

Artsource

*The Music Center's Study Guide
to the Performing Arts*

TRADITIONAL

CLASSICAL

CONTEMPORARY

EXPERIMENTAL

MULTI-MEDIA

ARTISTIC PROCESSES

1. CREATING (Cr)

2. PERFORMING, PRESENTING, PRODUCING (Pr)

3. RESPONDING (Re)

4. CONNECTING (Cn)

TRANSFORMATION

ENDURING
VALUESFREEDOM &
OPPRESSIONTHE POWER
OF NATURETHE HUMAN
FAMILY

Title of Work:

Firebird, with Dance Theatre of Harlem, premier 1982
Firebird Suite, 1945 version

Creators:

Artistic Director: Arthur Mitchell (1934 - 2018)
Composer: Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
Choreographer: John Taras (1919-2004)
Set and Costumes: Geoffrey Holder (1930 - 2014)

Background Information:

As an African American, Arthur Mitchell grew up in a loving, hard-working, church-going family; although he earned money by working many jobs, he realized that he wanted something more in life. One evening at a junior high school dance, a teacher observed that he had a special gift and encouraged him to audition for the New York City High School of the Performing Arts. Since he had no formal dance training, he learned a Fred Astaire song-and-dance number which he performed in a rented suit and top hat. He delighted the judges, but found the first year as a dance student very difficult since he lacked the skills to succeed in modern and tap dance. Finally, he was told he would never become a dancer. This greatly angered Arthur and made him determined to succeed. He graduated, winning the highest dance award and a scholarship to study modern dance. Instead, he accepted an offer by Lincoln Kirstein to study classical dance at the School of American Ballet. There, he worked with legendary choreographer George Balanchine, who told him that as a black dancer he would have to be twice as good as a white one. Soon his sense of style, freedom and elegance earned him star status as the only black male dancer with the New York City Ballet. In the ten years that followed, Mr. Mitchell proved that he could be judged by his dancing and not his color. On the day that Martin Luther King Jr. was

assassinated, Mitchell made the decision to make this dream possible for other African American dancers by establishing an all-black classical ballet company. In partnership with his teacher and friend, Karel Shook, he started a school in an empty Harlem garage. This evolved into the internationally acclaimed company - Dance Theatre of Harlem.

About the Artwork:

The *Firebird* score, by Igor Stravinsky, was based on an old Russian folk tale. It was commissioned by Serge Diaghilev, artistic director, impresario and manager of the Ballets Russes. Originally choreographed by Michel Fokine, it was first performed in 1910. Arthur Mitchell wanted to include *Firebird* in his repertory and commissioned John Taras to revise it choreographically and Geoffrey Holder to design sets and costumes which fit the style of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The demanding role of the firebird was originally danced by Stephanie Dabney and the Young Man by Donald Williams. This special work has become the 'signature piece' for Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Creative Process of the Artist or Culture:

Arthur Mitchell seeks to include a wide spectrum of classical ballets which are often re-designed for ethnic or modern settings. *Firebird* was altered to reflect a Haitian jungle setting with costumes suggesting Gauguin's Tahitian paintings.



Photo: NVLP

*"I am a fighter, and I
fight with my art."*
Arthur Mitchell



Discussion Questions:

After the video has been viewed:

- How did Arthur Mitchell overcome his failure in his first year of dance at the High School of Performing Arts? What failure have you overcome?
- Discuss the statement, “If you want to succeed, you will have to be twice as good as a white dancer.”
- What inspired Mr. Mitchell to give up his own career as a dancer to help other African Americans?
- Describe the traits of Mr. Mitchell’s character which you think have been important to his success.

Summary of the Firebird Dance:

The *Firebird* score, written by Igor Stravinsky for a ballet, is based on an old Russian folk tale. John Taras, the choreographer selected by Mr. Mitchell, changed the story so that it was more universal in concept and less culturally Russian. In his version of the story, a handsome young man loses his way in a dark, enchanted forest. A mystical Firebird flutters into sight, her brilliant plumes sparkling like fire as she preens and dances alone in the woods. Dazzled by her beauty, the man captures her. The frightened bird struggles to escape. Realizing that such beauty can never be possessed, the young man releases her and the Firebird rewards his kindness with a magic feather. She flies happily away as the man continues through the strange, enchanted wood. He comes upon a lovely princess and maidens dancing in the forest. The man and the princess fall in love despite the maidens’ warnings. The princess and her maidens are captives of an evil wizard whose fierce monster-insects guard his kingdom against all intruders. The man fights the creatures, but they are too strong for him to overcome alone. Desperate, he waves the magic feather. Instantly the Firebird appears. She dispels the evil. Peace and freedom return to the land. The ballet ends with a happy marriage between the Young Man and the Princess as the Firebird triumphantly ascends.

Multidisciplinary Options

- Arthur Mitchell was compelled by the ideals of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement to find a way to contribute something of value to the progress of African Americans. Thinking of the title of Martin Luther King’s speech, *I Have a Dream*, write down your own dream for an ideal future for mankind and the role

• **Note:** source material for story from the video, Kennedy Center Tonight, Stravinsky’s *Firebird* by the Dance Theatre of Harlem, WQED, Pittsburgh.

you might play in achieving this. You can do this in the form of a poem, speech or drawing.

Audio-Visual Materials:

- Photo on page 1 courtesy of National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP) and U.S. Library of Congress.
- Arthur Mitchell video footage courtesy of The National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP), www.visionaryproject.org, and the U.S. Library of Congress.
- For extended Arthur Mitchell video interview with NVLP, please visit: www.visionaryproject.org/mitchellarthur

Additional References:

- *Free At Last*, selected speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on audio recording. Motown. 1968.
- *The Firebird*, audio, narrated by Natalia Makarova. Music of Igor Stravinsky played by the Seattle Symphony. Delos International, Inc., CA 90038. 1991.

Sample Experiences:

LEVEL I

- Read the summary of *Firebird*. Identify the different characters and describe how they would dance their parts. Explore these ideas in movement.
- * • The Firebird is a mythical creature with magical powers. Create other mythical creatures which combine the characteristics of a specific animal with an element from nature, such as ice, fire, thunder, rain, etc.

LEVEL II

- Get the audio cassette of *The Firebird* and listen to the story told to music. Have the students imagine the story being danced as they listen. Discuss what they saw.
- * • Use books, poems and photos to learn about birds. Think of the specific qualities and actions of each. Select several and write a cinquain poem about each. Use the poems as structures for dances about birds.

LEVEL III

- Study the speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. In small groups, have students explore and plan a way to interpret its words and meaning through dance movement.
- * • Discuss the story and outline the scenes. Divide into small groups and have each group mime-dance their part of the ballet. Use music if available.

MYTHICAL CREATURES

THE POWER OF NATURE AND TRANSFORMATION

LEVEL I Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

In different cultures throughout history, people have created mythical creatures which appear in folk tales, dances, sculptures and drawings. Often these creatures have magical or supernatural powers. This is the case of the Firebird, which has a combined name of an animal and a natural element. This lesson is all about creating mythical creatures which have the traits of a specific animal combined with an element from nature. These mythical creatures can be well understood when a student interprets them through dance movement.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Create mythical creatures which they interpret in dance. (Creating & Performing)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (Responding & Connecting)



MATERIALS:

- Music (optional).
- Drum and assortment of percussion instruments to accompany the movement.

PROGRESSION:

- Tell the story of the *Firebird*. Afterwards discuss the fact that the Firebird is a magical character in the story and how its name reflects certain characteristics. (It dazzles.)
- Discuss the ‘power’ that each of us associates with elements of nature and animals (e.g., thunder and lightning, tigers and elephants, etc.).
- Ask the students how they would use their bodies to show a firebird. First have them take the shape of the bird, showing two to three variations. Then discuss whether the bird would be strong or weak, fast or slow, large or small, sharp or smooth, direct or indirect. After they have discussed these ideas (each will have their own interpretation) let a few students at a time show their poses or dance their version of the *Firebird*.
- Discuss other birds and fish that have names reflecting qualities or elements of nature. Examples might include: Thunderbird, Cloudfish, Snowbird, Tigerfish, Sunfish, Rainbird, Zebrabird, Rainbowfish.

- Explore a few of the creatures above and have the students decide how they will show the differences in the way they move to describe each one. For example, explore the way they would dance a Thunderbird and contrast it with a Snowbird. The first might be strong and bold and the second might be light and delicate. How would they show these differences in movement?
- Staying within the categories of birds and fish, have the students create names which combine two ideas. When all the ideas are listed on the board, select a few for small groups of students to improvise or have several students each pick a mythical creature of their choice to portray in movement. It works best when they start and end with a specific shape.
- Discuss the audience response to the performances. Ask them questions which direct their attention to why students were successful in showing the idea.

EXTENSIONS:

- Create a collage featuring an imaginary creature. Cut or tear magazine pictures into body parts; paste them into an overlapping collage, connecting the pieces to create an imaginary animal in motion. Add details with markers or paint.
- Expand this idea to include other animals, such as Lightning snake, Ice turtle, Tree elephants, Shadow cats, etc.
- As a class, select one of the characters as a central figure in a folk tale. Build a story around this character. Use the tools of WHO, WHERE, WHAT, WHEN, WHY AND HOW. Create a situation which has a conflict and resolution and involves the special powers of the selected character.

VOCABULARY: improvisation, mythical creature

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe your favorite part of the *Firebird* story.

DISCUSS: Discuss how your group decided to portray the mythical creature they selected and why.

ANALYZE: Discuss whether or not you felt your group was successful in conveying your mythical creature using shapes and motion. Analyze what really worked and what you could do to make it better.

CONNECT: Discuss other animals or creatures you would be interested in showing through dance. What characteristics would you show? (size, shape, rhythm, actions, etc.)

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking

WINGED POEMS

THE POWER OF NATURE

LEVEL II Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

Birds are quite an interesting species to study. They appear as messengers or magical creatures in stories which are found in many cultures. Painters, dancers and playwrights have woven them into their art in a variety of ways. The *Firebird* is the central character in this Russian folk tale and inspired Igor Stravinsky to compose a musical score for a ballet. In this ballet, the Firebird is a mythical creature with magical powers, but there are many birds in nature which are decorated in exotic ways and which have abilities that could easily make them the central character of a ballet.

This lesson is about observing birds and seeing their unique features and physical qualities. Exploring these ideas in movement can be a delightful way to develop an affinity with birds and know something about their essence.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Discuss selected bird groups and convey some of the unique qualities of each through movement. (**Connecting & Creating**)
- Identify and abstract qualities found in nature and express them through movement. (**Connecting & Creating**)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (**Responding & Connecting**)

MATERIALS:

- Pictures, photos, film and videos of birds.
- Sample cinquain poems of birds (optional).

PROGRESSION:

• Tell the story of the *Firebird*. Afterwards discuss the characteristics of the bird and how the students would describe her. Use this as a point of departure for introducing the subject of birds. Display books or photos of birds; show a few specific birds to the class. Discuss each one and have the class call out words which describe the shape, color and special characteristics (long beak, short legs, colorful head feathers, etc.). Then write down the name of a specific bird and list the following:

- actions done by each bird
- where the bird lives (habitat)
- what the bird does or eats



- Select one of the following cinquain poems and read it to the class. Each poem gives two descriptive words, tells where the bird goes, what it does, and ends with a simile saying something about its unique character.

Cinquain Poetry Format
 Noun
 Two adjectives
 Three words that tell where
 Four doing words
 One word noun

EAGLE
SNATCHING, SOARING
CRAGGY MOUNTAIN LEDGES
PROUDLY RULING AIR SPACES
SKYDIVER

HUMMINGBIRD
QUICK, LIGHT
FLOWER TO FLOWER
SIPPING, DARTING, HOVERING, FLITTING
TINKERBELL

SEAGULL
SQUABBLING, SWOOPING
FLOATING ON AIR
SHORELINE CLEAN-UP CREW
SCAVENGERS

FLAMINGOS
GRACEFUL, BALANCING
SHALLOW, STILL WATERS
WALKING, WADING, WATCHING, SHIFTING
STATUES

SANDPIPERS
SCURRYING, SCANNING
EBB AND FLOW
PLAYING WITH THE WAVES
SANDSKIMMERS

PEACOCK
STRUTTING, BOLD
ELEGANT GARDEN DECORATIONS
SPREADING THEIR TAIL FEATHERS
FANS



Poetry: Susan, Devon and Paul Tracey

- Discuss the words in each poem and have the students explore ways to show the word images in motion. This might be a shape or an action. Encourage the students to vary each idea by changing their level, finding more than one shape or action to show the same idea, changing their direction, speed or part of the body used.
- Have a few students at a time show their improvisations. Instruct the class to comment on how the movers developed their idea. Ask such questions as:
 - Who used a change of level?
 - Did any of the movers stay in one spot? Who made their movement travel? How?
 - What other ways did the movers find to 'paint' a picture of their bird? What did you especially enjoy? Why?
 - What suggestions do you have for the next group? Be specific.

EXTENSIONS:

- Have the class select one of the birds they danced to draw or paint. Ask them to think of the shape and characteristics, as well as the habitat. In their painting or drawing, have students explore ways to fill shapes with textures and patterns.
- Give the form of cinquain poetry to the students. Have them select a bird of their choice and write a poem in this style either as a class, in small groups or individually. Give them the opportunity to share their poems and to create a dance to accompany the poem.

VOCABULARY: improvisation, level, direction, cinquain poetry

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe in your own words the bird that you selected to dance.

DISCUSS: Discuss what you most enjoyed about creating a dance about a specific bird. What did you find the most challenging?

ANALYZE: Discuss two of the birds that were danced and analyze the main differences between the way they were portrayed. (i.e. How did each bird use space? What kind of actions did each do?)

CONNECT: How could you use your skills and knowledge to make up a dance about other animals?

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking

DANCE A CLASSIC STORY

TRANSFORMATION, FREEDOM & OPPRESSION, ENDURING VALUES

LEVEL III Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

Many famous ballets are based on well-loved folk tales. Examples of this include *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *Cinderella* and *Firebird*. *The Firebird* is an old Russian folk tale, of which there are many versions. These story ballets have specific character roles which are danced by the *premier* dancers (soloists) and also group roles which are danced by the *Corps de Ballet*. Sometimes gesture and mime are also used to move the story line along. In these ballets, the magical or evil character dancers are often dressed in masks and elaborate costumes. The scenery, music, lighting and costumes are all important aspects of these ballets, in addition to the highly technical and dramatic dancing.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Know a version of *The Firebird* folk tale and organize the story into scenes which can be danced. (**Responding & Connecting**)
- Dance the role of different characters in a story. (**Creating & Performing**)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (**Responding & Connecting**)



MATERIALS:

- The *Firebird* music by Igor Stravinsky (optional, but highly recommended).

PROGRESSION: (This can take several sessions to accomplish.)

- Tell the story of *Firebird* on page two of the unit.
- Discuss the idea that a story can be divided into scenes and developed into a ballet. Ask if there are students who have seen any story ballets. Which ones? How did they identify the different characters? How did the movement of the dancers convey the story ideas? What else can they share about the ballets?
- Make a list of the characters in *Firebird* (See the summary of the ballet). Write down adjectives which describe each character, as well as actions each character would do.

- Give everyone an opportunity to explore how the main characters would express themselves in dance movement. Begin with postures and shapes each character might take. For example, explore sitting shapes, standing shapes. What emotion would motivate each character?

- Ask the class to explore body shapes which represent the *Firebird*. Think of and explore movement words which describe the actions of the Firebird. Repeat this process with *Princess of Unreal Beauty* and the *Young Man*. Allow everyone to try these parts. Ask them to select three actions which will capture the character. In the case of the *Beautiful Maidens*, they might run through the spaces of the trees, dance in a follow-the-leader fashion, or playfully toss fruit from the trees back and forth to each other. The Young Man might walk through the forest, looking in different directions, spot the Firebird and hide while he observes it, then quietly sneak close and quickly capture the bird.

- Working in groups, ask the students to use their bodies to create an enchanted forest. Discuss the idea of trees, vines, flowers, rocks, etc., and have them create these shapes and arrange them as a garden. The open spaces between, as well as different levels and shapes of the objects, are important to consider. Share ideas and discuss what parts worked and what could be improved and how.



- Ask a few people to portray the *Prince of Evil* and others to dance the part of the *Creatures of Evil*. Ask the students to give action words to guide these explorations. It might be effective to have the monsters move in exaggerated, slow motion to more clearly portray their power or use actions such as flying or jumping. Also, have them try changing shapes in slow, exaggerated motion. Discuss the interpretations. Was the slow motion time effective? Try the role using a rhythmic, faster tempo. If you have the music, play the section of the monsters and see how the music affects the movements.

- When all of the main characters (premier dancers) have been explored in movement, select interested students to choreograph and dance these roles. If more than one student wants the part, have several dancers perform the main roles simultaneously. This works well if you have 3-4 action words which each is interpreting in his/her own way, i.e. walking, turning, reaching or a specific, choreographed phrase of motion.

- The following is an outline of the Dance Theatre of Harlem's version of *Firebird*:

- A Young Man goes on an adventure and finds himself in an enchanted forest.
- The Firebird appears and does a dance.
- The Young Man captures the Firebird.
- The bird struggles and the Young Man releases her.
- The Firebird gives the Young Man a magic feather for his kindness.
- The Young Man sees the Princess of Unreal Beauty and the beautiful maidens dancing in the forest.
- The Young Man and Princess fall in love, despite warnings from the maidens.
- The Prince of Evil and his giant Creatures appear and threaten the prince.
- The Young Man fights the Creatures but cannot overpower them alone.
- The Young Man waves the magic feather and the Firebird returns.
- The Firebird dispels the evil, then peace and freedom are again restored.

- The Young Man and the Princess of Unreal Beauty celebrate their wedding.
 - The Firebird flies triumphantly away.
- There are several parts to the story, but you can choose to improvise or choreograph only a few. Begin by showing the class a way to tackle the first scene.

Example: Discuss the enchanted forest/jungle and how it could be portrayed. Instead of scenery, ask several people to create trees, flowers and vines to establish the environment. The *Young Man* (or several Young Men) slowly enters the forest, choosing movements which convey feelings of wonder and mystery. He should travel along a specific path and explore possible ways to turn an ordinary walk into dance movement. Use the elements of dance (level, direction, size, energy, etc.) to accomplish this. On cue, students should slowly change their shapes within the forest environment.

- After the students have sketched out and improvised their plan, they should discuss it and give suggestions as to how to be more effective. Perhaps let other students try the same scene with a different interpretation.
- After the students get an idea of how to develop a scene into dance, you can continue working to explore other scenes, or divide the class into small groups to develop one of the scenes. If you have the music, use the portion which corresponds to the scene being interpreted.

EXTENSIONS:

- It is not important that the entire story be developed into dance. It is most important that students have an opportunity to interpret the different characters through dance movement. To do this, have the students work for simplicity in their movements and gestures. They should take time to abstract and exaggerate the gestures into dance movements. They should explore the possibilities of walking like the character, taking poses which the character would take, working with entrances and exits, playing with the energy qualities and timing of the character, etc. Give the students adequate time to explore these concepts so they will understand how to communicate through dance movement and learn how it differs from a play with words. They must also be given time to critique and edit their work.
- Make a 3-D model of the way you would envision the décor of the stage. Base your designs on a specific culture of your choice.

VOCABULARY: premier dancer, corps de ballet, choreograph, improvisation, gesture, phrase

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe the character you most enjoyed portraying.

ANALYZE: Discuss the main differences between the Young Man and the Prince of Evil.

CONNECT: Discuss other fairy tales that have common elements to the story of the *Firebird*. Identify the elements.

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking