innovative *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* were soon to follow.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and has written numerous articles for magazines and newspapers in the U.S. and U.K. and hundreds of program notes for orchestras and opera companies. Operahound.com