

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 21 April 2025
7.30pm

Wigmore Soloists

Benjamin Marquise Gilmore violin
Rachel Roberts viola
Steffan Morris cello
Tim Gibbs double bass
Thomas Blomfield oboe

Michael Collins clarinet
Robin O'Neill bassoon
Philip Cobb trumpet
Peter Moore trombone
Owen Gunnell percussion

Richard Katz narrator

Alfredo Casella (1883-1947)

Serenata Op. 46 (1927)

*I. Marcia • II. Minuetto • III. Notturmo •
IV. Gavotta • V. Cavatina • VI. Finale*

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Quintet in G minor Op. 39 (1924)

*I. Tema con variazioni • II. Andante energico •
III. Allegro sostenuto, ma con brio • IV. Adagio pesante •
V. Allegro precipitato, ma non troppo presto •
VI. Andantino*

Interval

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

The Soldier's Tale (1918)

By arrangement with Chester Music Ltd

Histoire du Soldat

Composer: Igor Stravinsky

Text writer/Librettist: Charles Ferdinand Ramuz

English translation by Michael Flanders & Kitty Black



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The three works in this programme were composed within nine years of each other and during a feverish period of musical experimentation. Caught up in and remaining in thrall to this atmosphere throughout their lives, the three composers underwent frequent metamorphoses of style and form. Stravinsky pivoted from Russian traditionalism to *avant-gardism* to neo-classicism to advanced serialism, while Prokofiev pushed conventional form to its limits with his spikily individual musical language. Casella, perhaps less well-known than the others, had a similarly transformational musical journey: early influences were followed by experiments in the *avant-garde*, then a U-turn into neo-classicism and an interest in the Baroque. This spirit of enquiry led not only to a loosening of musical form but also to less conventional combinations of instruments (sometimes for purely pragmatic reasons). Prokofiev's Quintet is scored for what David Fanning called a 'wacky ensemble' of oboe, clarinet, violin, viola and double bass; Casella's *Serenata* is for clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, violin and cello; and Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* adds a narrator to its chamber ensemble.

Casella's *Serenata*, composed in 1927, belongs to his latter, neo-classical phase. Its overall spirit is lively and bustling, often with the strict instruction '*senza rallentare!*' (without slowing down) at the end of each movement. The trumpet has a starring role in the jaunty first movement, with the rest of the ensemble acting as backing group. It is in a straightforward A-B-A format, with the 'B' section featuring some unusual dynamic effects, foreshadowing the atmospheric slow movement. The trumpet is more integrated in the *Menuet*, which sandwiches a decidedly eerie middle section between two framing passages of beguiling charm.

The slow movement is in entirely different territory. It is thickly chromatic, occasionally darkly melodramatic, and contains haunting instrumental effects such as a clarinet trill against skeletal string harmonics. The sprightly *Gavotte*, again in A-B-A format, leaves out the strings, and its brief 'B' section is a slinky excursion with muted trumpet. The strings take over for the soulful *Cavatina*; technically a duet, but the double-stopping throughout suggests larger forces. The players assemble for the finale which is a tarantella-style whirl, barely flagging throughout and bringing the piece to a good-natured close.

Prokofiev's Quintet was originally composed as a ballet score entitled *Trapetsiya* (Trapeze) for a company led by Boris Romanov. The reasons for the small ensemble were largely economic. But Prokofiev's 'wacky ensemble' generates a highly distinctive effect: oppositional, even gnarly, rather than smoothly blended. The opening has an intriguingly curdled character, dominated by each instrument swinging repeatedly up and down intervals of fourths or fifths. In the first variation, the 'swinging' becomes more pronounced as the tempo slows down, and the strings pulse moodily against the woodwind. The second variation is livelier and spikier, with shrieking glissandi from the violin, and a

sparkling intertwining of lines across the ensemble. The curdled music from the start returns to complete this movement. The double bass takes the stage next, its punchy rhythms forming the basis of the second movement, including a section marked 'pesante' (heavy) in the middle. The thick texture resolves, unexpectedly, onto a sweet C major chord at the end.

One can imagine the ballet troupe having some difficulty with the irregular rhythms of the third movement, though its tumbling energy is infectious. The fourth movement resembles an experiment in sonority; its grinding 'theme', such as it is, is a kind of morose murmur, passed across the whole ensemble. An 'allegro' follows, comprising fragments of melody, and brief, battling rhythmic figures. The finale is a minuet and trio, with a solemn opening, followed by a central section which has the flavour of snarky dance, with deliberate 'wrong notes' in the strings. The minuet returns, with increasingly insistent repetitions of the main theme, before the Quintet rumbles to a close.

Compared to other dramatic works by **Stravinsky** in the 1910s – *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* and the work-in-progress *Les Noces* – *The Soldier's Tale* is on a considerably smaller scale. This was largely due to the economic and fragmented circumstances under which it was written. Stravinsky was living in Switzerland, having relocated from Paris mainly for his wife's health (she was suffering from tuberculosis), and in dire financial straits. His Russian property and other interests had been dismantled or were otherwise inaccessible due to both the Russian Revolution and the unfavourable treaty at the end of World War I. And he was struggling to get paid work (or even paid *for* work by Diaghilev, always tardy in these matters). He had met the Swiss writer Charles Ramuz who conceived the idea of a small performing troupe, touring Europe and giving performances in *ad hoc* venues to keep costs down. *The Soldier's Tale* is scored for a septet, elaborate percussion, plus narrator (in the original there were also two actors and a dancer).

The story, from a collection by Alexander Afanas'yev, was set during the time of Tsar Nicholas I, but for Stravinsky the tale was timeless – 'essentially human', as he put it – and also personal in its account of a soldier isolated from his homeland. Stravinsky's music comprises a series of characteristic numbers – march, tango, ragtime – with a prominent role for the violin, which becomes emblematic of the Soldier's soul. Given the violin's central 'dramatic' role, the music is not merely incidental. In the second half it gains further momentum, particularly in the series of dances for the Princess, and the diabolical, uncontrollable dance of the devil. After seeming to be vanquished at the end of the drama, the devil regains control over the soldier, his soul, and his violin. In the concluding march, the instruments fall away until – after two final chords from the violin – only a drum remains.

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