

A Game of Thrones: New Music Meets the Firebird

Thursday, May 14, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	NORMAN b. 1979 <i>"Play" for orchestra (German premiere)</i>	45'
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		90'

Andrew Norman

45 minutes

b. 1979

"Play" for orchestra (German premiere)

THE COMPOSER

Andrew Norman, born in 1979, is one of the most distinctive and acclaimed orchestral composers of his generation. He studied composition at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music and at the Yale School of Music, has taught at The Juilliard School, and is now on the composition faculty at USC. His music draws on a lifelong interest in architecture and the visual arts, and his orchestral works have a textural intricacy and theatrical immediacy that have made him a favourite of orchestras and audiences alike.

A two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, Norman was named *Musical America's* Composer of the Year in 2017. He has won the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2017 the \$100,000 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, one of the largest prizes in classical music, for the work performed tonight. He has been composer in residence with Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic commissioned his *Sustain* for its centennial season.

ABOUT THE WORK

Play is the piece that put Andrew Norman on the international map. Written in 2013 while he was composer in residence with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, it was premiered by BMOP under Gil Rose in Boston's Jordan Hall that May, and Norman revised it in 2016 for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It was nominated for a 2016 Grammy,

won the 2017 Grawemeyer Award, and one critic called it the best orchestral work the twenty-first century had produced so far. Tonight's performance is its German premiere, a major moment for Berlin audiences.

The work's title is deliberately double-edged. *Play* refers, on one level, to the playfulness of music itself: the joy of musicians making sound together. But Norman also points to a darker side of the word, to "manipulation, control, deceit, and the many forms of master-to-puppet dynamics", and he maps ideas from video games onto the orchestra. The three movements are called "levels", and the next one can only be reached once the previous one has been completed.

Norman builds this idea directly into the score in a startling way. The percussion section is given control over the rest of the orchestra. A hit on the triangle alternately starts and stops the music; a strike on the temple block transfers a gesture from one player to another; other percussion sounds turn players on and off, make them louder or softer, faster or slower, or send the music backwards to rewind and try again. The result is music that constantly seems to glitch, loop and fragment, and then suddenly snaps back into long lyrical phrases of disarming beauty.

Listen across the three levels for the question of who is in charge. At times dozens of independent musical ideas seem to fly in all directions at once before the percussionists rein them in; elsewhere the players are left with little or no conducting and must find each other on their own.

This is music about agency: who controls the action, who is controlled, and what happens when the rules of musical narrative are themselves up for grabs. As Norman puts it, much of the piece "deals with who is playing whom".

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of*

45 minutes

Spring) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his "neoclassical" period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Firebird is based on Russian fairy tales, assembled into a scenario by the choreographer Michel Fokine and his collaborators. The action centres on Prince Ivan Tsarevich, who wanders into the enchanted garden of the immortal sorcerer Kashchei. There he captures the magical Firebird, who buys her freedom by giving him one of her feathers, with which he can summon her in time of need. Ivan then encounters thirteen captive princesses, falls in love with one of them, and is taken prisoner by Kashchei. The Firebird returns, casts Kashchei and his followers into a deep sleep, and reveals the secret of his immortality (an egg containing his soul); Ivan smashes the egg, freeing the princesses and the kingdom.

Stravinsky's score is a marvel of orchestral imagination, and tonight's performance presents the full ballet rather than one of the more frequently heard concert suites. He gives good and evil different musical languages: dark, chromatic writing for the sorcerer's world, bright and folk-like music for the prince and the princesses. From the first murky stirrings in the low strings, Stravinsky conjures an entire fairy-tale world: the glittering flight music of the Firebird itself, all darting woodwinds and harp glissandi; the gentle Round Dance of the princesses; the savage stamping rhythms of the *Infernal Dance of Kashchei*; the hypnotic *Berceuse* with its bassoon lullaby; and the radiant, slowly mounting brass theme of the Finale, built on a Russian folk melody.

Listen, in the *Infernal Dance*, for the great offbeat thwacks of percussion and brass that announce the demonic Kashchei. Listen, in the *Berceuse*, for the bassoon's slow, rocking lullaby that puts the sorcerer to sleep. And listen, above all, for the Finale: that simple folk tune, beginning quietly in a solo horn, gradually gathers the weight of the

entire orchestra until it bursts into a coda of overwhelming joy. It is one of the most thrilling endings in the orchestral repertoire, and it is the sound of Stravinsky walking onto the world stage.

KLAUS MÄKELÄ, CONDUCTOR

Klaus Mäkelä, born in Helsinki in 1996, is by some distance the most talked-about young conductor in the world today. The son of cellist Sami Mäkelä and pianist Taru Myöhänen-Mäkelä, he trained as a cellist himself; by fifteen he was good enough to substitute in the Helsinki Philharmonic, which he has called his second training as a conductor. He had wanted to conduct since the age of seven, when he sang in the children's chorus of a *Carmen* production at the Finnish National Opera, and at twelve he began studying with the legendary teacher Jorma Panula, later at the Sibelius Academy.

His career has moved at extraordinary speed. He became Chief Conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic in 2020 and Music Director of the Orchestre de Paris in 2021, and in the 2027–28 season he will take up two of the most prestigious posts in classical music at once: Chief Conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam *and* Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He records exclusively for Decca Classics, only the third conductor in the label's history to be offered such a contract, after Georg Solti and Riccardo Chailly.

Mäkelä made his Berliner Philharmoniker debut in April 2023 and has returned regularly since. Tonight's programming is characteristic of his approach: the German premiere of a major contemporary American work paired with one of the founding masterpieces of twentieth-century music.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Alex Ross's history of twentieth-century music tells the story of the Ballets Russes and The Firebird and runs on into the American music of recent decades that Andrew Norman writes in.

ACCESSIBLE **Diaghilev: A Life**

Sjeng Scheijen, Oxford University Press 2009

A biography of the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who commissioned The Firebird from the young Stravinsky for the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1910.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: A Creative Spring**

Stephen Walsh, University of California Press 2002

The first volume of Stephen Walsh's biography of Stravinsky, covering his Russian years and the Firebird commission that made his name.

SOURCES

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3. Andrew Norman: Play for orchestra (programme notes), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/andrew-norman-play-for-orchestra/>
4. Andrew Norman: Play, European American Music Distributors (Schott). <https://eamdc.com/psny/composers/andrew-norman/works/play-5/>
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14. Klaus Mäkelä: Wunderkind Conductor Career Timeline (so far), WFMT. <https://www.wfmt.com/2024/10/18/klaus-makela-timeline/>
15. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
16. Diaghilev: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199751495>
17. Stravinsky: A Creative Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520227491>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-05-14-makela>

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