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The Firebird Suite (1919 Version)

Description

God, a single-eyed triangle, is about to create man. His hands come down from the heavens and, in a blue nothingness, they mold a creature from clay. The first attempt does not go well. The thing comes alive (changing from a greyish blue to fuchsia), but it is just a hand directly connected to a foot by the wrist. It wiggles around a bit, then it extends toward the sky and melts. God's eye widens in dismay. He tends to a new critter; this time, it comes out as a red, stumpy torso with arms and legs pointing in the wrong direction. The third attempt is finally successful: Adam is born first, a yellow, fidgeting clay puppet, and then Eve. They do not just change color when life pervades them, but they become animated cartoons.

Adam and Eve timidly touch each other with one finger. He then takes her hand. From the void that surrounds them, a green little snake pops out. He looks around and soon notices the two humans sitting on the ground. A blue tree appears and grows big yellow apples on its branches. The snake, Adam, and Eve look at it. One apple turns red. The snake grins and smirks at the couple, plotting something. His eye twitches repeatedly; it is a tic he will keep for the rest of the episode.

The reptile furtively tiptoes (by making small jumps) to the tree and picks the shiny red apple with his mouth. He reaches the humans. He first offers the apple to Adam, who refuses it with a smile. At first surprised, the snake malignantly glances at Eve; however, the woman has the same reaction. Astonished and then sadly disappointed, the snake crumples down to the ground while Adam and Eve walk away side by side.

At first intentioned to leave the apple, the snake has a sudden second thought. His eye twitches with malice; he puts the apple to his mouth with his tail and he swallows the fruit. Overcome by sleepiness he curls up, with a final eye twitch before resting his head on his spires.

A fire abruptly explodes. Everything turns red and orange on a black background. A giant, fat demon, with a grinning face and an orange bulbous body, manifests himself. The serpent is terrified; the monster picks him from the ground. He laughs in his face; a second demon, a purple one, arises. Several others follow, all in different colors; some of them tease the snake by showing them the tongue or making grimaces. The orange demon laughs again and then sends the snake flying and twirling around in the dark, until he falls on the ground. The eyes of the demons are around him; three giant devils arise and stretch their right arms forward. The limbs morph into three lines of speeding cars that chase the snake, who grows little legs and runs away. Headlights of live-action car speed away in the background. The line of cartoon cars resembles a long snake that raises its multicolored body like a cobra ready to attack.

The protagonist bumps into the orange demon. Details from real light billboards are visible behind him. The devil opens his mouth and a flight of stairs drops from it. It is an escalator that climbs upward, while the snake runs downward to escape. He holds to something elastic that however snaps. Now seated on one of the steps, the snake has no choice but to go up into the mouth of the demon; the front teeth of the giant stretch to the bottom lip and, like prison bars, they seal the snake inside.

The inner mouth of the demon is covered in TV screens. They show logos, advertisements, and commercials about sex, with real footage of naked women. Two couples of cartoon woman breasts extend from one screen to the dizzy snake, who tries to flee. A tongue-arm protrudes from a cartoon mouth and makes inviting gestures with its hand. Finally, two hands joined together (like those from the ending of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*) come forward and then separate, revealing that they belong to a huge, bright pink naked woman. Her open mouth fills the whole screen, until the scene cuts to the round window of a washing machine. The snake is imprisoned inside it while the machine floats away. The window finally opens and ejects the snake together with soap and water.

Live-action lights and billboards keep appearing in the background. From a bunch of large beer cans, two blonde naked girls erupt and then throw themselves into the snake's mouth, turning into yellow liquid.

In the sky, the demons now sit on large toilets; from their bottom comes a shower of house appliances, canned food, TVs, and car pieces. They line up and chase the snake once again. When they reach him, a bright light flashes and then the screen turns black.

All the stuff expelled by the toilets lingers around the snake. It suddenly turns into paper bills and money, and back to objects afterward. The whole scene is taking place into a giant beating heart; the arteries keep pumping goods and money into it.

A small church floats on-screen; the heart comes too, and, like a cornucopia, it pours money through the open roof of the building. The

church becomes a monumental building with a dome that opens like a lid to take in more money. The clueless snake is half-submerged in a sea of coins; one of them drops on his head, so he reacts with a scornful eye twitch.

The screen becomes black again. Small candle flames appear one by one. They line up in rows around the snake, while a small casket materializes, plank by plank, around the reptile. The lid falls on him. A rotating beacon light appears in the darkness. The snake peeks from inside the casket. The police signal is on the head of a blue demon, who comes forward with a grinning face. In an attempt to flee, the snake gets his tail stuck in the casket. The devil grabs him and, with needle and thread, sews the animal's mouth shut. The tongue of the monster protrudes in the shape of a gloved hand with a truncheon; it hits the snake on the head multiple times, while the character grows arms to shield himself from the blows. He finally frees himself from the clutches of the demon, but he ends up on a road that moves under his feet like a treadmill; while he runs in place, other gloved hands burst out from other treadmills nearby; they continue to abuse the snake with truncheons, syringes, guns, and rifles, until a cage falls on him. Trapdoors open on the treadmills and let out giant metallic springs. One of them pushes the cage in the air.

A flock of winged demons comes forward. The orange demon is ascending fast; he holds the snake on the palm of his hand. He repeatedly closes and opens his fingers; the snake gets progressively dressed as a middle-class man, with, a suit, a tie, and a hat.

The hand of the demon disappears. The black background breaks in half and reveals Adam and Eve in the pale blue scenery of the beginning. The distraught snake sits in front of them. The music by Stravinsky ends.

The snake looks at his own dress. He has a fit and, in despair, he acts out in mime (while speaking in gibberish) all his misadventures. Adam and Eve calmly look at each other. Finally, the snake removes his clothes (and reabsorbs his limbs). He sticks out his tongue: the apple is on it. He rests the fruit on the ground and scornfully crawls away.

The action continues for a little while over the live-action interstitial: the snake appears in front of the orchestra and the old ladies get scared. They all run away, while the host tries to stop them, to no avail.

Program Notes

Just like the *Concerto RV 559*, the final number in the *Allegro non troppo* program is a multimovement piece that gets only partially set to Bozzetto's animation. The original is the five-movement second suite¹ that Igor

¹The first one was compiled in 1911; the third and last one came in 1945.

Stravinskij compiled, in 1919, from his own two-act (with an introduction) ballet *The Firebird*. It was staged for the first time in Paris on June 25, 1910, by the Ballets Russes, the dance company of the Russian impresario Sergej Djagilev, who also commissioned the work. *The Firebird* marked a turning point in Stravinsky's career: according to composer and musicologist Roman Vlad, "its success was overwhelming, and Stravinsky's name was made: he found himself overnight enjoying an enviable position in western musical life."² It was also the first time that the revolutionary orchestral writing of Stravinsky's early maturity started to become evident, with occasional rhythmic violence and sharp sound contrasts that foreshadowed the primal sound brutality of the *Rite of Spring*.

The Firebird was conceived as a *ballet d'action*,³ which is to say a music tightly knitted to plot events that get expressed by choreography and pantomime. Its story came from a mixture of two items from the narrative Russian folklore. The first one is the Firebird, a benign female character that appears in many stories. The musicologist Richard Taruskin called her "a part of every Russian's prepackaged dreamworld."⁴ Her archetype was mixed with the tales about Kašëj the Deathless, an immortal evil being. The two authors of the ballet scenario, the art historian Alexandre Benois (1870–1960) and the choreographer Michel Fokine (1880–1942), took inspiration from Russian fairy tales collected by Aleksandr Nikolaevič Afanas'ev (1826–1871). However, another source was a poem by Jakov Petrovič Polonskij (1819–1898), *Zimnij put'* (*A Winter's Journey*, 1844) that is an early example of a work where the Firebird and Kašëj are featured together; Polonskij drew inspiration from an older anthology of Russian popular prints (*lubki*) that, in 1830, presented Kašëj as a king for the first time,⁵ just like he is in Stravinsky's ballet. The storyline devised by Benois and Fokine was summarized by Vlad as follows:

The young Czarevitch Ivan ... having captured the Firebird sets it free out of pity and thus attains the moral right to liberate the world from the diabolical Katschei. The liberation is the work of the Firebird, which at the very moment when Ivan is about to be turned to stone, sends everyone to sleep with the enchanted lullaby and gives the Czarevitch the chance to seize and destroy the eggshell containing the soul and with it the pledge of Katschei's immortality.⁶

²Roman Vlad, *Stravinsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14.

³Ibid., 11.

⁴Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 556.

⁵Ibid., 565.

⁶Vlad, *Stravinsky*, 12–13.

The Firebird also helps by trapping in a forced dance Kašëj's minions, who were chasing Ivan. In the finale, several characters that were petrified by the evil king come back to life, including thirteen princesses, one of which is Ivan's love interest. The movements of the 1919 *Suite* chosen by Bozzetto, the second and the third one, are in fact about both the princesses and the dance of the minions: they are the *Princesses' Khorovod* (a round dance) and the *Infernal dance of King Kastchei*. The only similarity between the story of the short film and that of the original ballet stays in the "infernal" theme attributed to the dance of the minions, which Bozzetto played out by visualizing the persecution of the snake by humongous colored demons. Also, the two selected movements refer to the two worlds that get reciprocally confronted in the ballet, the human and the supernatural one. The *Princesses' Khorovod* is about the human world, just like in the *Allegro non troppo* episode, even though the context is a religious one: it is that of the creation of mankind according with the Judeo-Christian tradition, as the music accompanies a retelling (with comedy twists) of the biblical story from the Book of Genesis. The *Infernal dance of King Kastchei* is instead heard in the second half of the episode, when Bozzetto definitely departs from the Bible and introduces demons as harbingers of the most degenerate sides of the civilization that will come after the loss of the pristine Edenic state.

In respect to these major plot points, the *Firebird of Allegro non troppo* seems to be revealing about Bozzetto's stance on religious themes. The topic is foregrounded also in the *Boléro*: in that case the symbol of Christianity, the cross, barges into the scene with ominous solemnity together with the musical event that the director mostly charged with meaning, the final modulation that made him think about the last-minute appearance of man at the end of evolution. The cross is not presented in a positive light: the angle, the color, and the attitude of the characters make it seem intimidating and oppressive. Moreover, it comes at a focal point in a narrative that tells how the late arrival of man disrupted the natural order, by means of brutal violence and cunning malice. Religion gets similarly referenced in other works by Bozzetto, like *Grasshoppers*, where high priests who abuse of their powers, or ruthless fundamentalists, have key roles in the relay race of mutual violence recounted by that short film. In *Rhapsodeus*, the light that everyone seeks through the ages, and that triggers merciless killings, might be a metaphor for religious truth; at one point, two popes fight each other over it, on mechanic cathedrals. However, during a 2017 screening of *Rhapsodeus* in Padova,⁷ the director said that he did not want the light to be associated with a specific meaning, and that it might represent all the things humans hold as worthy of taking someone else's life. Moreover, it must be noted that in *Grasshoppers* the cross appears too, but not to scare or oppress people;

⁷Cinema Pio X, Padova, June 30, 2017.

instead, it causes the warring men to momentarily pause in awe. Their fight rages on soon, though, and the cross, disregarded, sinks in the dust they kick up. It might be argued, then, that Bozzetto's films do not present religion as something inherently detrimental for the world, but they do elaborate on the way religion has historically appeased greed and violence. In this respect, Bozzetto situates religion among the tools that mankind wrongly used, just like the fire that appears in the hand of the ape during the *Boléro*, and that soon gets turned into a weapon. The premise about the negative relationship between men and their tools seems to be twofold: tools become weapons as soon as men sees them as means to obtain more power over their peers. This has been a constant in Bozzetto's output since his very first film, *Tapum! The History of Weapons*, which is a satire of the ridiculous variety of deathly contraptions that have been created through the ages. So, humans might not be inherently evil; they are just dangerously inclined to make the worst possible choice in their pursue for power. This seems confirmed by the way Adam and Eve are presented in the *Firebird*. They are two rare Bozzetto characters who are not malignant, neurotic, or frustrated. They appear instead as peaceful, affectionate, and dignified; and, evidently, they do not own or desire anything. They do not have any clothes on, and they live in a pale blue void; more importantly, differently from the Bible, they make a choice that goes against the acquisition of more power. They do not need the apple, which stands for the fruit that, in Book of Genesis, came from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When eaten by the snake, such fruit reveals its devastating potential: the demons that torment the serpent throw at him a whirlwind of visual metaphors about material desires in the contemporary society. The theme is the rampaging commodification of everything, including sex and, of course, religion; a telling scene, in this sense, is the one where a small church gets flooded with money and morphs into a towering cathedral. When contextualized as a thread in the director's pessimist view about how men pursue their goals, Bozzetto's references to religion suddenly appear even in good resonance with some teachings of Christianity and their theological elaboration. For example, according to the theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo (354–430), what was evil about the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden was just how it got used by Adam and Eve,⁸ who anyway, even when still innocent, had already in them the seeds of the pride and self-love that led to their disobedience.⁹ Bozzetto's opinion on mankind seems to be quite the same: humans might be good but only when not given a chance to act out their natural propensity to increase their power. The presence of such position in Bozzetto's films

⁸Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 351.

⁹Ibid.

has however nothing to do with the religiousness or less of the director. Instead, this is likely another consequence of Bozzetto's keen ability to catch and expose through satire the main cultural and social issues of his own country. Catholicism has always been a huge presence in the culture of Italy; Bozzetto grew up and worked in an environment imbued with it. It is also because of this that the religious visual references that appear in Bozzetto's films mostly come from the Christian Catholic repertoire: it is the religion the director has always been more exposed to, and whose contradictions he knows best.

In *Allegro non troppo*, *The Firebird* is actually the piece that more explicitly targets the cultural shortcomings of Italy in the 1970s. Its second half, set to the *Infernal Dance*, is replete with provocative imagery referring to several sensible issues of that decade: the celebration of hedonistic consumerism in advertisements, the sexual liberation turned into a commodification of the female body, and the violence used by the state to maintain the status quo and censor the dissidents (see Part One, Chapter 2). This last point is touched by the sequence when the mouth of the snake gets sewn shut by a devil wearing a police beacon light; then, a multitude of hands donning white gloves and blue sleeves, as well as white truncheons, suggests an association with the colors and equipment of the Italian State Police. The use of live-action footage (shot by Bozzetto himself) as backgrounds to the animations was intended to make it even clearer that the satire was about the contemporary society.¹⁰

The animation itself, instead, falls in the “rough” part of the stylistic spectrum of *Allegro non troppo*. Only the *Slavonic Dance* looks sketchier; there are, however, design differences even within the short film itself. The outline of the snake and the demons is made of a succession of small curves that gives them a “squishy” appearance, particularly prone to metamorphosis. In fact, the characters are continuously shape-shifting; the skin of the demons sometimes emits even “bubbles” of matter that burst up and disappear, just like the initial dark amoeba in the *Boléro*. This morphing attitude is enhanced by the flatness of the designs by Manuli, which allows them to change without hindering too much the consistency (e.g., when the snake ends up with legs and arms). Adam and Eve, instead, have a more solid appearance. Such design is actually a consequence of the multiple animation techniques used on them: before they turn into drawings, they get introduced as plasticine puppets in the introductory sequence produced by the studio Master Programmi Audiovisivi. So, the drawing style “inherits” the solid design of the puppets. That sequence is

¹⁰Bozzetto in the documentary “Ricordando *Allegro non troppo*,” in the *Allegro non troppo* DVD, part of the DVD collection “Tutto Bozzetto (o quasi)” (Roma: Multimedia San Paolo, 2005).

a quite unique occurrence of Claymation in an Italian animated full-length feature. Its presence is justified by the screen action, as God models the first human beings from the substance of earth. There might be here also an implied parallel between the hands of the animator, which give life to characters on screen, and that of God as “animator” in the sense that he gave an *anima* (Latin and Italian for “soul”) to Adam and Eve. Interestingly, Bozzetto did not follow the biblical tale about the creation of the woman; she gets created second, but not from Adam’s rib. She is instead modeled independently, in the same way of her husband. This might be a sensible touch by Bozzetto, in a decade when women became vocal about their rights but were nonetheless struggling hard to get the attention they deserved from the patriarchal Italian society. In fact, the detail about Adam’s rib was one of the major points that consolidated the woman as a vicarious figure, at the service of man, in the most conservative Christian view; Augustine of Hippo, in his *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*De Genesi ad litteram*), even declared that “woman deserved to have her husband for a master. But if this order is not maintained, nature will be corrupted still more, and sin will be increased.”¹¹

The two parts of the short film are different also in the interaction between music and animation. The more quiet and melodic *Princesses’ Khorovod* is mainly used as a source of emotive functions. The uncorrupted world of Adam and Eve is described by the section of the music that starts one bar before rehearsal number 5 in the original score. The *Firebird* is in fact the only other episode of *Allegro non troppo*, after the *Boléro*, that features a single movement in a less than complete form. There is even a diegetic justification for this: while the other pieces in the program are supposed to be performed by the orchestra of old ladies, the *Firebird* plays from a record after all the musician have left the theater. The music starts in the live-action interstitial, while the record and the gramophone are on screen; the diegetic impression gets even reinforced by an artificially superimposed sound effect, the rhythmic scratching of the needle through the grooves. According to Audissino’s terminology, this gives the music a realistic motivation.

The transition to the Claymation sequence, however, repositions Stravinsky’s music to an artistic motivation, with an emotive function that however is replete with implicit synchronies that cleanly outline the phrasing, just like it largely happens in the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* and the *Valse triste*. A few explicit synchronies are anyway present, like the one that emphasizes the birth and growth of the tree: the animation starts exactly with a new section (rehearsal number 11) where the thematic material and the instrumentation make a radical change.

¹¹Augustine of Hippo, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 2, ed. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 171.

The *Infernal Dance*, instead, is mostly a matter of temporal perceptual functions, and rightly so: it is the place of *The Firebird* where Stravinsky unleashed for the first time a daring rhythmic treatment of the orchestra and a writing that violently cuts from one timbre to another, a future trademark of his so-called “Russian period” and of works like the *Rite of Spring*. Bozzetto took advantage of the many sounds that get aurally “pinpointed” by accents or sudden alternances to create an intense choreography of synchronies, expressed through character animation, editing, and camera movements. The vast majority of functions is of the temporal perceptual kind, but there are also spatial perceptual ones, like the one that describes the speeding of the cars that pursue the snake. Their relentless motion catches and visualizes the sense of urgency conveyed by an insistent repetition of a melodic fragment that gets passed through the woodwinds, while the strings accompany it with fast repetitions of a motivic cell of two short notes followed by a longer one (rehearsal number 6). Anyway, Bozzetto’s inventiveness in devising synchrony ideas is probably at its wildest in *The Firebird*; in some of its most memorable moments, the director reframes Stravinsky’s most outstanding timbral ideas as “cartoony” sound effects that work like onomatopoeias. This is the case of the synch of the trombone glissandos with the female breasts popping out from the TV screens, or of a “pulsating” passage with pizzicato strings and timpani to suggest the sound of the beating heart. The most surprising case in this selection might however be the creation of the orange demon’s laughter with the two trombones that play two bars before rehearsal number 1: the head movement and the staging of the action make the synchrony unmistakable, expressive and funny at once.

As in the *Valse triste*, the animation of *The Firebird* goes on for a little while after the music has already finished. When the snake reenacts his experience with the future miseries of civilization, he speaks in gibberish like Mr. Rossi and his sound effects get rendered in the fashion of a “regular” sound cartoon. This choice eases the transition of the animated snake to the sound film context of the live-action sequence, to create the gag that justifies the whole orchestra fleeing at once and leaving the film without a finale. However, this could be also an aesthetic transition to the finale itself, the last animated episode of *Allegro non troppo*, and the one that abandons the *Fantasia* model to embrace a traditional pattern of cartoon sonorization, even if paired with a highly anarchic narrative content.