Saturday 21 March / 7pm
Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
The Soldier's Tale

In late 1917, Igor Stravinsky was sitting out the Great War at Morges in neutral Switzerland with his wife Katya and their four children, and money was tight:

I was also in a position of the utmost pecuniary difficulty. The Communist Revolution, which had just triumphed in Russia, deprived me of the last resources which had still from time to time been reaching me from my country, and I found myself, so to speak, face to face with nothing, in a foreign land and right in the middle of the war.

It was imperative to find some way of ensuring a tolerable existence for my family.

But at least he wasn't alone. Together with a little group of equally cash-strapped fellow artists – the conductor Ernest Ansermet, the writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz and the painter René Auberjonois – he conceived the idea of "a little travelling theatre, easy to transport from place to place and to show even in small localities". Ramez and Stravinsky began adapting a series of Russian folktales by Alexander Afanasyev. Since this was a time of war and revolution, this "Soldier's Story" – "to be read, played and danced" – of a Russian soldier who sells his fiddle to the Devil seemed both timeless and uncannily timely.

Rehearsals seem to have been lively affairs. The main roles were given to student performers from Lausanne University. Jean Villard-Gilles, then only 20, spoke the part of the Devil and years later he remembered the experience:

Stravinsky and Ramuz were in charge of the daily rehearsals – the former always in a frenzy of enthusiasm, inventiveness, joy, indignation, headache; leaping on the piano as if it were a dangerous foe that had to be subdued by a bout of fisticuffs, then bounding on to the stage, swallowing glasses of kirsch whose after-effects had to be combatted with the aid of aspirin; the latter calm, attentive, friendly…

The Soldier's Tale was premiered at the Théâtre Municipal in Lausanne on 28 September 1918. Stravinsky had written for the biggest orchestra they could afford: a clarinet, a bassoon, a cornet, a trombone, a violin, a bass and a percussionist. The staging was basic. In front of Auberjonois' backcloth, the narrator sat on a barrel next to a table with a carafe of white wine and a glass.

The plan was to take it on a Swiss tour, but the 1918 influenza pandemic was spreading and the theatre closed the next day. Yet Stravinsky's music still does a wonderfully wry and entertaining job of conjuring up that strange, fever-dream moment in European history: tunes that sound like folkdances, set to neon-lit harmonies. Fairy-tale figures dancing jerkily to rags and tangos; empty stomachs firing creative imaginations. And through it all - as the clarinet squeals, the drums rattle and the narrator unfolds his sinister story - the unsettling feeling that maybe the Devil really *does* have the best tunes. Sitting comfortably? You won't be…

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Maria Włoszczowska violin

Polish violinist Maria Włoszczowska is recognised for her versatile musicianship, performing as a soloist, director and chamber musician, in addition to her roles as Artistic Partner of the Royal Northern Sinfonia and Director and Leader of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe.

Recent career highlights include Maria's solo debut at the BBC Proms with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and conductor Dinis Sousa, directing the Chamber Orchestra of Europe at Mozartwoche Salzburg and in Kronberg, directing the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife, performing Beethoven's Violin Concerto with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Mozart's Violin Concerto No.5 with Orquestra XXI, and concertos

by Vivaldi, Bach and Telemann with Neues Bachisches Collegium Musicum under the baton of Reinhard Goebel at Leipzig's Gewandhaus. In the 2024/25 season, Maria performed as soloist and director with, among others, the Orchestre de Chambre de Paris, the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and Amsterdam Sinfonietta, as well as returning to the Chamber Orchestra of Europe for several projects as their newly appointed Director and Leader.

Maria appears frequently at Wigmore Hall and at international festivals such as Musikdorf Ernen, Lockenhaus Festival, Lammermuir Festival and IMS Prussia Cove as well as in residency at Yellow Barn, Vermont. Distinguished artists such as Jeremy Denk, Alasdair Beatson and Dinis Sousa regularly join Maria in recital and recent highlights include her New York recital debut presenting all six Bach Sonatas for violin and keyboard and performing Ives' complete cycle of Violin Sonatas at Wigmore Hall and Lammermuir Festival alongside Jeremy Denk.

A recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society's Emily Anderson Prize, Maria based herself in the UK after completing her studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Hungarian violinist and conductor András Keller. In 2018 she won both First Prize and Audience Prize at the XXI Leipzig International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition. Maria plays on a violin by Francesco Stradivari.

Royal Northern Sinfonia

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From symphonies to string quartets, film soundtracks to choral masses, and original performances with awesome artists from Sheku Kanneh-Mason to Self Esteem, the orchestra's members have got one of the most varied jobs there is. They're always looking for fresh new sounds from up-and-coming composers, inviting local communities to share a stage, and doing everything they can to inspire and prepare the musicians of tomorrow to one day take their place.

They're also working hard to smash the barriers that can stop brilliant people getting into classical music. They've teamed up with national partners to support women conductors to develop their careers, to help global majority musicians get vital experience in the orchestra world, and to celebrate disabled and non-disabled musicians breaking new ground together in inclusive ensemble RNS Moves. And they bring new musical opportunities to the region, headlining the first-ever BBC Proms weekend outside London.

Because they whole-heartedly believe orchestral music is for anyone - big cities and rural villages, tiny babies and life-long listeners, die-hard fans and curious minds - they travel far and wide to make sure there's top-notch classical music on offer for anyone ready to say "I'll give that a go". You'll find them in churches, castles, and community venues across the North, as well as leading the charge in Carlisle, Kendal, Middlesbrough, and Sunderland.

With 65 years of success to build on, they've signed a dynamic artistic leadership – Music Director Dinis Sousa, Artistic Partner Maria Włoszczowska, Principal Guest Conductor Nil Venditti and Associate Conductor Ellie Slorach – to lead the way into a bold, bright future.

Wherever the orchestra play and whoever they share a stage with, every performance is a chance to see, hear and feel the music.