

COLORADO COLLEGE

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Summer
Music
festival

Program Notes
by
Michael Grace

ON THE FRINGE

Sunday June 22, 2025

5:00 PM

Celeste Theatre

The Soldier's Tale

Igor Stravinsky
(1882-1971)

Igor Stravinsky was born in Russia in 1882. At the outbreak of WW I in 1911, he was forced to flee Russia with his family and move to Switzerland to escape the war. Before and during the war years he continued to compose major works and curiously often turned to Russian subjects. These included the three great ballets – *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* – all written for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe in Paris. Large and colorful works, these created vignettes of strong Russian culture as manifest in the characters – Russian soldiers, fairy tale figures, soldiers, and princesses, etc. The last of these legendary ballets, *The Rite of Spring*, also dealt with a tragic conclusion in suicide. With the war over, Stravinsky was eager to write works that involved army figures, but not necessarily as tragic as his earlier characters.

He composed *L'Histoire du soldat (The Soldier's Tale)* in 1918, generally considered to be the year in which the war ended. He inherited a scenario written for the Narrator, a Dancer, a Princess, the Devil, three Actors, a septet of musicians and, of course, a soldier. The story is based on a Russian parable of a soldier who trades his violin to the Devil in return for vast economic gain. We take the violin to be a symbol of his soul. So, like Faust in his own parable, our soldier sells "his soul to the Devil." For audience members who know the story of Faust, perhaps in the version by Goethe, you will know how this comes out. To add power to the ending, here the Devil – aka Mephistopheles aka Joseph or the Devil – leads what at first appears to be a glorious march.

This version of the story was created to be acted continuously by the cast. It is set in two halves. He specified, however, that this is not a play, an opera, or a ballet, but more accurately a theater piece. Stravinsky hoped that with such a small number of performers, *L'Histoire* could be performed in villages for large numbers of ordinary people and that they would learn lessons about sacrificing one's values for money. Unfortunately, his idea of a grand tour was scotched by a significant flu epidemic in Switzerland in 1918.

Stravinsky chose two instruments from each instrumental family, trying to achieve the widest tonal range possible: violin and double bass (strings); clarinet and bassoon (woodwinds); trumpet and trombone (brass). At times, he also added a percussionist responsible for a number of different instruments. This wide tonal range was desired for the different styles of music he wanted to adopt. And he did indeed reveal considerable skill in creating characteristic styles. In one scene, the princess becomes ill and there is an opportunity for the soldier to cure her by playing the violin. In order to cheer her up, he plays three dances – a tango, waltz, and a ragtime. And guess what? It worked and she was cured.

Critic Eric Bromberger found just the right words to capture the feelings of this scene. “In the last scene the devil achieves his final triumph. Several years have passed, and the soldier and princess go to visit his home. Once they pass the frontier, the devil, dressed in brilliant scarlet, appears and gets control of the violin. Defeated, the soldier slowly follows him. *L’Histoire du Soldat* began with a march, and now it concludes with another, the *The Devil’s Triumphant March*. Brilliant and animated, this music grows leaner as it proceed – the other instruments drop out, leaving only the percussion to bring the music to its eerie close. Many have compared this effect to stripping away the extraneous to leave only the music’s skeleton – “a fitting conclusion to this tale of demonic triumph.”

As we observe this final *Triumphant March* of the Devil, the Narrator utters his final word.

*Il ne faut pas vouloir ajouter
À ce qu’on a, ce qu’on avait;
On ne peut pas être à la fois
Qui on est et qui on était.
Il faut savoir choisir;
On n’a pas le droit de tout avoir:
C’est défendu.
Un bonheur est tout le bonheur;
Deux, c’est comme s’ils n’existaient plus.*

*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.*

UPCOMING SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL EVENTS

www.coloradocollege.edu/musicfestival

Music at Midday

12:15 p.m. June 23, June 25, June 26, June 27, Packard Hall, free

Music and Art Talk

1:30 p.m. June 25, Fine Arts Center Agents of Care Hall, free

Festival Artists Pre-Concert Recital

5:45 p.m. June 26, Packard Hall, free

Festival Artists Concert

7 p.m. June 26, Packard Hall, ticketed event

Festival Orchestra Concert

Scott Yoo, *conducting*

7:00 p.m. June 17, Celeste Theatre, ticketed event

Pre-Concert Lecture with Michael Grace begins at 5:45 p.m. in the CAC Screening Room

