The Soldier's Tale (1918)

What a difference a century makes!

—or maybe not so much.

The performance you are about to see today was created by Stravinsky in 1918 in part as a response to a European world grappling with social and economic turmoil born from the four years of mechanized brutality of World War I. Then—disease, the "Spanish 'Flu'," a true pandemic, sweeping across the globe, victimizing far many more even than had perished fighting. Now, a little more than a century later, in our own time, no Great War, just decades of seemingly endless conflicts and threats of conflict, deep social unrest and distress. And then—almost unimaginable—another pandemic, and again a relentless global tide of victims. As it was in his own time, Stravinsky's *The Soldiers Tale* is a story for our time too.

Stravinsky's early successes were ballets in collaboration with Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russe in Paris. The *Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913) all draw on Russian folk tale or mythic sources for their stories and on elements of Russian folk music in keeping with strong Russian nationalist influences of the late 19th Century. World War I interrupted this career path as did, also, the Russian Revolution of 1917, which severed Stravinsky's ties with his homeland and made circumstances economically difficult for him and his family. *The Soldiers Tale* was to be one solution to this, not a full ballet but a small-scale theatrical piece that could easily be taken on tour: a narrator, a couple of actor-dancers and a small group of musicians. The pandemic, however, had other plans: after a successful première in Lausanne an outbreak of the "Spanish 'Flu'" forced cancellation of the rest of the tour.

As with his earlier ballets, Stravinsky chose a story based in Russian folk material: a tale of several encounters between a homeward bound soldier and the Devil, and of a bargain not entirely unlike the one that Faust makes. Centuries of European history have shaped the iterant soldier as a suitable Everyman figure. To develop the narrative Stravinsky collaborated with the Swiss writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. The outlines of the basic folk tale are typically episodic, a little like the flow of components in a dream sequence. However, as an adaptation done by a poet the meanings that accumulate from the story may be more complex than those in a simple folk tale. The story is presented in two main parts, the first of which is divided into scenes.

A Brief Outline

The soldier is headed home on leave and, resting, rummages through his knapsack and locates a number of familiar personal items including his cheap violin which he

then plays. The Devil (who has been watching) demands the violin and offers a magic book in exchange. With little hesitation the soldier agrees. However, the Devil insists the soldier come home with him for three days to teach him to play, and in turn be instructed how to use the magic book to become rich. Yet, when he is transported back to his village events reveal that three days has in fact been three years, his fiancée is married with children and even his mother flees him thinking him to be a ghost.

The Devil shows up again and the soldier accuses him of cheating him out of his fiddle, his favourite possession. But in reply the Devil treats him with harsh authority and insists he learn to use the magic book to his advantage—while he himself gets to keep the fiddle. As time passes, the soldier does learn and prospers and justifies his material way of life—yet gradually begins to recognize the emptiness of his life without the happier human contact he had in earlier times. He realizes that those who have nothing have everything, while he who has everything has nothing. He is rich but "dead." The Devil appears once more (disguised as an old peddler woman) and tries to interest the soldier in some rare items, which are actually the contents of his original knapsack. The last item the Devil offers is the violin, but insists the soldier play it. He tries but the violin is silent. With the Devil gone, the soldier throws away both the violin and the book.

Part 2 begins with the soldier on the road again looking for a new country to start in. A fellow soldier he meets tells him of the plight of the king's only daughter seemingly incurably ill. The king will marry her to anyone who can cure her. The soldier is encouraged to try. At the palace he tells his fortune using a pack of cards. He draws nothing but hearts (even the queen)—a promising sign. Of course, the Devil shows up with the violin. But our soldier realizes at last how he can be free again: he must lose all his possessions, everything that might be seen as a debt in his bargain with the Devil. He proposes cards, the Devil accepts and the soldier, by design, loses repeatedly, his final card is the Queen of Hearts that falls to the Devil's Ace of Spades. The defeated (and now inebriated) Devil staggers and falls.

The soldier takes the violin and plays for the princess. She is cured, leaves her bed and dances: a Tango, a Valse, and a Ragtime (it's 1918 and music is on the change). His life appears completed now with a wife. The Devil appears defeated, but in fact is not. He puts a curse on the couple: he will claim the soldier if they ever leave their kingdom. You know what happens—years later the soldier yearns to go to his childhood village and see his mother, to take the princess with him and in that way to unite all the stages of his life. He thinks he can do it without "anyone" knowing about it. He goes on ahead to the frontier. We know who's waiting. The Devil has the violin once again in his possession. The soldier hears a voice call him from behind, but he cannot turn back. He is in the Devil's thrall and is meekly led away. Unlike the Faust story, this Devil appears to win.

And what does it all mean . . . ?

That's the task for each of us of course, but probably we've had practice in earlier years, puzzling out the significance of the objects (violins, magic books etc.) and the characters (itinerant soldiers, archetypal figures of evil etc.), and actions (curing uncurable princesses etc.) that are the ingredients of folk tale, never quite knowing what **precisely** it all means. Stravinsky's *Tale* is similarly fluid in structure and meaning. Some details are clear—the violin is clearly an important element—is it like the soldier's soul, that he gives away thoughtlessly but then seeks to reclaim? You can work on that. There are moments of deliberate moral focus: early in the tale the Devil presents the indecisive soldier with a clear and practical question: "How are you going to live?" Then there is another section near the end of the tale in which clear moral conclusions are drawn, The Great Choral, where the issue of fulfillment in human life is raised: "The thing you were before you changed you can't be any more . . . you have to choose . . . you can't have everything . . . ." But it is likely the implied meanings, that emerge without explicit comment from the characters' words and actions carry more weight—a traditional figure, the Devil, is presented as a mouthpiece for society's moral authority, and our individual Everyman, though prospering and content for a while, is unable to survive and is led into permanent captivity at the end. In addition to that there may be reflections of the contemporary world of the creators who seem to have deliberately made their 1918 production contemporary not traditional—the soldier in Swiss wartime uniform, the Devil in disguises of various present-day characters, the soldier-as-prosperous-capitalist who conducts business on the telephone. Is Stravinsky updating the setting, as some have suggested, to make the Tale a partial comment on the Russian Revolution that appeared at first to have liberated Stravinsky's homeland—until the emergence of Lenin turned the Revolution into something entirely different. So what might *The Soldier's Tale* have to say about our own time?

The music

The music of Stravinsky with which most of us are familiar and which established his career prior to World War I, are the ballets The *Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913). We recall the rich, colourful, even startling orchestration. *The Soldier's Tale*, instead, is scored for a small group of seven different players, namely clarinet, bassoon, cornet, trombone, violin, double bass, and percussion. The single percussionist is responsible for two snare drums of different sizes, a larger snare drum, a bass drum, cymbals, tambourine and triangle. Stravinsky insisted the musicians be a visible, physical component of the overall dramatic performance, not merely off-stage accompanists for the speakers, actors, dancers.

The musical forces may be small but the range of their associations is appropriate to the tale of an itinerant soldier with rural roots. Different instrument combinations recall village, wedding, dance and military bands of different parts of Europe, and the violin style is that of the travelling Hungarian gypsy tradition. This music represents the blossoming of a new style for Stravinsky, one which he had already begun to develop during the war years, one reflecting influences from "modernist" European composers rather than the late Russian romanticism of his earlier ballets. A style in which the clarity of lines in counterpoint to each other is more prominent than the lush harmonies of his earlier orchestral writing, it is later referred to as "neo-classical." Already, in *The Soldier's Tale*, we find the Little Choral and Great Choral deliberately recalling baroque musical styles, although how Stravinsky treats his classical "authorities" is far from straight forward, ironic rather than deferential, and in this way the music too becomes another source of meaning in this deceptively complex *Soldier's Tale*.