The Soldier’s Tale
COCKTAIL HOUR WITH THE FELLOWS
27 – 29 SEPTEMBER
SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, UTZON ROOM
The Soldier’s Tale

After the success of his ‘Russian’ works like The Rite of Spring and Petrushka Stravinsky reached something of an impasse in around 1918, which he would break by developing his neo-classical style in works like Pulcinella. Exploring his stylistic options led Stravinsky to write several ragtime pieces, of which this one five-minute piece is the first. He described it as a ‘composite portrait of this new dance music’ (well, new to him...Scott Joplin, who had just died, had been writing rags since the 1890s) and it certainly contains all the elements: a march-like speed, lots of syncopated rhythms working against the pulse, and an orchestral sound dominated by what Stephen Walsh calls the ‘matter-of-fact bordello-piano twang of the cimbalom.’

Stravinsky’s contemporary Béla Bartók likewise suffered a creative impasse which he too alleviated by re-examining the music of the Baroque. Around 1926 he also returned to the string quartet.

His third string quartet is a single-movement work articulated in a clear pattern of slow-fast-slow-fast sections. Bartók explores the range of ‘extended techniques’ which were to become the staple of later twentieth century music, among them sliding glissandos; bowing with the wood, rather than hair of the bow; bowing at the bridge to produce an eerie sound or above the fingerboard to produce a much paler tone. But none of the sounds is used merely for local effect. In the first part a tightly wound chromatic idea is treated contrapuntally though interrupted by terse chords (often built up of symmetrical intervals, in contrast to the asymmetry of a major or minor chord) and rhythmic figures and leading to more ‘stable’ lyrical material, despite a pervasively dissonant palette. The second part plays with fugue and variation techniques but never sounding like anything other than Bartók. The ‘recapitulation of the first part’ is actually a development of the opening material, and the Coda ends frenetically with material derived from the second part.

Witold Lutosławski was the most important Polish composer of the 20th century. During World War II the young man earned a living playing piano duets with fellow composer Andrzej Panufnik in a cafe, the only form of musical activity permitted by the German occupying forces. After the war, the Polish authorities enforced a restrictive, Soviet-inspired cultural policy, with an emphasis on social usefulness and folk material. Lutosławski nonetheless perfected his technique and produced several outstanding works based on Polish folk melodies. In the mid-1950s the government line became more relaxed, and in the climate of increased artistic freedom and access to Western developments, he was at last able to formulate a mature style. The Dance Preludes date from just before this key turning point in the composer’s career and constitute...
Lutosławski’s ‘farewell to folklore for an indefinite period’, in his own words. Originally for clarinet and piano, there is also a miniature concerto version as well as the version for nine-piece chamber ensemble to be heard this evening. Musically, the work is a straightforward suite of five miniature dances, allowing the solo clarinet to shine in a number of contrasting moods and tempos.

Dating from around the same time as Ragtime, The Soldier’s Tale grew out of a Russian fable of a soldier who tangles with the devil. It was the first theatrical piece Stravinsky had not composed for the Russian ballet of Diaghilev. Wartime conditions required a small ensemble, which suited Stravinsky’s inclination. He chose the most representative high and low types from each of the string, wind and brass families: violin and double bass, clarinet and bassoon, cornet and trombone. A large array of percussion, with a single player, consisted of instruments which Stravinsky bought and taught himself to play. The Concerto Suite follows the outline of the stage show.

The Soldier’s March, of the Soldier on leave, returning to his home, has prominent parts for the cornet and trombone. When he stops and gets out his violin, that instrument begins its elaborate part. Since the violin embodies the Soldier’s soul, The Soldier’s Violin has a wistful and pastoral character, using a motif Stravinsky heard as he dreamt of a young gypsy sitting by the road and playing the violin for her child. The first of the Tale’s two parts relies on narration – of the devil, disguised as a butterfly collector, bartering with the Soldier for his violin in return for a book which will tell the future, spiriting the Soldier away to teach him to play; of the soldier’s return – the promised three days turning out to be three years – treated with horror as one returning from the dead; of the Soldier’s using the book to gain ‘wealth untold’; but losing all his former happiness; of his buying back his violin from the devil, disguised as an old clothes woman.

The second part is told largely in music. Coming to a country where the Princess lies ill, the Soldier is persuaded to try his luck at curing her. Meeting the devil again on the way to the palace, the soldier plays cards in order to lose all his new wealth, freeing himself from the devil’s thrall. The Soldier takes back his violin, and plays The Little Concert, which revives the Princess (most of the themes of the piece are used in this number). In Three Dances: Tango, Waltz, Ragtime, the couple’s happiness is expressed. The Tango was already a dance craze in Europe, and Ragtime was a novelty to Stravinsky, who had studied sheet music brought back from the USA from Ernest Ansermet. ‘Jazz’, he remembered later, ‘meant wholly new sound in my music; and The Soldier’s Tale marks my final break with the Russian orchestral school in which I had been fostered.’
The Devil reappears, and the Soldier plays *The Devil’s Dance*, causing his opponent to fall exhausted. He is not vanquished, and swears revenge if ever the Soldier should once again cross the frontier. The *Chorale*, based on the Lutheran chorales of the German Protestant Church, is a reflection on happiness, during which the narrator warns against seeking to have more than one had already. The Princess pleads with the Soldier to return to his homeland, and on the frontier the Devil triumphs. The echoes of the *Faust* and *Orpheus* legends are strongest here. *The Devil’s Triumphant March*, finally dominated by the receding sound of the drums, exemplifies as well as any part of the music Stravinsky’s brilliant and virtuosic handling of each of his instruments, emphasising their individuality yet laying the ground work for a new kind of ensemble – mastery the first time in a manner which has had many imitators.

ADAPTED FROM NOTES BY GORDON KERRY, ELLIOTT GYGER, DAVID GARRETT
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Stravinsky

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James Julian† clarinet
Aidan Gabriels† horn
David Johnson† trumpet
Dale Vail† trombone
Adam Cooper-Stanbury† percussion
Rebecca Lagos Principal Percussion, Sydney Symphony*

Bartók
Tobias Aan† violin
Jessica Oddie† violin
Beth Condon† viola
Eliza Sdraulig† cello

Lutosławski
Tobias Aan† violin
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Stravinsky

The Soldier’s Tale
Roger Benedict conductor
Jessica Oddie† violin
David Barlow† double bass
James Julian† clarinet
Jordy Meulenbroeks† bassoon
David Johnson† trumpet
Dale Vail† trombone
Adam Cooper-Stanbury† percussion
† = SYDNEY SYMPHONY FELLOW

*Rebecca Lagos will be playing the cimbalom for this performance.

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