

MICHAEL DAUGHERTY

Dead Elvis

Born: April 28, 1954, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Work composed: 1993

World premiere: July 1993, Michael Daugherty conducting The Grand Tetons Chamber Players, Charles Ullery as bassoon soloist.

At 54 years of age, Michael Daugherty cannot be described anymore as a young American composer. Yet he remains young in his compositional heart. The son of a dance-band drummer and the oldest of five siblings—all professional musicians—Daugherty cut his musical teeth playing keyboards in jazz, rock and funk bands, and continues to draw from the musical vernacular in works composed for the concert hall. His hands-on experience in pop music preceded formal studies in composition at North Texas State University, Manhattan School of Music and computer music at Paris-based IRCAM, Pierre Boulez' landmark institution of musical modernism.

Daugherty's musical interests and training cut a wide swath that encompass work with jazz arranger Bill Evans (who provided the ensemble setting for Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain* and other classic jazz albums) and study with the late György Ligeti. As a teacher, Daugherty's résumé includes stints at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He has also served as composer-in-residence with the Detroit and Colorado symphony orchestras. Among the most performed American composers, his music has garnered many awards including the Stoecker Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The titles of a number of his compositions reflect and celebrate his early immersion in pop culture: *Route 66*, *Sunset Strip*, *Motorcity Triptych* and *Le tombeau de Liberace*, among many others.

Against that background, one is not surprised that the seemingly endless presence of “The” Elvis Presley (the article in front of his name courtesy of the late Andy Kaufman) would provide another iconic figure for Daugherty's musical inspiration. The resultant work, *Dead Elvis*, was commissioned by Boston Musica Viva and Chuck Ullery, principal bassoonist with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

The composer has noted:

“No rock and roll personality seems to have inspired as much speculation, adulation, and impersonation as Elvis Presley (1935-77). In *Dead Elvis*...the bassoon soloist is an Elvis impersonator accompanied by a chamber ensemble. It is more than a coincidence that *Dead Elvis* is scored for the same instrumentation as Stravinsky's *L'histoire du Soldat* (1918), in which a soldier sells his violin, and

his soul, to the devil for a magic book. I offer a new spin on this Faustian scenario: a rock star sells out to Hollywood, Colonel Parker, and Las Vegas for wealth and fame. I use *Dies irae*, a medieval Latin chant for the Day of Judgment as the principal musical theme in my composition to pose the question, is Elvis dead or alive beyond the grave of Graceland? In *Dead Elvis* we hear fast and slow fifties rock and roll ostinati in the double bass, violin, and bongos, while the bassoonist gyrates, double-tongues, and croons his way through variations of *Dies irae*. Elvis is part of American culture, history, and mythology, for better or for worse. If you want to understand America and all its riddles, sooner or later you will have to deal with (Dead) Elvis.”

Many traditional concertgoers are uncomfortable with presumably “serious” art music that embraces the efforts of pop musicians, yet composers have virtually always drawn from the equivalent musical styles of their day. One need go back no further than Bach, whose countless (and wonderful) suites evolved from well-known dances of his time. In Michael Daugherty we have a living composer who working in the same tradition. Aside from the engaging and intrinsic qualities of *Dead Elvis*, the composer may also be narrowing the cultural abyss that separates “high” and “low” art—though that may be hoping for too much!

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)
***L’Histoire du soldat* (“The Soldier’s Tale”)**

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work composed: 1918

World premiere: September 28, 1918, in Lausanne, Ernest Ansermet conducting

Stravinsky’s three early ballets—*The Firebird*, *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*—put him on the international map. During the years following 1910, he traveled widely, settling into temporary quarters in Switzerland, Paris and Russia until the outbreak of World War I curtailed such peripatetic wanderings. Among his friends from that period was the noted conductor Ernest Ansermet, founder of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and a devoted advocate of Stravinsky’s music. In 1915, Ansermet introduced the composer to Swiss novelist and poet Charles Ferdinand Ramuz. Two years later Stravinsky and Ramuz embarked on a collaboration that eventuated in *L’Histoire du Soldat*. Ramuz provided a narrative script based on a story taken from a collection of Russian tales compiled by Alexander Afanasiev. The theme is an old one: a soldier on a ten-day leave is tricked by the Devil into losing his soul.

The modest, though imaginative, scoring reflected the difficulty of assembling large numbers of musicians for performing throughout wartime Europe. The ensemble consists of just seven players: violin, double bass, clarinet, bassoon, trombone and percussion

(which include various drums, cymbals, tambourine and triangle). Over the next several years, Stravinsky produced several variants including a suite shorn of the narrative. The story, of course, is itself a spin-off of the Faust legend. Musically it retreats from the primitivism (Stravinsky's chosen term) of the 1913 *Sacre du Printemps* and incorporates musical styles from the world of jazz (which the composer claims to only have seen in annotated form rather than heard) and popular music of that era.

Aside from the infusion of such elements into *L'Histoire*, the new work also marked a distinct change from the opulent scoring of the three above-mentioned ballets. From *L'Histoire* on, Stravinsky favored a leaner, more economical and international style that came to be known as Neo-classicism, which he employed for essentially the next three decades until he moved into 12-tone composition concurrent with the death of his nemesis, Arnold Schönberg, "discoverer" (as he described himself) of that serial technique.

Regarding the employment of a non-traditional musical vocabulary in *L'Histoire* Stravinsky later recalled: "My choice of instruments was influenced by a very important event in my life at that time, the discovery of American jazz...Jazz meant a wholly new sound in my music..." and, "The characteristic sounds of *L'Histoire* are the scrape of the violin and the punctuation of the drums. The violin is the soldier's soul, & the drums are *diablerie*."

Stravinsky explained the genesis of "The Soldier's Tale: "My original idea was to transpose the period and style of our play to anytime and 1918 and to many nationalities and none, though without destroying the religio-cultural status of the Devil...The Devil is the *diabolus* of Christianity, a person, as always in Russian popular literature, though a person of many disguises. Our soldier, in 1918, was very definitely understood to be the victim of the then world conflict."

The vibrant music of *L'Histoire* can stand alone shorn of its narrative text (as indicated by the popularity of the 1920 Suite), but a brief synopsis of the story line may help the listener:

Part I

The hapless soldier (Joseph) travels on foot to visit his far away home. En route he is met by the Devil disguised as an old man; he offers to buy the soldier's cheap fiddle. That failing, the Devil offers an alternative plan: he will give the young man a book that can bring him vast wealth. The deal is accepted when the soldier realizes that the book foretells the future. The Devil offers to teach the soldier the secrets of the book if the man shows the Devil how to play the violin. After three days, the Devil takes the soldier home. Upon arrival, however, the young man is confused and befuddled because everyone he encounters runs from him in fear. When he arrives at what had been the home of his fiancée he finds that she is not only married but has children. With increasing horror and dismay, the soldier realizes that three *years* have elapsed since meeting the Devil, not just three *days*. In the next several meetings the Devil appears in new and

equally deceiving disguises, finally selling the violin and other items back to Joseph, who quickly realizes that he can no longer play the fiddle.

Part II

Joseph leaves home, empty-handed and heartbroken. On a stopover at an inn he is told of an ailing princess whose condition remains incurable. The king has offered her hand in marriage to the man who can restore her health. The soldier heads to the castle and is met by the Devil, now pretending to be a virtuoso violinist. Convincing Joseph that he is controlled by the Devil because he still has the Evil One's money, the soldier is deceived into thinking that by losing the money in a card game he will be free. The plan seems to work in Joseph's favor. Enjoying his newly secured freedom, he takes the violin (which he can now play), and then triumphantly visits the princess's chambers and miraculously cures her through his musical performance. They embrace and the princess begins to dance. The Devil appears, not in disguise, but as himself. Joseph sees that he can defeat the Devil by playing his violin, and does so with desired results. Still, the Devil is not so easily undone. He warns the couple that they may not leave the castle or once again the soldier will be in thrall to his devious tormentor. Naturally, the princess becomes increasingly curious about her betrothed's past, convinces Joseph to take her to visit his home, which he does with disastrous results. The Devil is waiting for them, playing the violin. An utterly defeated Joseph follows the Devil without resistance.

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