

L'Histoire du Soldat

Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* became something of a signature piece for the new music concert series I was playing with. We performed the piece many times over the years, with several different stagings. The violin part is devilishly (ha ha) difficult, and it was my commitment to playing this part well that put me on the map as a violinist, in my early 30s.

Until this time, I had a smallish idea of myself as a total musician. I refused to think of myself as anything but a composer, and therefore refused to take responsibility for any professional standard of excellence in regard to my other, more physical, musical activities. I liked to think of myself as an excellent conductor, but the violin was just something I did for money, and it was not invested with any personal pride, or indeed any personal satisfaction. That all changed the second time I played *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

The first time, was not so great. I had delayed wood-shedding the part until the day before the first performance. I practiced a good three hours the night before, and got it sounding pretty good; but the trouble is that three hours of dedicated practice the night before a performance is not enough to nail any piece down, especially one so hard. I played OK, people were complimentary; my musicianship was never in question, as I have always been able to get at the spirit of the music, no matter how lame my technique was. However, God and I both knew I had not done my best—I had not given the piece the attention it deserved, so I had not been rewarded with the most I could have got out of it. That was O.K. with me, because I still wasn't taking responsibility, you see.

But then something else happened: that same month, coincidentally, UC Berkeley was putting on a performance of the same piece, so we went to go see it. When the small orchestra came out, I observed that the violinist was a fairly young girl, 19 or 20, on the small side, with a violin that looked huge on her. I had to kick back and laugh, "Ha,ha, this is going to be good! I'm sure this little kid can play this massive piece! Ha! This is gonna make my guilty conscience feel a lot better."

Well, after the first few bars, I had to eat my words; the girl shamed me. True, her musicianship was not on my level, but her violin playing was

excellent—much cleaner, much clearer, and much much better in tune than mine. This affront to my violin ego added insult to injury, and I became determined to present that piece as well as it could be played, at our next scheduled performance, which was in two months.

I began preparing with less than an hour of practice a day, and gradually built up to around two hours a day, every day. I practiced slow, I practiced with the metronome, I practiced small bits over and over, I practiced for perfect intonation. I still wasn't hearing myself as a front-line player; in fact I wasn't even thinking of myself all, I just wanted this piece to sound good—I was thinking of the piece.

We played *L'Histore du Soldat* twice that summer. The first night was very good, I played much better than on my spring humiliation. But, the second night I caught fire, an Angel came and sat on my head, I could do no wrong. I had one of those rare moments when I observed myself playing from above—in all humility, I must confess that I was brilliant. Afterwards droves of fellow musicians and audience members crowded forward to congratulate me—they were blown away by me, they were in awe of me.

Basically, what I did that night was to set a new standard for myself—no longer could I tolerate, in myself, a violinist who was striving for any less than perfection. It was not the playing that was better this time, it was the striving, it was the attitude; it was taking responsibility for every note, and not forgiving myself for my weaknesses because, "I am not really a violinist." I denied myself that out—no more excuses—if I was going to play in public, I was going to play my best, the best which I occasionally achieved in casual practice but which had never routinely demanded of the myself in performance. It was at this point that I decided to become a first rate new music soloist, and that is what I became. No longer just a composer, but a musician.