



SAN FRANCISCO
CONTEMPORARY
MUSIC PLAYERS

Every story we tell falls into one of two types: You go on a voyage. A stranger comes to town.

With Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* you get both at the same time. In Charles Ferdinand Ramuz's well-known text, summarized in programs notes here, Joseph, a Russian soldier, trades his violin to a stranger for the promise of wealth. In the voyage that ensues, Joseph's fate spirals downward and out of control. The stranger of course, is the devil, whom we come to realize is less of a stranger in our midst than we would like. And the end for Joseph is dire—suffice it to say that the final movement of the work is entitled “The Triumphal March of the Devil,” with a percussion solo, rare for its time, as Satan's last word.

Now approaching its centennial, *L'Histoire du Soldat* is iconic, well-known and well-loved, and seemingly little in need of revision. So why are we changing it so radically for tonight's performance?

There are two reasons for reconsidering *L'Histoire*. For many people, the lightness of the Ramuz text and the concurrent lightness of much of Stravinsky's music simply does not make sense as an expression, in 1918 just after the end of World War I, of the horrors of war and the travails of a soldier's life. Stravinsky would certainly have claimed that not every work about a soldier made in wartime needs to be an expression of horror. But the inveterate sunniness of the music seems more an expression of Stravinsky's wartime exile in peaceful Switzerland than it does of the big questions of good and evil that the text proposes. In the most important revision of the text, Kurt Vonnegut, whose war came a generation later, creates a new story, recasting the hopelessly lost soldier as Eddie Slovik, the lone American soldier to be executed for desertion since the Civil War. The devil is an American General.

The second impulse for reconsideration comes directly from Stravinsky's musical language itself. As one of the first and most important pieces indebted to jazz, the African-American idiom of the day, Stravinsky made liberal use of instrumental and textural mannerisms he gleaned from the genre. Stravinsky was certainly not

the first to borrow from and capitalize on a musical language not his own. Artists from Beethoven to Moby have done the same. But a contemporary American point-of-view—at least this contemporary American’s point-of-view—is that we might want to reconsider questions of cultural appropriation in light of recent events in our country. Music is far more than sound. And African-American music, originally an expression of resistance to slavery, should remain a musical manifestation of solidarity with the powerless of our society.

So, let’s experiment tonight.

We have invited the great trumpet player, Peter Evans, whose piece *A Lover’s War* will be performed in interstices of *L’Histoire du Soldat* by a group of the Bay Area’s finest improvisers. Evans replaces the well-worn Ramuz text with the images of another kind of war through excerpted quotations from James Baldwin’s essay, “The Creative Process.” We’ve lost the Faust-lite story of neutral Switzerland and instead offer compelling and personal musical responses that will, we hope, be more attuned to the sharper edges and greater risks of this time and place. Peter writes powerfully of his motivations for this project in his program note, so I won’t comment further here.

But the big question remains: Will it work? Will intense juxtapositions of such different musical and textual forces tell the story of both the journey and the stranger? Will an ancient tale become sharper and more present? And will our efforts create, as Mary Oliver writes, that rare artistic experience of something “inexplicable made plain.”

As always, we hope, and expect, that you will tell us.

Steven Schick
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