



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Thomas Wilkins, Music Director

2020 - 2021 SEASON

Celebrating 100 Years

Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale

Thursday, April 8, 2021 at 7:30 PM | Holland Center

JEAN FRANÇAIX
(1912-1997)

Octet for clarinet, horn, bassoon, and string quintet

Moderato

Scherzo

Andante

Mouvement de Valse

Rosario Galante, clarinet
Brett Hodge, horn
James Compton, bassoon
Anne Nagosky, violin
Holly Piccoli, violin
Brian Sherwood, viola
Paul Ledwon, cello
Nate Olson, double bass

JESSIE MONTGOMERY
(b. 1981)

Strum for string quartet

Largo

Allegro

Andante

Allegro

Holly Piccoli, violin
Anne Nagosky, violin
Brian Sherwood, viola
Paul Ledwon, cello

IGOR STRAVINSKY
(1882-1971)

Suite from *Histoire du soldat (The Soldier's Tale)*

1. Marche du soldat (The Soldier's March)
2. Petits airs au bord du ruisseau (Airs by a Stream)
3. Pastorale
4. Marche royale (The Royal March)
5. Petit concert (The Little Concert)
6. Trois danses (Three Dances): Tango, Valse, Ragtime
7. Danse du Diable (The Devil's Dance)
8. Grand choral (Great Chorale)
9. March triomphale du Diable (Triumphal March of the Devil)

Rosario Galante, clarinet
James Compton, bassoon
Scott Quackenbush, cornet
Jason Stromquist, trombone
Derek Dreier, percussion
Susanna Perry Gilmore, violin
Nate Olson, double bass

Have you ever loved a piece of music so much that you've crossed the line from enthusiastic listener to potential cult member? Have you actively sought out loved ones, pets, and casual acquaintances (recording in hand), ready to overstep personal boundaries in the name of watching them hear that piece for the first time? Have you then suffered utter disbelief as they don't melt into a puddle of rapturous tears in front of your very eyes?

My therapist (cough) would tell you that you probably went wrong when you interrupted an important task, or maintained unblinking eye contact, or put the headphones on the cat. She might remind you that personal freedom means that not everyone has to love something as much as you do, and she's right – you don't have to lose your mind over these three pieces.

But I *really* hope you do.

The music tonight pulls no emotional punches; the means are different, but the impact is the same: genuine, cup-runneth-over feelings. Whether they aim to give joy, wax nostalgic, or rope you into some sincerely invested story-telling, these three pieces are arrows to the soul.

And I promise I won't stare at you the whole performance, so let's get into it.

We start with Françaix.

Françaix: Octet for Clarinet, Horn, Bassoon, and String Quintet (1972)

Jean René Désiré Françaix was born talented, encouraged early and often, quickly excelled and composed a *lot* of extraordinary music into his 80s. He combined good timing with capability; his first publication was so impressive that it put him in front of *the* Nadia Boulanger, 20th Century Sage of Composition.

Here's the thing, though – the 20th century was a hell of a time to compose. Amidst two World Wars, countless explosive conflicts and horrifying humanitarian nightmares, music was going through nearly unrecognizable changes. Composers seemed to split into camps that either composed to reflect the world around them – moving into atonality, increasingly more experimental techniques with sharper edges – or turned to wit, humor, and burgeoning popular music for expression.

Françaix was the latter, and he composed with a particular motto: “musique pour faire plaisir,” or, “music to please.” He was dinged for it, though, saying “I am always told that my works are easy. Whoever says that has probably not played them. [...] My works are not considered as contemporary music, but I am not yet dead.” Françaix certainly wasn't alone in this style, but his longevity – he died in 1997! – took him beyond his compatible contemporaries (Poulenc, Milhaud), his former antitheses (Schoenberg, even Stravinsky), and into the territories of composers like Elliott Carter and Pierre Boulez. Over the decades classical music had indeed changed, but Françaix's mindset had not.

Thank goodness. Françaix has over 200 works in his repertoire, but this disarmingly effervescent yet surprisingly complicated Octet is a *treasure*. Herbert Glass calls it a “charmer-with-punch,” and I've yet to come up with a more accurate description. Somewhat ironically, it came about because Willi Boskovsky, concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, leader of the Phil's New Year's Day concerts, and first violinist of the Vienna Octet, needed a “stop-gap” for a concert featuring the Schubert Octet. Although the work was ultimately dedicated to the Octuor de Paris, and to the “revered memory of Franz Schubert,” its Viennese origins and nod to Maestro Boskovsky are written directly into the work, closing with a waltz that would be right at home in Austria on January 1st.

So – why do we love it? If you’ve heard Schubert’s Octet, you may be bracing yourself for a Romantic marathon. Don’t worry – the only thing Francaix kept from Schubert is the instrumentation. This work has you on the hook from the very opening – the most gentle yet engaging of pulls. A brief string introduction gives way to a simple, comforting, gorgeous tune that passes between clarinet and bassoon. It transforms slightly around the edges into nostalgia and longing as the rest of the ensemble provides support, returning eventually to brightness. Things start to wind up, there’s a brief fanfare... and then we’re off to the races. The Octet has four movements: the Moderato – Allegrissimo we’ve just launched into, a Scherzo that continues to fill us all with Fizzy-Lifting Drink, an Andante that picks up where the opening theme left off, and a perfect mini Valse to close it all out. Let’s face it – loving this work isn’t optional. It worms its way into your heart before you even know it’s there.

Jessie Montgomery: *Strum* for String Quartet (2006, rev. 2012)

Jessie Montgomery is an American composer, violinist, and educator who draws from her upbringing in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the influence of the artists around her (including her own parents – her father is a musician, her mother a performing artist and story-teller), and the reality of the 21st century. On top of an exploding composing career, Montgomery helped found the PUBLIQuartet and continues to perform with the Catalyst Quartet, the Silkroad Ensemble, and the Sphinx Virtuosi. Every organization that she’s involved with, whether as a performer, curator, or composer, is committed to presenting and commissioning works by underrepresented artists. Consequently, Montgomery has been called “one of the most relevant interpreters of 21st century American song and experience.”

The Omaha Symphony presented Montgomery’s *Starburst* as a work for string orchestra this past October, and we’re thrilled to bring *Strum* to you this evening in its original, string quartet iteration. This has been one of Montgomery’s hallmarks; she’s made a point of revisiting most of her works and providing the means to program them accessibly, regardless of stage space, personnel, or pandemic-protocol necessary. And – when we say revisit, we mean a completely fresh look, allowing works like *Strum* to “explode with life” (*Washington Post*) whether as a full string orchestra or a string quartet. Here, Montgomery explains:

“*Strum* is the culminating result of several versions of a string quartet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012 the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinanti that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.”

Why will you love *Strum*? Probably for the same reasons we do – if the Francaix was a “charmer-with-punch,” the Montgomery is “disarmingly folksy.” You get lulled in, but Montgomery pushes the level of intensity in a delicious slow burn through the end of the work. Hearing it is a delight but being able to see it live – the sheer energy of the notes flying around the stage – will get you totally wired. It’s an addictive feeling that we highly recommend.

Igor Stravinsky: *Suite from L’histoire du soldat (The Soldier’s Tale)* (1918)

We’ve had slightly ironic, good-humored joy. We’ve had electric execution. And now, the finale of our program is folk-lore nostalgia, laced with danger and a healthy respect for the Devil, all courtesy of Igor Stravinsky.

Stravinsky is considered possibly the most important composer of the 20th century, a staggering accomplishment, but not a surprise. It’s partially due to his reputation as a style-chameleon; you could call him the opposite of Francaix in that he had no issue adopting (and most of the time furthering) the next direction in classical composition. That *The Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring* and *Pulcinella* and his very serial *Septet* could all be written by the same person is a tremendous argument for Stravinsky reigning supreme. He didn’t just change with classical music in the 20th century; in some ways, he defined classical music in the 20th century.

L’histoire du soldat, or “The Soldier’s Tale,” was written at a very... familiar sounding point in time, towards the

beginning of his career. Stravinsky and his wife had ventured to the Swiss Alps as a treatment for her side-effects of tuberculosis. They intended to spend just a few short months and then World War I engulfed Europe, making it impossible for them to return home. The Stravinskys made do, but large projects for the composer soon dried up. With an eye on their dwindling finances, Stravinsky began to brainstorm with Swiss writer C.F. Ramuz about a cost-efficient program, something that could use a skeleton crew of musicians and actors, travel without set, and tour villages without concert halls.

They found Alexander Afanasyev's take on a Russian folk-tale called *The Runaway Soldier and the Devil*, scored it for a mixed septet to cover all instrument families and ranges, and added up to three actors with an optional dancer. *L'histoire du soldat* was born.

The first performance was a success.

Then... the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 began.

What happened next, we all feel deeply in our bones. The emergence of *L'histoire* as a masterpiece, however, was a silver lining of the circumstances. Once performances were possible again, the tiny non-opera, non-ballet, non-musical production made its unique way forward to great success. Even with access to expanded resources after the war, Stravinsky kept the original septet of instruments, resulting in a score that is demanding across the board, and specific characters or themes that stick with specific voices. The violin and percussion parts are especially virtuosic; the former the living embodiment of the Soldier's soul, the latter, the machinations of the Devil as he plays the long game towards victory.

What makes this work a masterpiece is the combination of extraordinary writing and execution, on and off the music stand. Though the Suite contains no narration, you can hear the Soldier's triumphs and failures, his elation and his utter misery. And... I'll spoil the ending – you really, really think he's going to win this battle, and the anxiety is *palpable*. This is why we love *L'histoire*: no matter how many times we've heard this story – AND know how it ends! – we still can't help but hope that this time will be different.

It's not, sorry.

That won't change the joy in hearing it, though. If this is your first time through *L'histoire*, I apologize for ruining everything. Here's a mini-synopsis to make up for it!

The Soldier's March introduces Joseph the soldier, happy to be on his way home but bemoaning that the best thing he has with him is his fiddle. He stops by a stream to play – *Airs by a Stream* – acknowledging that his violin is well-worn, but personally beloved. The Devil, inexplicably nearby, can't help but notice and stops by to barter with Joseph for the violin, disguised as an old man. They haggle, and Joseph finally caves. He trades the violin for a book that will grant him unlimited wealth by telling him the future. The Devil asks for three days of violin lessons, and Joseph obliges.

During *Pastorale*, Joseph has finally resumed his journey and returns home with the Book of Wealth, only to realize that the three days the Devil asked for were in fact three years. People regard him with horror, and he curses the Devil, who appears to chide him and shows him how to use the Book. Joseph becomes fabulously rich... but still miserable. He finally rips the Book apart and plans to leave every worldly possession behind him. He tries – in vain – to play the violin “kindly” returned by the Devil, but nothing comes out. Suddenly, royal heralds with trumpets and trombone relay that the Princess is deathly ill; during *The Royal March* they share that anyone who can cure her will be granted permission to marry her.

Joseph packs his violin and a scant pack and heads to the palace. The night before his chance to heal the Princess, the Devil shows up, eager to ruin things. Joseph realizes that he can only truly be free of the Devil if he loses all the wealth made possible by the Book... so he deliberately loses everything to the Devil in a game of cards. Suddenly, the violin plays for him once more! (*The Little Concert*). Joseph uses the violin to heal the Princess (*Tango, Valse, Ragtime*) and, just as they're embracing, the Devil makes a “last” stand for control. Joseph uses the violin to force the Devil to dance uncontrollably (*The Devil's Dance*), and it looks – briefly – like Joseph has finally defeated his enemy for good.

Unfortunately, the Devil is in the details. He retreats, but issues Joseph a warning before he leaves: if either he or the Princess crosses the kingdom's border, their souls are his. (*The Great Chorale*) The couple manages this with no problem for years... until Joseph begins to wish his mother could join them at the palace. The Princess persuades him that they could make the journey in secret, and Joseph believes that maybe he *could* have it all.

They begin the journey. As they near the border, Joseph starts to outpace the Princess. He reaches the border post first...

... where the Devil is waiting, violin in hand. (*Triumphant March of the Devil*) Joseph hangs his head and follows the Devil, not hearing the Princess calling out behind him.

There are, I would argue, two morals to this story. The true moral is stated by the Narrator: "No one can have it all." The Devil might argue, though, that his last lines are more important:

"He who laughs last he laughs most; as I shall do to watch him roast!"

An incredible finish to an incredible program. We hope you love it. Enjoy.