IGOR STRAVINSKY *Petrushka* *(1947 version)*
BORN: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov), Saint Petersburg, Russia
DIED: April 6, 1971, in New York City
WORK COMPOSED: 1910-11; 1947 (re-orchestrated)
WORLD PREMIERE: June 13, 1911, with Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris; Pierre Monteux conducting

Who doesn’t love a good comedy? Watching Robin Williams in his stand-up routines would always bring on an asthmatic episode from laughing too much. My favorite comedic memory is watching *The Three Stooges* with my friend Aldo Forte. Aldo, who was born in Cuba and emigrated to the US with his family when he was eight years old, loved the *Stooges* and would fall off the sofa and howl with laughter while watching them. It was more fun watching him than the film! The antics of *The Three Stooges*, Laurel & Hardy, The Marx Brothers, Abbott & Costello, *The Honeymooners* and so many others mix their comedy with bits of minor violent actions.

That mixture of comedy and violence has been with us throughout history, most notably in puppet theaters of old with the puppet Pulcinella from 16th century Italian *commedia dell’arte*. This puppetry made its way to England in the form of *Punch and Judy* and first appeared there in 1662. Punch carried a stick, called a slapstick, that was as large as himself and he would freely use it upon most of the other characters in the show. In 18th century Russia the character was better known as Petrushka and was targeted for adult audiences. These puppet shows tended to be very popular, albeit quite violent. Over the years, as puppet theater became more popular with children, Petrushka became less vulgar and was performed in open air venues or on the streets. However, after the Russian Revolution the Soviet authorities forced Petrushka indoors to be able to better monitor his subversiveness.

The story of how Petrushka became a ballet is interesting. Stravinsky had great success with his ballet *The Firebird* and while he was completing it he claimed to have a vision of a solemn pagan ritual where elders sat in a circle watching a young girl dance herself to death. She was being sacrificed to the god of Spring, which is the theme of *The Rite of Spring*. Diaghilev approached Stravinsky immediately after the June 1910 premiere of *The Firebird* about a new ballet. Stravinsky told him of his vision and proposed the *Rite* theme and Diaghilev accepted the idea. By the end of September 1910 Stravinsky was living in Clarens, Switzerland and Diaghilev went to discuss the new ballet. However, Diaghilev was stunned to discover that Stravinsky was working on something completely different. It seems that Stravinsky had another vision: “In composing the music, I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts.” Although Stravinsky envisioned this as a concert piece, Diaghilev immediately thought of it as a theater piece and the idea of a puppet made him think of Petrushka.

Stravinsky composed the music during the winter of 1910-1911 for Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*. Michel Fokine set the choreography and Alexandre Benois did the sets. The great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky performed the title role. The original score called for a very large orchestra and in 1947 Stravinsky began revisions “with the dual purpose of copyrighting it and of adapting it to the resources of medium-sized orchestras.” He later
remarked, “Ever since the first performance of the score, I had wanted to balance the orchestral sound more clearly in a few places, and to effect other improvements in the instrumentation. The orchestration of the 1947 version is, I think, much more skillful.”

Throughout his career Stravinsky struggled with the issue of freedom. In his 1946 lectures at Harvard University, Stravinsky wrote, “I experience a sort of terror when, at the moment of setting to work and finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that everything is permissible to me… Will I then have to lose myself in this abyss of freedom?” A big turning point for Stravinsky was in 1910 when he finished The Firebird. Although his music was still influenced by the great Russian composers he admired, The Firebird was his first mature work and a break from tradition, establishing him in the world of music. The premiere of Petrushka was an overwhelming success and, until the legendary premiere of The Rite of Spring in 1913, it was the latest word in modern music.

The ballet is divided into four separate scenes (tableaux) that are connected by drum rolls signifying the raising of the curtain. The first and last scenes are set outside and the middle two are in private rooms.

The Shrovetide Fair
The ballet takes place in the 1830s and the opening scene is Admiralty Square in Saint Petersburg. It’s a sunny winter day and the Shrovetide Fair is in progress. A crowd is milling about and there are dancers, organ grinders and drunkards aplenty. An old magician appears and raises the curtain to reveal three puppets: Petrushka, the Moor and the Ballerina. As the Magician plays his flute the puppets come to life and move into the crowd with a powerful Russian Dance. The music for the first street dancer, the tune for flutes and clarinets accompanied by the triangle, is one Stravinsky heard played regularly outside his hotel in Beaulieu. The song is called Elle avait un’ jambe en bois and it was later discovered that it was under copyright, so arrangements had to be made with the composer, Emile Spencer, to pay him a royalty whenever Petrushka was played.

Petrushka’s Room
The walls of Petrushka’s room are black and decorated with stars and a crescent moon. The door to the Ballerina’s room has devils painted on it. A portrait of the scowling Magician dominates the space. As the curtain rises a large foot kicks Petrushka inside his room. The Magician has imbibed all three puppets with human emotions and feelings, although it is Petrushka who feels and suffers the most. He is conscious of his ugliness and grotesque appearance and bitterly resents how completely dependent he is on the cruel Magician. The striking dissonance of Stravinsky’s ‘Petrushka chord’ dual tonality (a C major triad against an F-sharp major triad) is, in the composer’s words, “Petrushka's insult to the public.” Petrushka tries to console himself by falling in love with the Ballerina and for a moment he believes he has won her love. But his antics frighten her and she flees. Petrushka blames the Magician and hurls himself at the portrait, only to succeed at tearing a hole in the room’s cardboard wall.

The Moor’s Room
This room is decorated with green palm trees and fantastic fruits on red ground. The Ballerina is
attracted to the brutal and stupid Moor. She visits him and distracts him from the coconut with which he is playing. Petrushka breaks in on their little love scene and goes into a jealous rage, after which the Moor quickly throws him out of his room.

The Shrovetide Fair (toward evening)
Back outside at the fair a festive crowd gathers to view a number of ballet set-pieces: *Dance of the Nurse-Maids, The Peasant and the Bear, Dance of the Gypsy Women, Dance of the Coachmen,* and *Grooms and Masqueraders.* At the end Petrushka enters being pursued by the Moor, who kills Petrushka with a slash of his scimitar. The Magician reappears and holds up Petrushka’s body, with sawdust dripping from it, reassuring the crowd that this was all make-believe. However, the ghost of Petrushka appears above the rooftops thumbing his nose at the Magician. Terrified, the Magician drops the puppet and flees.

Stravinsky described the ending: “I wanted the dialogue for two trumpets in two keys at the end to show that [Petrushka’s] ghost is still insulting the public. I was, and am, more proud of these last pages than of anything else in the score. Diaghilev wished to have me change the last four *pizzicato* notes in favor of ‘a tonal ending,’ as he so quaintly put it, though two months later, when *Petrushka* was one of the Ballets [Russes’s] greatest successes, he denied he had ever been guilty of his original criticism.”

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History: Igor Stravinsky - Petrushka. This ballet music has been performed only twice before by the DSSO: on November 17, 1979 (Taavo Virkhaus conducting), and on September 21, 2002 (Markand Thakar conducting). Including tonight, all DSSO performances have been of the 1947 revised version.

Instrumentation: Three flutes (third doubling on piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets (third doubling on bass clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, xylophone, cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, bass drum/cymbal, suspended cymbal, three snare drums), harp, piano, celesta and strings.