

Contemporary Players mix it up with Stravinsky

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There's a winning combination of tautness and shagginess about "L'Histoire du Soldat" ("The Soldier's Tale"), Stravinsky's little theatrical fable. The story, about a military Everyman who makes a deal with the devil, is compelling without making much narrative sense, and although the music is rhythmically fine-grained, the score itself is a collection of separate instrumental numbers that can accommodate a variety of interpolations.



Photo: Peter Gannushkin

Peter Evans tweaked Stravinsky's theatrical fable.

So “Lover’s War” — a gloss on “L’Histoire” by the trumpeter and composer Peter Evans that was unveiled in Herbst Theatre on Friday, Feb. 17, during a short and utterly beguiling concert by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players — found itself with plenty of room to maneuver.

The premise was simple, the results enchanting. Evans jettisoned all the spoken narrative, and with it the faux folk tale by Stravinsky and C.F. Ramuz that traditionally structures the piece. In its place, he assembled a series of improvisatory episodes for seven jazz instrumentalists to serve as mortar to the Stravinskian bricks of “L’Histoire.” And for a bit of the old spoken-word feel, there were short readings from James Baldwin’s essay “The Creative Process.”

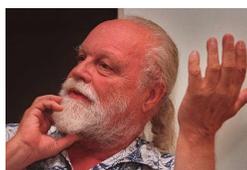
Those excerpts, read by artistic director Steven Schick, were perhaps a bit too lapidary to land with their intended political punch in this context (although there was a startled laugh at the timely opening line, “There are forever swamps to be drained”). But the musical interactions between the evening’s two strands were alarming, engrossing, even revelatory.

For one thing, they helped nudge Stravinsky’s music out of its slightly stiff relationship with jazz, which in 1914 was based — like that of so many cosmopolitan Europeans — on a limited sense of what this new musical strain was about. The growling, extravagant freedom of Evans’ solo excursions, or his long, exquisite dialogue with the exuberant violinist India Cooke, helped underscore the manic energy that lurks beneath the fussy formalism of Stravinsky’s writing.

And though the Players’ rendition of “L’Histoire” was alert and forthright throughout, it wound up taking a back seat to the inventive splendor of Evans and his cohort.

Evans himself set the stage with a brilliant soliloquy, beginning almost surreptitiously and gradually blossoming into a ferocious burst of multiphonic yowls and pyrotechnics. That turned

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out to be a blueprint for many of the improvised episodes — start out small, build to a frenzy — but each one pursued the path in a different way.

A haunting collaboration among percussionists Schick, William Winant and Nava Dunkelman turned shadowy insinuations into a hard-driving musical conversation. English hornist Kyle Bruckmann joined Dunkelman for a tight-knit exchange of musical views.

The last and most exciting episode brought in all seven players, beginning with bassoonist Dana Jessen and growing to a fierce but wonderfully responsive tumult. In a coda, Cooke and violinist Hrabba Atladottir traded gentle instrumental witticisms, topping one another with flair to bring the evening to a delightful conclusion.

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