Igor Stravinsky was born in St. Petersburg in Russia in 1882. He studied piano and conducting, but he is most well-known for the music he composed, and became famous for writing orchestral music and ballets with tremendously unique and complex rhythms and textures. Nonetheless his music features a variety of styles and forms and very often incorporates elements of folk music, and he remains best known for his innovative and expansive use of rhythm. Although Stravinsky went to school to study law, in accordance with his father’s wishes, he also studied music and eventually became a student of the eminent composer Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. While he never finished his law school degree, Stravinsky’s early music caught the attention of Sergei Diaghilev, the director of the famous Ballets Russes. Diaghilev gave Stravinsky his start by commissioning *The Firebird*, whose success led to two more commissions, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*; these are still among his most famous works. When World War I began in 1914 Stravinsky moved to Switzerland, where he stayed through the war’s duration; he spent the next several decades based in France, and began experimenting with the so-called “neo-classical” style, composing a number of sonatas, symphonies, and other pieces whose superficial structure and characteristics resembled that of Haydn, Mozart, and other composers of the Classical period. He and his wife moved to the United States in 1939, where they spent the rest of their lives. Stravinsky continued to compose extensively, now also spending more time as a conductor as well, taking time especially to conduct his own music. He died in New York City in 1971 at the age of 88.

The “March” and “Waltz” heard on this concert are from the second of Stravinsky’s two Suites for Chamber Orchestra, both of which he composed while living in France in the early 1920s. It was during this time that Stravinsky was first immersed in the idea of neo-classicism: to compose a suite for orchestra, much less a march or a waltz, was a somewhat backwards-looking idea on the face of it, but these pieces are quite progressive -- at just over a minute in length, the March is a wonderful miniature study of march rhythm ostinato, with an impressive variety of tone color drawn from reduced orchestral forces. Stravinsky’s Waltz is not much longer and plays with ostinato in the same way, only now with more of a lilt, supported by spiky, angular woodwinds; it would make for strange and wonderful music to dance to.