

## Fonteyn's "Firebird"

By FERNAU HALL

**T**HE most important event in the English dance world for many years was the revival by the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the last Edinburgh Festival of the original production of "The Firebird," with Margot Fonteyn in the title role. She was rehearsed in the part by Karsavina (who created it for Fokine in 1910), and aroused the greatest enthusiasm in audiences; but her Firebird differed violently from the tender and beneficent creature made familiar in the last three decades by Danilova and others, and stirred up a passionate controversy. Since the Sadler's Wells Ballet will be bringing "The Firebird" to America this fall, Americans will soon be able to make up their own minds about Fonteyn's interpretation.

Of all the critics who watched the première of the revival last August, only Cyril Beaumont (elderly, very distinguished English ballet historian) had seen the original production with Karsavina before the First World War, and accordingly his review in *The Sunday Times* carried a great deal of weight. Soberingly, he damned every aspect of Fonteyn's interpretation: dancing too brilliant, arm movements too writhing, make-up too exotic, and so on.

For me, Fonteyn's interpretation was perfect: it brought to life a thousand details of choreography which before meant nothing, and the variety of moods she expressed was breathtaking. But I could not tell how close it was to the original; to find out, I talked to Karsavina.

She told me that the choreography had altered a great deal as the role passed from one dancer to another in the absence of the choreographer, and that she had taught Fonteyn the original version, just as Fokine had taught it to her. Since this role represented a new world to Fonteyn, she had great difficulty at first; but eventually she mastered it, and danced it superbly, interpreting it exactly in accordance with Fokine's conception. This was derived from Russian fairy tales, which have been much influenced by the mythology of Persia and India, and so the role is essentially exotic.

I published this interview in the magazine *Ballet Today*. A few weeks later the Sadler's Wells Ballet reached

Covent Garden and presented the revived "Firebird" for the first time in London. Cyril Beaumont, ignoring what Karsavina had said about Fokine's intentions, wrote a further article in which he condemned Fonteyn's interpretation in almost the same words as before; but he took up one of the phrases Karsavina had used in the interview ("a bird of prey"), and attacked Fonteyn for showing the Firebird in this guise—in spite of the fact that this was how Fokine described the role to Karsavina.

Naturally this angered Karsavina. She replied with a Letter to the Editor in *The Sunday Times* in which she took full responsibility for Fonteyn's interpretation, quoted word-for-word a number of instructions given her by Fokine, and ended with a splendid outburst: "If Mr. Beaumont doubts



—Houston Roger.

"Fonteyn's taste is infallible."

the accuracy of my memory after twenty years of frequent appearance in this part, he must perhaps concede me some knowledge of Russian folklore and enough artistic integrity not to distort the ideas of Fokine."

Beaumont replied the following week, expressing regret for causing distress to Karsavina, but stating that if (as Karsavina claimed) the Firebird was supposed to be a bird of prey, she had not given that impression herself. To support this statement he quoted extracts from a book written by himself (published in 1940) and from older books by Benois and Svetlov. (In fact, these quotations established only that Karsavina had been very pathetic at the moment the Firebird was captured by Ivan Tsarevich; they did not conflict with what Karsavina had said about the role.)

Karsavina's "Firebird" has become a legend in England, and Beaumont's letter suggesting that she had either misunderstood the role or danced it wrongly drew a large number of letters of protest. The Editor published only two—from Anton Dolin and Keith Lester. The latter stated that when he worked under Fokine in 1932 on a revival of "The Firebird" in Buenos Aires Fokine taught Spessivtseva to interpret the role exactly as described by Karsavina.

Just before the close of the Diaghilev Exhibition in London, early in January, Karsavina gave a talk there on the Fokine ballets. By this time the "Firebird" controversy was the talk of the town, and half London seemed to be trying to squeeze its way into the lecture room. When Karsavina came to talk about "The Firebird" she went to some trouble to make clear its basis in Russian fairytales, and explained that this ballet broke fresh ground in treating fairytales without adulteration, preserving all their ruthlessness, vigor, and exotic flavor. She did not mention Beaumont, but the glint in her eye could not be misunderstood.

Fonteyn's reaction to this controversy was very interesting. Instead of making her Firebird less ferocious she made it more so, and in the scene where she expressed anger developing into triumphant rage as she forced the demons to dance the effect was overwhelming. She broke clean away from the European classical tradition, breathing heavily and working her mouth like a wild beast. If any other dancer had done such things the result might have been appalling, but her taste is infallible, and the effects were quite in harmony with the exotic style of the role, being similar to effects used in corresponding circumstances by the classical Kathakali dancers of South India.

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MUSIC TO MY EARS

## A SWISS MOVEMENT IN MUSIC

**A**SSUMING that sooner or later someone had to write the kind of "Concerto for Jazz Band and Orchestra" which the Swiss-born Rolf Liebermann produced for last year's Donaueschingen Festival, it is just as well that it happened sooner. For now it is still 1955, it has been played in New York by the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos following an American premiere in Chicago in November (the Sauter-Finegan band "assisted" in each instance), and our composers can go back to their worktables confident that no major upheaval impends.

Liebermann is, of course, a clever craftsman, to the extent indeed that one is more taken by his ability to express himself in the twelve-tone idiom than in the jazz one. Esthetically he reminds one of those people who put together montages of paint, bits of glass, a swatch or two of cloth, and call the melange "art." All he has failed to reckon with is that the brittle timbre of four trumpets and as many trombones played in the American jazz way are destined to dominate any tonal pattern in which they occur.

Whatever else it accomplished, the performance of the red-coated jazz ensemble (Sauter-Finegan were the two gentlemen in dinner jackets who kept score or something as the work was being played) introduced more than a few of the Philharmonic's audience to the special kind of virtuosity they command. Mitropoulos had the good sense, as well as the indoctrination in the idiom, to give the capable jazzmen their head often enough to make the results more spontaneous than would have seemed possible. The final, brilliantly-scored "Mambo" brought waves of applause for the red-coats, led by their admiring onstage colleagues in tails.

The week's Swiss movement wound up with the introduction by the Collegiate Chorale of "Isaiah's Vision," an evening-length oratorio by the Berne-born Willy Burkhard. Paul Sacher, the respected conductor of the Basel Kammerorchester, was brought to New York for the occasion, adding to Ralph Hunter's preparation of the Chorale an authoritative acquaintance with the work, which dates from the mid-Thirties.

It is unquestionably imposing in its conception, and carried through with unflagging zeal. I could not, however,

confess enthusiasm for the tonal language. Moreover, the repeated G's and A's which tenor Thomas Lloyd Leech was called upon to sing in the prologue did not augur well for Burkhard's use of the voice. Much of the writing that followed was more suitable to tubes of brass than chords of flesh, especially the writing for the bass, sung by Lee Cass. Valarie Lammore was the soprano, with a particularly difficult line to sing in "They on the Lord that do call," in which, for no deducible reason, the accent fell on "do."

**I**T HAS long seemed to me a reasonable proposition—in these days of high scenic costs—that operas with a common locale could profitably use some basic scenery interchangeably. Actually, the Met has done something of the sort with its "Boris"-Khovantchina and the two versions of Abbe Prevost's *novelle*, but the City Center went all out for the proposition with its recent staging of Nicolai's "Merry Wives of Windsor," in virtually the identical setting of its "Falstaff."

To judge from its standing in the German-speaking countries, "Merry Wives" is a comedy classic, and it is always profitable to encounter a classic, regardless of the binding it wears. From the first pages of the familiar overture on one could see the outlines of a magnificent comic opera in this derivation from Shakespeare. Unfortunately, it is the score written by Verdi with Boito's aid, rather than Nicolai's.

However, the latter's music has ample charm and, if it sometimes sounds a mite naive in the plot structure more familiar in the later usage, it makes its melodic points surely and with reasonable dispatch. Joseph Rosenstock's sophisticated direction of the overture—not always honored in the execution of the orchestra—bespoke a familiarity with the score not shared by the singers. There were vivacity and vocal skill in some personnel, of which the most of both was contributed by Phyllis Curtin as Mistress Ford. A few more performances may give her the assurance she requires. Jon Crain lifted his light tenor voice appealingly in the music of Fenton, and Leon Lishner (Page), Edith Evans (Mistress Page), and William Wilderman (Falstaff) also promised well. As Ford, William Shriner, a singer not previously