

# 'L'Histoire du Soldat' Joins Salute to Stravinsky

By THEODORE W. LINNEY Jr.

**I**GOR STRAVINSKY'S "L'Histoire du Soldat" ("The Soldier's Tale") is one of those pieces everyone talks about but no one performs much. Yet in these days of mixed media, its combination of dance, music and dialogue makes it a natural vehicle for the small ensemble aiming to give audiences an event rather than another concert.

With the Stravinsky centenary being marked this season, there is another incentive to play less frequently heard works like "L'Histoire." Small wonder, then, that the Harmonie Ensemble, a chamber group founded by Steven Richman in 1978, will offer an all-Stravinsky program Sunday evening at the 92d Street Y, and that "L'Histoire du Soldat" will be its centerpiece. (For reviews of last night's Stravinsky triple bill at the Metropoli-

tan Opera, see page C18.)

The presentation at the Y will be choreographed and directed by Anna Sokolov and will have Howard DaSilva as its narrator. Chris Sarandon will play the part of the Devil and Joseph Forrelo the Soldier, and Naomi Sorkin will dance the part of the Princess. Other works on the program include the Octet for Wind Instruments; the "Pastorale" for solo violin and four winds, with Gerald Tarack, violinist, and "Pribaouti," a piquant setting of folklike songs for voice and eight instruments, with the mezzo-soprano Elaine Bonazzi as soloist. The program also offers what is billed as the American premiere of "Lied ohne Name," an unpublished duet for bassoons that lasts a minute.

Preparing the performance has meant more than the usual workload for Mr. Richman. "It's a good thing I learned this score a year and a half ago," he says, "because I spend 99 per-

cent of the time being a producer: 10 hours a day, seven days a week for the last three and a half months. The work is endless. You get involved in everything. But it's going to be the best 'L'Histoire' ever in New York."

Stravinsky began work on "L'Histoire du Soldat" early in 1918, one of the bleaker periods of World War I, which he spent holed up in Switzerland. In 1915, the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet had introduced him to C. F. Ramuz, a well-known author in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and the composer soon developed a working friendship with Ramuz that lasted through his Swiss sojourn. Ramuz supplied Stravinsky with the French versions of the texts for "Les Noces" and "Renard" and in the gloom of the war's final winter he suggested to the composer the idea of an ironic treatment of soldiering, seen through a series of vignettes involving two or three actors and a handful of in-

strumentalists.

The tale in "L'Histoire du Soldat" is that of a soldier who has something the Devil wants. "It's the Everyman story," Mr. DaSilva says. "It's not as sophisticated as 'Peer Gynt' is, but it involves the same battle between man and the Devil." Rehearsing the work, Mr. DaSilva adds, has been "fascinating."

"It's the first time I've ever done this. And I've never had a more difficult time with narration. I don't read music, but I thought I would be able to keep up with it all right. It goes out so fast, though, and the pacing is so erratic, that I find I must depend on Steven Richman quite a lot. He's very good. He encourages the keeping to the beat; at the same time, we talk about trying to achieve freedom within the rhythm. And I admire Anna Sokolov's work with the dance. It's such fun. I am absolutely absorbed watching the battle over the soul of the Princess."

**'This the Devil. Pure Evil'**

As one of the participants in that battle, Mr. Sarandon is not above playing the Devil's advocate. "What's really interesting to me about this particular character," he says, "is that there's no guilt, and little psychological nuance. We usually think of psychological attributes when we're performing a role. But this is rather refreshing, and it's something Miss Sokolov has been clear about: this is the Devil. Pure evil. He wants what he wants, when he wants it, and he gets it."

"The piece uses the metaphor of the violin as innocence," Mr. Sarandon continues. "The Devil wants it. Acting the part, there's no question of the 'whys.'"

Stravinsky's original idea was to produce an entertainment, not a complex study, a work that would not require an elaborate production. The air was parody, and the story mixes sarcasm and humor in equal amounts. Stravinsky worked on the piece through the summer of 1918; on Sept. 28, two weeks before the end of the war, it received its premiere in Lausanne with Ansermet conducting.

A number of musical influences can be detected in "L'Histoire du Soldat," beginning with that of Russian folk music, which shaped much of Stravinsky's music in the years following "Le Sacre du Printemps." But by the time he turned to "L'Histoire," Stravinsky was beginning to react against his own preoccupation with folk materials. His deliberate effort to diffuse the focus of the work, by incorporating elements of American ragtime (which he had begun to absorb from sheet music Ansermet gave him), Spanish popular music and dance forms like the tango, are readily apparent.

The scoring of the piece is extremely spare and, like "Les Noces," but in a very different way, it depends heavily on percussion. During the composition of "L'Histoire," Stravinsky is said to have collected a vast array of percussion instruments in his studio and ex-



Principals in "L'Histoire du Soldat" are, front row, from the left: Steven Richman, Anna Sokolov and Elaine Bonazzi. At rear are, from the left: Joseph Forrelo, Naomi Sorkin, Chris Sarandon and Howard DaSilva.

perimented with the combinations and rhythms that make the part so interesting and challenging. In addition to percussion, which will be played by Raymond DesRoches, the score includes a prominent part for violin, to be played by Mr. Tarack. Charles Mellich, clarinet; Peter Simmons, bassoon; Raymond Mass, trumpet; Ronald Borror, trombone, and Donald Palani, string bass, complete the ensemble.

Because "L'Histoire du Soldat" involves so many elements beside music — the score refers to itself as a piece "to be read, played and danced" — no two performances can ever be alike. All sorts of things can be brought to the piece by the participants, particularly by the actors. Sometimes, though, what makes a performance special is what the performers do not bring to it.

In his conducting class at Yale University, the Swiss conductor Gustav Meier used to tell the story of how he

performed "L'Histoire du Soldat" with members of the court orchestra of the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie. The musicians, none of whom had much experience with modern idioms, played the piece "wonderfully." Mr. Meier would recall fondly. The synopses and shifts of meter and accent that made it such rough going for even the best-trained of European musicians, gave the Ethiopians no trouble at all. It was only later that Mr. Meier learned how they did it: not being particular about notation, the Ethiopian players simply ignored the bar lines and played the rhythms as they were written, without counting.

It is unlikely that will happen on Sunday.

Tickets for the Harmonie Ensemble's Stravinsky evening, which starts at 7:30, are priced at \$7.50, \$9 and \$10.50. They are available at the Y's box office, 1395 Lexington Avenue at 92d Street, or through Chargit, by calling 944-8300.