

# *Fantasia*



*Original 1940 theatrical poster Wikipedia*

*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Each segment has different directors. Produced by Walt Disney. Production Supervisor Ben Sharpsteen: Story by Joe Grant and Dick Huemer. Cinematography by James Wong Howe.. Cinematic length: 126 minutes in the original version. Production Company: Walt Disney Productions. Distributed by Walt Disney Productions and RKO Radio Pictures. Cinematic release: November 13th 1940. USA simultaneous American releases. Video release: 1991. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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### Written Without Prejudice

*Fantasia* is introduced and narrated by Deems Taylor.

The music is performed by The Philadelphia Orchestra, which is conducted by Leopold Stokowski. The eight pieces in the film are:

- [\*Toccata and Fugue in D Minor\* by Johann Sebastian Bach](#)
- [\*Nutcracker Suite\* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky](#)
- [\*The Sorcerer's Apprentice\* by Paul Dukas.](#)
- [\*Rite of Spring\* by Igor Stravinsky.](#)
- Intermission: jazz fragments
- [\*The Pastoral Symphony\* by Ludwig van Beethoven](#)
- [\*Dance of the Hours\* by Amilcare Ponchielli.](#)
- [\*Night on Bald Mountain\* by Modest Mussorgsky](#)
- [\*Ave Maria\* by Franz Schubert.](#)



## Review

In politics Walt Disney has a bad reputation for his right wing efforts, particularly against the unions and for supporting the Un-American Activities Committee. His cultural reputation was little better. He was supposedly stingy, and noted for playing it safe with what he produced, for being an adapter of trends rather than an innovator and for being a purveyor of low brow culture.

His film *Fantasia* disproves many of those allegations concerning culture. He was innovative, putting visual images to classical music as early as 1928 in a short piece called *Silly Symphonies*. This was within a year of Hollywood producing the first full sound picture, *The Jazz Singer*. By the middle 1930s he was working with Leopold Stokowski (who offered to work for nothing) on what would become the segment from *Fantasia* which everyone recalls first, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. That segment alone had cost a phenomenal 125,000 1930s dollars. At this time the value of a dollar was so much higher than now that ninety dollars a week was a high wage. After being told that *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* if shown by itself would not recoup its cost Disney took a risk and went ahead with *Fantasia* version. In release the film would eventually contain seven other similar segments, an introduction and an interval piece. The ultimate combined production and distribution costs would come to nearly two and a quarter million 1940 dollars, just under twenty times that of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. *Fantasia* was one of the most expensive films ever made up to that time. Even after it was obviously a commercial failure in the early 1940s Disney continued to work on a sequel. All this is Disney being stingy?

Far from playing it safe Disney was an innovator. *Fantasia* was the first film ever recorded in stereophonic sound and because new equipment had to be used this added to the cost. So did the employees. Only three segments had the same director and most had two. Each of the eight segments had its own crew and in total over five hundred animators were used. Rather than use already existent recordings Disney had Stokowski record his orchestra especially for the film. When he wanted advice on how to depict the planets Disney went to Edward Hubble, widely respected as the world's leading cosmologist. Similarly when it came to filming Disney chose one of the greatest names in Hollywood cinematography, James Wong Howe. Technicolour was expensive and rarely used; the first full length Hollywood technicolour feature was made in 1936 and by 1940 only a few had been made. Few of those early examples used colour as astoundingly and effectively as did James Wong Howe in *Fantasia*. He could have colours be vivid and bright without being gaudy and then have them

subdued without being drab. His juxtaposition of hues would be astounding in some scenes subtle in others, but his talents made *Fantasia* one of the most beautifully photographed films ever.



*Walt Disney explaining his animation ideas to Deems Taylor and far right Leopold Stokowski. Wikipedia*

Production began in January 1938 and would last over two years. Problems were ongoing and delaying; not all of them concerned finance and technicalities. As even the finished version went for over two hours, length seemed a problem so Disney cut the ninth segment, herons dancing to Debussy's 'Clair de Lune.' Which other classical pieces were to be included or excluded were difficult choices. Disney did not use some suggested or even designed pieces, although with some work had gone ahead. Many a classicist wanted every segment excluded. They felt that *Fantasia* was debasing classical music. Such views were not new then; 'The Nutcracker' was soundly denounced after its 1892 debut. In 1913 at the Parisian premiere of 'Rites of Spring' protesters went beyond denunciations into protests and riots. The purist defenders of the classics seemed to have missed the irony of defending what their purist predecessors had denounced. With several of the segments having abridged music they were on safer ground. Others made humourless and puritanical objections. Creationist pressure groups objected to the evolutionary theme in 'Rites of Spring.' The Hayes Office censors objected to the female centaurs being bare breasted so their scenes were redone with garlands covering

breasts. Oddly in the ‘Night on Bald Mountain’ segment two women had a breast exposed for perhaps three seconds. Filmmakers have to be quick to slip past the Hays Office.



Amazingly the racial subservience and stereotyping evident in the above still apparently did not raise ire in 1940. By the reissue of *Fantasia* in 1969 the world had changed, so this scene was removed.

All these efforts, expenses and time were going into a tremendous risk. By November 1940 when the film was finally released much of continental Europe was under Nazi rule. While America was not at war yet, the Nazis banned many American films, even those not concerned with the European situation, such as *Gone With the Wind*. *Fantasia* did lose much of its European market, which meant the loss of many audiences who loved classical music.

Even where audiences could see the film problems loomed. A big release, full length animated feature set almost solely to classical music had never come out of Hollywood before – and without scripted dialogue. The only voices in *Fantasia* were those of Deems Taylor introducing each segment and a few words said by Mickey Mouse. No dialogue? This was not what cinematic audiences were used to. They wanted and got straightforward narratives, with dialogue. While some actors and directors could get away with subtle ironies, meanings conveyed with body language and Lubitsch touches, most films used dialogue to emphasise or explain what the visuals should have. Disney’s famous adage “Don’t tell me, show me” emphasised the primacy of visuals in cinema.

That seems so obvious now, but in Hollywood then many films were filmed stage plays - or seemed to be. Didactic efforts were common. Star power had primacy. Without stars or dialogue in *Fantasia* Disney was focusing audiences on what they were shown, not what they were told or heard or had explained to them.

It was a great moment, probably greater than Disney realised, for it centred films on how individuals chose to interpret what was shown, not passively absorb those meanings which directors, producers and stars usually fed to audiences. Deems Taylor actually invited the audience watching the Bach segment to let their imaginations construct images as they listened. The film went even further than that, for why earnestly search for meaning and narrative in scenes where hippos waltz with crocodiles? Where Mickey Mouse shakes hands with conductor Stokowski? Those in the audience who left thought and analysis behind and just let the sensual world of image and sound float over them to indulge their senses were perhaps unintentionally the wisest, for although some of the segments did have a narrative, this was not what the film was about.

Unfortunately the great majority of the public did not see it that way. The critics gave it extremely mixed reviews. Several did see its greatness, but the film was also denounced as boring, pretentious, overlong and in parts insane. Such comments came not as expected from rednecks, these comments came from critics. Much of the film going public just ignored it.

One expected criticism was that in the darkest days of World War Two Disney could have easily found more relevant topic matter than cheer centaurs and flamingos prancing to old classics. Think this over, what happens to societies such as the Spartans, the Nazis, or the Khmer Rouge, all of which were totally dedicated to war and to wiping out anything imaginative, joyous or whimsical?

The extraordinary last segment in *Fantasia* shows a world being thrown into evil, chaos and terror by malignant forces who seem to be winning, but then comes the victory of peace and faith and the soothing strains of Schubert's 'Ave Maria.' This expresses a belief that peace and the better elements in human nature will win. As Nazi storm troopers spread their havoc through Europe this was a much needed message.

During the war years the film looked like it was heading for a dismal fate. In the January 1942 rerelease the intermission and Bach's segment went To

recoup costs. *Fantasia* was then a hundred minutes long to fit on a double bill with a western.

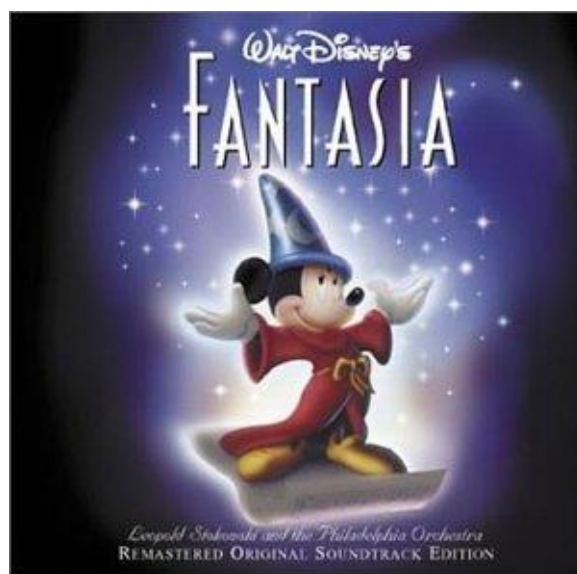
Then after the war Disney wisely tried again with the full version. From 1946 until 1990 it was reissued several times for cinematic release, often with editings and restorations. Gradually these reissues gained the audiences it never had in 1940 and the film's greatness was widely realised.

There is a greatness to it that has lasted eighty years. The stunning use of colour and sound, both in their presentation and their contrasts are still marvellous. The perfect synchronisation between visual movement and the music have led many to think the music was designed to match the pictorial movement. The liberation from dialogue and narrative still allows sensuality to sweep over the audience.

It rightfully gained placings in various prestigious listings concerned with the greatest films ever made. By 1976 it was being affectionately spoofed and imitated in the Italian *Allegro Non Troppo*. Walt's brother Roy worked on the long awaited sequel *Fantasia 2000*. (1999). Critical opinion had reversed from 1940. When that sequel was released the general opinion was that while it contained much that was worthwhile, *Fantasia 2000* was not as great as the original. This raises the question: How could it be?

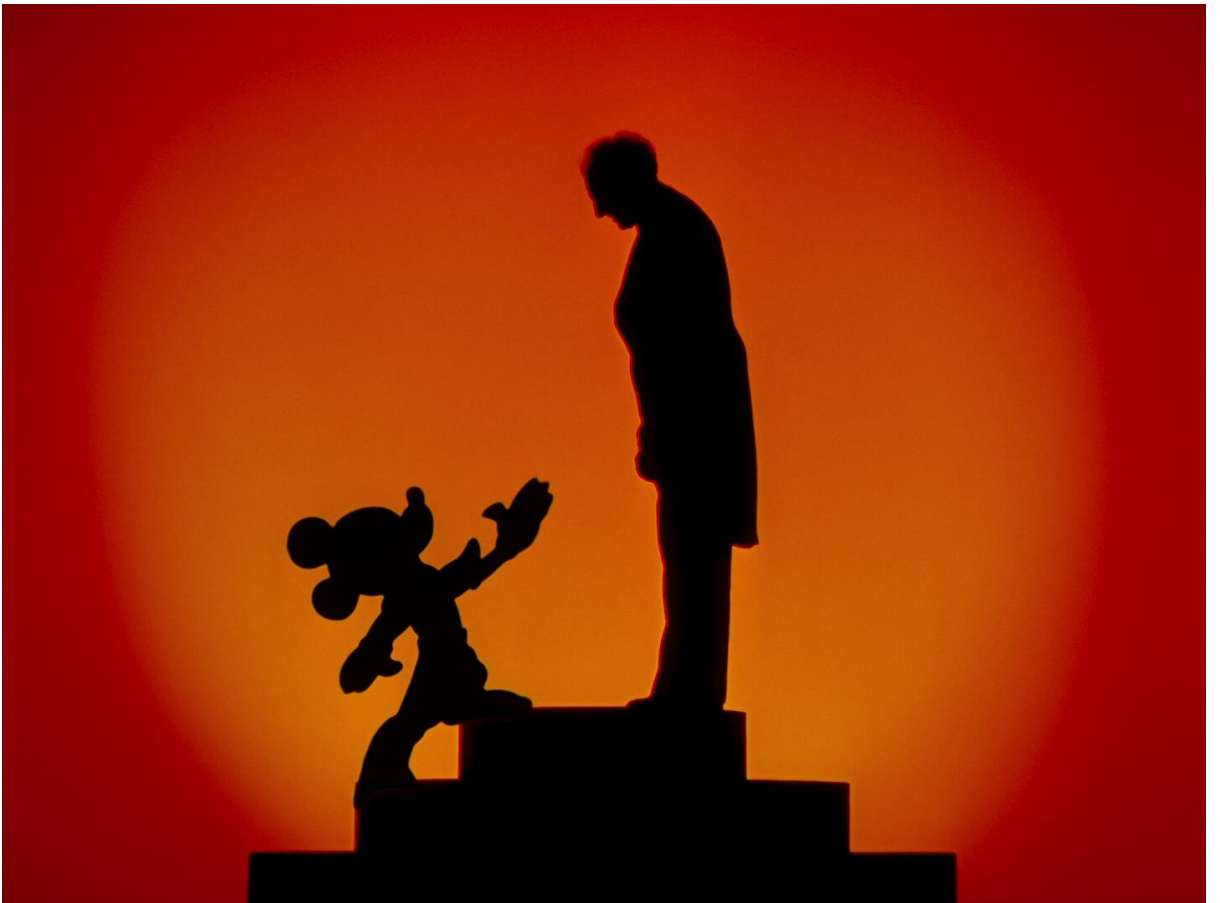


*Fantasia cd Cover Wikipedia*



*The eight composers who had works used in the film. From top left: Bach, Tchaikovsky, Dukas, Stravinsky Bottom row: Beethoven, Ponchielli, Mussorgsky, Schubert.*





*Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Composition date uncertain. Directed by Samuel Armstrong.

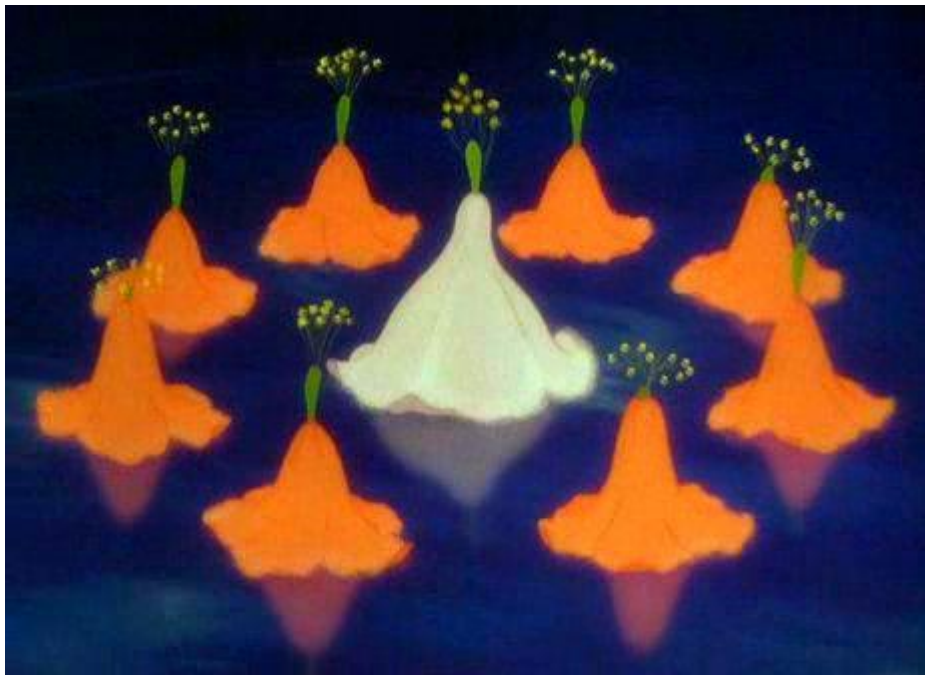
Deems Taylor explains that this is one of the segments that does not tell a story. He suggests that viewers let their imagination flow with the music and conjure up any images they wish. In a Hollywood film this is an extraordinary offer. The segment begins with filming the orchestra in silhouette and then goes into abstract lines and shapes.



*The Nutcracker Suite* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composition date 1892. Directed by Samuel Armstrong.

Deems Taylor tells us that Tchaikovsky despised this work, but does not say why. Why? This is the most exuberant, whimsical, delightful music imaginable and Disney's animators have colours and synchronized movement to match. Pixies, petals, leaves and dragonflies swirl, prance and dance to some of the most enchanting scenes ever filmed.



*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Paul Dukas (1865-1935)

Composition date 1897. The story was based on a short story by Goethe.  
Directed by James Algar.

This is the one everybody knows and remembers.



*Rites of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Composition date 1913. Directed by Bill Roberts and Paul Satterfield

Stravinsky's piece, originally intended to go with depictions of tribal rites, starts with the beginning of creation and ends with the extinction of the dinosaurs. Nature is not cute or romanticized here.

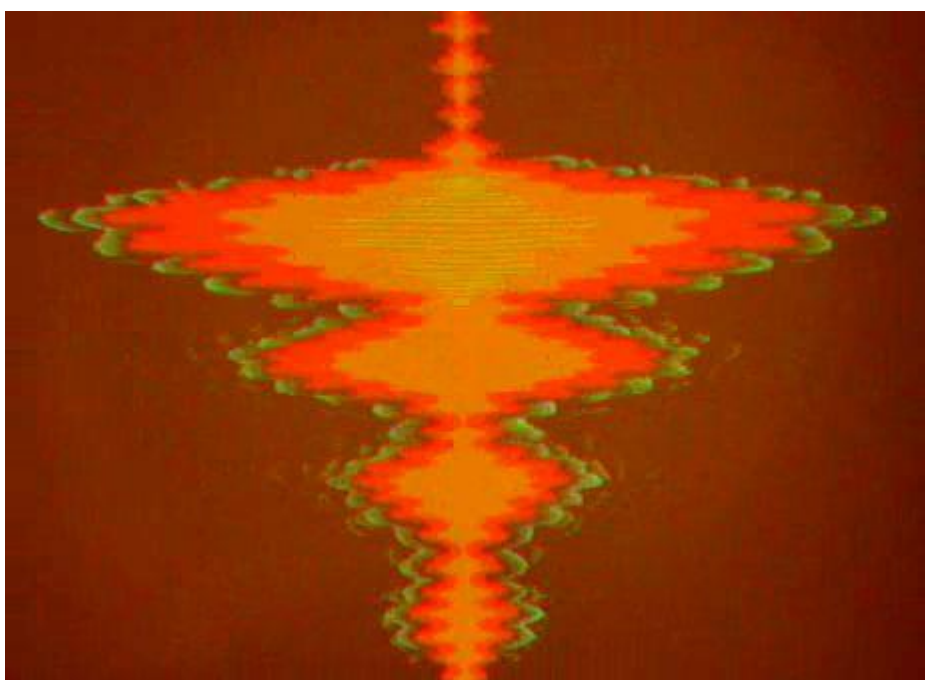


### Intermission: jazz fragments

The orchestra plays around with a jaunty jazz piece, the clarinetist and cello player take the lead parts. Deems Taylor shows how notes made by different instruments show upon an electronic register. The startling images are still vivid and beautiful. Today any recording studio can do that and it is just a routine part of sound recording, but in 1940 few in the audience had seen that and it would have appeared as another stunning miracle of technology.



*Deems Taylor*





*The Pastoral Symphony* by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Composition date 1808. Directed by Hamilton Luske, Jim Handley and Ford Beebe.

This symphony focuses on romance set to Greek mythology, replete with centaurs, fauns, cherubs, doves Grecian temples and Gods tossing thunderbolts.





*Dance of the Hours* by Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886) Composition date: original 1876 then revised in 1880. Directed by T. Hee and Norman Ferguson

Each hour gets a dance and the whole thing is delightfully ridiculous, preposterous and high energy as Hippopotamus waltz, ostriches swirl and elephants prance. Romance booms between a crocodile and a hippo.



*Night on Bald Mountain* by Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)  
Composition date 1867. Revised by Rimsky Korsakov 1886. The story  
was based on Russian Legends. Directed by Wilfred Jackson

Satan awakes on Walpurgis night and summons the spirits of the dead  
and with his imps has an orgy





The tolling church bell signals dawn approaching and the forces of evil retreat.

*Ave Maria* by Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Composition date 1825/1826  
Directed by Wilfred Jackson

As dawn starts to lighten the sky Ave Maria shows the triumph of peace





*Walt Disney 1901-1966.*