

Stravinsky Histoire du Soldat, Rarities and Premieres

Steven Richman, conductor; Harmonie Ensemble/New York
Lucy Shelton, soprano; Mark Peskanov, violin; Martin Bruns,
baritone; Mikhail Svetlov, bass; Doris Stevenson, piano.
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With four premieres and wonderfully lively, idiomatic recordings of familiar and relatively obscure Stravinsky, this beautifully recorded disc is an absolute winner. Despite the sour message of *How the Mushrooms Went to War* (they didn't go and were hence destroyed by the beetles), this is a predominantly cheerful collection of bright pieces that show Stravinsky as a masterful musical humorist—whether in a raucous, bluesy *Tango*, a song for two bassoons, or even in his stunning Octet for Winds. I'd add his version of *La Marseillaise* for solo violin, which the French took in good grace. (Not so Bostonians, when he rearranged the *Star Spangled Banner* in 1940. The police came to Symphony Hall, confiscated the parts, and booked Stravinsky for “tampering with public property”. The notes here reproduce his mug shot. He must have been turned in by a music-lover).

First, the premieres. Originally a solo piano piece from 1940, *Tango* is best known in its 1953 orchestration for chamber group. Here it is played as an effective violin-piano duet that makes the chamber version seem inflated. *How the Mushrooms Went to War*, as the title is rendered here, is a Russian work that dates from 1904 when Stravinsky was studying with Rimsky-Korsakov. The notes tell us that it received its first performance in Rimsky's home. It sounds to my ears rather like Mussorgsky. There is little of the rhythmic play we associate with Stravinsky, and the humor is heavy-handed. The tale is evidently based on an allegory Czarists used to tell their children. (Or perhaps the children of other parents. Could anyone want his or her child in the Czarist army?) Each kind of mushroom in turn declines to serve: The legs of the golden mushrooms are too skinny, the morels are too old, and others are gentry, peasants, or servants. All are somehow exempt, and the beetles get them all. *La Marseillaise* is a one-minute arrangement for violin that isn't that far from the original, except in some dissonant double-stops. The *Petit Ramusianum Harmonique* is a peculiar little piece spoken and sung in French and meant to be a birthday present for C.F. Ramuz, the librettist of *L'Histoire du soldat*. It consists of short conversations and shorter song fragments in which Ramuz receives the compliments of visitors and offers them drink.

The more substantial pieces in this collection include a **brightly energetic recording of the wonderful *Octet for Wind Instruments***. The **suite from *L'Histoire du Soldat*** is rather winsome and confiding in the “Pastorale” and “The Soldier at the Brook,” which makes the mock pomp of “The Royal March” **that much more enchanting. The winds play beautifully, precisely, and yet with ample verve and beautiful tone. The dance movements are played daringly. The accenting seems perfect, as is the balance and tact of the ensemble. They are neither too dry nor too loose. An excellent disc from a group well worth hearing, this homage to Stravinsky is a boon to all the composer's fans.**

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