

*Suite from l'Histoire du Soldat (1918)*

Igor Stravinsky

"I conceived the idea of *l'Histoire du soldat* in the spring of 1917. The thought of composing a dramatic spectacle for a *theatre ambulant* had occurred to me more than once since the beginning of the war. However, the sort of work I envisaged would have to be small enough in the complement of its players to allow for performances on a circuit of Swiss villages, and simple enough in the outlines of its story to be easily understood. I discovered my subject in one of Afanasiev's tales of the soldier and the Devil. In the story that attracted me, the soldier tricks the Devil into drinking too much vodka. He then gives the Devil a handful of buckshot to eat, assuring him it is caviar, and the Devil greedily swallows it and dies. I subsequently found other Devil-soldier episodes and set to work piecing them together. Only the skeleton of the play is Afanasiev-Stravinsky however, for the final form of the libretto must be credited to my friend and collaborator C.F. Ramuz. Afanasiev's soldier stories were gathered from peasant recruits to the Russian-Turkish wars.

The shoestring economics of the original *Histoire* production kept me to a handful of instruments, but this confinement did not act as a limitation, as my musical ideas were already directed toward a solo-instrument style. My choice of instruments was influenced by a very important event in my life at the time, the discovery of American jazz. The *Histoire* ensemble resembles the jazz band in that each instrumental category—strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion—is represented by both treble and bass components. The instruments themselves are jazz legitimates, too, except the bassoon, which is my substitution for the saxophone. The percussion part must also be considered as a manifestation of my enthusiasm for jazz. I purchased the instruments from a music shop in Lausanne, learning to play them myself as I composed. My knowledge of jazz was derived exclusively from copies of sheet music, and as I had never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written. I could imagine jazz sound, however, or so I liked to think. Jazz meant, in my case, a wholly new sound in my music, and *Histoire* marks my final break with the Russian orchestra school in which I had been fostered."

—Igor Stravinsky

"*L'Histoire du Soldat* was first performed at Lausanne, Switzerland under Ernest Ansermet's baton on September 28, 1918. It was arranged by Stravinsky into a *Suite* for a performance at the Wigmore Hall in London on July 20, 1920, conducted also by Ansermet. The instruments used were clarinet, bassoon, cornet a piston, trombone, violin, double bass, and percussion. At a later time, Stravinsky distilled the musical essence of this work into a version for violin, clarinet, and piano."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bleefield, Charles and Terese Bleefield, trans. *Igor Stravinsky: The Man and His Music*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949).