

SNOW MAIDEN STORY

Here is a synopsis I put together by plagiarizing several resources, especially (1) a synopsis on opreaandballet.com and (2) info from what I think is the official Bolshoi Opera and Ballet website. I show in brackets where Tchernaiakov modernizes the story. I think this outline may help you better understand Tchernaiakov's synopsis in the BelAir Blu-ray keeppcase booklet, which assumes you know some of the back story to the opera.

Prologue

In the early days, the pagan Slavs settled in Russia, a land of long, harsh winters. Some of the Slavs lived near the Red Mountain in the Land of the Berendeys where they were ruled by Tsar Berendey. According to legends, the Slavs were much concerned with the god Father Frost (Winter), the goddess Spring Beauty, and the god Yarilo (the Sun). The first festival of the year was Maslenitsa, the beginning of spring. The most important day of the year was at the beginning of summer, when Yarilo would be thanked. This was to encourage Yarilo to grant a long summer and good harvest.

It came to pass that Winter and Spring Beauty mated (without permission) and had a daughter. This irritated Yarilo, who invoked an indefinite climate change consisting of even longer winters and longer, colder springs. Yarilo also decreed that the baby girl would grow up in Farther Frost's palace, where she was called the Snow Maiden (or Snegurochka in Russian). As long as Snow Maiden stayed cold, she was safe—the greatest danger to her was the sun. When Snow Maiden reached age 14, she had become a great beauty.

One day, Father Frost was called away. He feared Yarilo might in his absence try to kill Snow Maiden by filling her heart with the fire of love. So Father Frost and Spring Beauty met in the forest. They agreed to hide Snow Maiden by letting her live among the Berendeys. Eventually, a Berendey couple adopted Snow Maiden.

[Tchernaiakov moves the time to the present. The Berendey Society is a club that meets from time to time in the woods to reenact ancient days. They arrive in funky recreation vehicles and mostly dress in camping clothing or what the Americans call "hippy style." Tchernaiakov's Spring Beauty is the Head Mistress at an arts academy. We meet her in a ballet classroom. Birds are played by child singers (from several Paris juvenile chorus groups) dressed like dance students at a dress rehearsal. Father Frost arrives with Snow Maiden. He looks like a an executive, but he's in a hurry. Maybe he is going to prison? Spring Beauty and Father Frost have to decide fast what to do with their daughter. And she wants to live with the Berendeys because she has heard so many of their beautiful songs. Result: Snow Maiden gets to join the Berendeys.]

Act 1

The village of Berendey. The people are discussing Snow Maiden's arrival. Lel, a handsome shepherd who represents the Sex God, meets Snow Maiden. Snow Maiden asks Lel to sing for her and gives him a flower in return. Lel is then distracted by the other girls and forgets Snow Maiden. [Tchernaiakov puts us at the Society campground, and Lel is a hippy with long hair.]

Snow Maiden's friend Kupava is happy because her fiancé Mizgir has arrived. In line with custom, the groom ransoms his bride from the youths and maidens of Berendey by throwing them gifts. The marriage ceremony begins, but Mizgir's gaze falls upon Snow Maiden. Staggered by her beauty, Mizgir turns from Kupava and begs Snow Maiden to return his love. Kupava is humiliated. The people condemn Mizgir and advise Kupava to seek justice from Tsar Berendey. [Tcherniakov follows all this closely. The Society takes things pretty seriously.]

Act 2

Tsar Berendey is ill at ease, sensing Yarilo's disfavour expressed in the bad weather. The Tzar will try something to win back Yarilo's favor: on Yarilo's Day the Tzar will stage a mass wedding all the young couples in the Tzardom. Kupava runs in, tears streaming down her face. She begs Berendey to punish Mizgir for betraying her. Berendey is enraged. The Tzar insists that Mizgir marry Kupava. But Mizgir rejects Kupava again: he loves Snow Maiden. The Tzar sentences Mizgir to exile. But Snow Maiden begs the Tzar to relent. Entranced by her beauty, the Tzar changes his decision. Mizgir will attempt to raise the fire of passion in Snow Maiden's heart before Yarilo's Day. [By this time, you will be completely convinced that all this could actually happen within the Society.]

Act 3

Young men and women are dancing in the sacred forest. Deeply moved by Lel's singing, the Tzar suggests he choose a girl to reward "the singer of love with a passionate kiss" in front of the assembled crowd. Snow Maiden waits for Lel to choose her. But the shepherd instead selects Kupava. He wants the love of a woman, not the love of a child. In tears, Snow Maiden flees the campground into the forest.

The people depart. Alone, Snow Maiden pines for and dreams of Lel. Mizgir appears. Snow Maiden is frightened at his passionate declarations. She flees in confusion. Mizgir wants to follow her and perhaps take her by force, but the Wood Goblin stops him. [Tcherniakov's Wood Goblin is now a tall, strong, bald hippy who knows boxing.]

Act 4

Snow Maiden prays to her mother, Spring Beauty, for the ability to love. In a magnificent passage, Spring Beauty appears and bestows on Snow Maiden all the powers of love that nature knows. Spring Beauty also warns her daughter for the last time to stay away from Yarilo's fiery eyes. [Good advice from mom to daughter.]

Mizgir enters, desperately searching for Snow Maiden. Now, filled with elation and love, Snow Maiden is unable to tear her eyes from Mizgir. She is ready to wed.

People enter the festival grounds for Yarilo's day. Tsar Berendey and his suite arrive. Mizgir asks the Tsar to bless his union with Snow Maiden. The Tzar begins a wedding ceremony before the assembly. Alas, a bright ray of light falls on Snow Maiden. She melts. But this terrible event will not cast a cloud on Yarilo's festival. Now Yarilo is appeased. He will grant favor to the Tzar's land once more, bringing a warmer spring and longer summer. And, oh yes, Yarilo, who is 93,000,000 miles away, never makes it on stage.

[Tcherniakov follows the traditional Act 4 closely except he puts several beautiful nudes of both sexes running around in the meeting ground among the hippies. You might then expect some kind of outlandish group orgy. Sorry, nothing like this happens.]

(Final comment from the editor. Another beautiful virgin is sacrificed to insure a good harvest. Sure reminds one of the *Rite of Spring*, which came along about 30 years later from another Russian composer.)