

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) *Soldier's Tale: Suite for Clarinet, Violin and Piano* (1918)

1. *Marche du Soldat*

4. *Tango-Valse-Rag*

2. *Le Violon du Soldat*

5. *La Danse du Diable*

3. *Petit Concert*

The tale in question is taken from a collection of over 600 folk tales collected in the mid 19th century by Alexander Afanasyev, who hoped that disseminating native Russian folk tales would help promote the Russian language against the aristocratically-preferred French. Stravinsky's text however is a French retelling with the Lausanne writer Charles Ferdinand Ramuz to whom he had been introduced in 1915 by the conductor Ernest Ansermet. Stravinsky and his family were then living in exile in the Vaudois Alps, a move necessitated by his wife developing tuberculosis following the birth of their fourth child. Ramuz and Stravinsky worked closely together on French libretti for Reynard (1916) and for Les Noces (1917), and then, both strapped for cash (no royalties or estate income for Stravinsky from revolutionary Russia), turned to the idea of a small travelling theatre production: small cast, small orchestra, small space. The patronage of the piece's dedicatee, the philanthropist and amateur clarinettist Werner Reinhart of Winterthur, allowed their idea to be realised.

The piece was originally written for a troupe of three actors (the soldier, the devil, and a narrator), two dancers, and a conductor with 7 instrumentalists: treble and bass from strings (violin & double-bass), woodwind (clarinet & bassoon) and brass (cornet & trombone) plus a nimble percussionist. The instrumental line-up is similar to that of the New Orleans Dixieland Jazz band of whose repertoire Stravinsky was aware. Ansermet conducted the first performance in Lausanne at the end of September 1918, with Lausanne University students taking some of the acting roles. Unfortunately, it did not solve Stravinsky's money worries.

The Suite that we are hearing this evening appeared the following year (November 1919), preceding another, eight-movement suite for the original instrumental ensemble (1920). It is scored for clarinet in A (with an eye to Reinhart), violin and piano, giving a substantial reduction of timbral possibilities, but allowing many of the novel rhythmic structures to emerge with clarity: "Rhythm and motion, not the element of feeling, are the foundations of musical art." (Stravinsky) Some of the rhythmic complexities are not immediately apparent. The piano's left hand in the *Marche* maintains a stubborn left-right, dominant-tonic pulse, which starts obviously enough in 2/4 but then migrates across bar-lines of 3/8 and 3/4 that follow the syncopated melodic line. Other pieces in the suite have more complex jazz-like integrations and disintegrations of rhythms again against an ostinato beat.

The Soldier's Tale itself is a Faust-like story from peasant recruits to the Russo-Turkish War. Returning to his native village on leave (*Marche du Soldat*), Joseph is accosted by the Devil disguised as an old man with a butterfly net. Joseph agrees to give the Devil his beloved old fiddle (*Le violon du Soldat*) in exchange for a book that describes future events. After only three days realising the book's financial potential, the now rich Joseph returns home to discover that in fact three years have passed: his girl-friend is married with children and his old friends shun him as an apparition. The Devil reappears as a peddler and sells him back his old violin. But Joseph can no longer play and hurls both it and the wretched book away.

Persuaded by a friend to try his luck at raising the king's daughter from her sick bed, Joseph is taunted at the palace by the Devil, now irritatingly a virtuoso violinist. The narrator advises Joseph that he could be free of the Devil's control if he were to lose all his money to the Devil at cards. He does so and is free; moreover he can play the fiddle again (*Petit concert*)! He moves into the Princess's bedroom, changes his tune (*Tango-Valse-Rag*), and resurrects the Princess into dance. The Devil, now undisguised, interrupts their inevitable embrace. Joseph protects the Princess by manically playing his fiddle (*La Danse du Diable*), exhausting the compulsively contorting Devil whom they can then drag away. Tonight's suite ends here on a musical high note. But in the main piece, the Devil recovers and reappears to warn Joseph that he will return to the Devil's power if he were ever to leave the bounds of the castle. Joseph eventually does leave, persuaded by the Princess to visit his mother; the Devil is lying in wait at the boundary, playing his violin. Joseph wittingly crosses over. The moral? Don't sell your violin, and as the narrator warns...

*You must not seek to add
To what you have, what you once had;
You have no right to share
What you are with what you were.
No one can have it all,
That is forbidden.
You must learn to choose between.
One happy thing is every happy thing:
Two, is as if they had never been.*