

PROGRAM NOTES

Igor Stravinsky - *Symphony of Psalms*

Igor Stravinsky

Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.

Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Symphony of Psalms

The trick, of course," Stravinsky once told Robert Craft, "is . . . to compose what one wants to compose and to get it commissioned afterwards." In the case of the *Symphony of Psalms*, commissioned for the Boston Symphony Orchestra before Stravinsky had composed a note, he wrote what he wanted to anyway, calling it a "symphony" partly to appease those who *thought* they had ordered an orchestral work. Stravinsky also refers back to the original meaning of the word as a simple and powerful gathering together of sounds, here "a choral and instrumental ensemble in which the two elements should be on an equal footing, neither of them outweighing the other." Stravinsky's orchestra inhabits a unique sound world: there is an unusual concentration of flutes and trumpets, but no clarinets, violins, or violas.

Stravinsky's own account of the composition of this great work follows, and needs no addenda. But since composers don't always point out their greatest masterstrokes, here are a few additional comments. Listen closely to the first chord—it recurs several times during the opening minutes of the first movement—for although it is a simple E minor triad, in Stravinsky's hands even a conventional chord becomes distinctive. In assigning the triad's notes to the instruments of the orchestra, Stravinsky hands out twice as many Gs as Es or Bs—contrary to what textbooks teach—and then concentrates these pitches either in the high reaches of the flutes, oboes, harp, and pianos, or in the low register of the bassoons, trombones, and basses—with nothing in between. Moreover, Stravinsky marks the chord not fortissimo, as one would expect, but plain mezzo-forte—having learned long ago that he didn't have to raise his voice to speak with force and power. (The predominant G of Stravinsky's first chord, incidentally, prepares our ears for the end of the first movement, when the music lifts upward to a brilliant G major triad.)

The final pages of the *Symphony of Psalms*, with the pianos, harp, and timpani moving slowly back and forth through three notes (E-flat, B-flat, F), like the solemn tolling of church bells while the chorus intones its words of praise, is one of the most celebrated passages in Stravinsky's output. It is all the more impressive for being slow, quiet, austere, and

repetitive. When E-flat finally rises to E-natural, and the music sinks into C major, Stravinsky achieves a simple power rare in music of any century.

The *Symphony of Psalms* was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Koussevitzky fell ill the week of the premiere, which was then postponed until later in the month; in the meantime, Koussevitzky gave permission for the European premiere to go ahead according to schedule, thus making that the world premiere.

Igor Stravinsky on the *Symphony of Psalms*

The commissioning of the *Symphony of Psalms* began with the publisher's routine suggestion that I write something popular. I took the word, not in the publisher's meaning of "adapting to the understanding of the people," but in the sense of "something universally admired," and I even chose Psalm 150 in part for its popularity, though another and equally compelling reason was my eagerness to counter the many composers who had abused these magisterial verses as pegs for their own lyrico-sentimental "feelings." The psalms are poems of exaltation, but also of anger and judgment, and even of curses. Although I regarded Psalm 150 as a song to be danced, as David danced before the Ark, I knew that I would have to treat it in an imperative way. My publisher had requested an orchestral piece without chorus, but I had had the psalm symphony idea in mind for some time, and that is what I insisted on composing. All of the music was written in Nice and in my summer home at Echarvines. I began with Psalm 150 and my first notation was the figure that bears such a close family resemblance to Jocasta's "Oracula, oracular" [from *Oedipus rex*]. After finishing the fast-tempo sections of the psalm, I went back to compose the first and second movements. The "Alleluia" and the slow music at the beginning of Psalm 150, which is an answer to the question in Psalm 40, were written last.

I was much concerned, in setting the psalm verses, with problems of tempo. To me, the relation of tempo and meaning is a primary question of musical order, and until I am certain that I have found the right tempo, I cannot compose. Superficially, the texts suggested a variety of speeds, but this variety was without shape. At first, and until I understood that God must not be praised in fast, forte music, no matter how often the text specifies "loud," I thought of the final hymn in a too-rapid pulsation. This is the manner question again, of course. Can one say the same thing in several ways? I cannot, in any case, and to me the only possible way could not be more clearly indicated among all the choices if it were painted blue. I also cannot say whether a succession of choices results in a "style," but my own description of style is tact-in-action, and I prefer to talk about the action of a musical sentence than to talk about its style.

The first movement, "Hear my prayer, O Lord," was composed in a state of religious and musical ebullience. The sequences of two minor thirds joined by a major third, the root idea of the whole work, were derived from the trumpet-harp motive at the beginning of the allegro in Psalm 150. I was not aware of Phrygian modes, Gregorian chants, Byzantinisms, or anything of the sort, while composing this music, though, of course, influences said to be denoted by such scriptwriters' baggage-stickers may very well have been operative. Byzantium was a source of Russian culture, after all, and according to current indexing I am classifiable as a Russian, but the little I know about Byzantine music was learned from [musicologist Egon] Wellesz long after I had composed the *Symphony of Psalms*. I did start to compose the psalms in Slavonic, though, and only after coming a certain distance did I switch to Latin (just as I worked with English the same time as Hebrew in *Abraham and Isaac*).

The "Waiting for the Lord" psalm makes the most overt use of musical symbolism in any of my music before *The Flood*. An upside-down pyramid of fugues, it begins with a purely instrumental fugue of limited compass and employs only solo instruments. The restriction to treble range was the novelty of this initial fugue, but the limitation to flutes and oboes proved its most difficult compositional problem. The subject was developed from the sequence of thirds used as an ostinato in the first movement. The next and higher stage of the upside-down pyramid is the human fugue, which does not begin without instrumental help for the reason that I modified the structure as I composed and decided to overlap instruments and voices to give the material more development, but the human choir is heard a cappella after that. The human fugue also represents a higher level in the architectural symbolism by the fact that it expands into the bass register. The third stage, the upside-down foundation, unites the two fugues.

Though I chose Psalm 150 first, and though my first musical idea was the already quoted rhythmic figure in that movement, I could not compose the beginning of it until I had written the second movement. Psalm 40 is a prayer that a new canticle may be put into our mouths. The "Alleluia" is that canticle. (The word alleluia still reminds me of the Hebrew galosh-merchant Gurian who lived in the apartment below ours in Saint Petersburg, and who on High Holy Days would erect a prayer tent in his living room and dress himself in an Ephod. The hammering sounds as he built this tent and the idea of a cosmopolitan merchant in a Saint Petersburg apartment simulating the prayers of his forefathers in the desert impressed my imagination almost as profoundly as any direct religious experience of my own.) The rest of the slow-tempo introduction, the "Laudate Dominum," was originally composed to the words of the *Gospodi pomiluy*. This section is a prayer to the Russian image of the infant Christ with orb and scepter. I decided to end the work with this music, too, as an apotheosis of the sort that had become a pattern in my music since the epithalamium at the end of *Les noces*. The allegro in Psalm 150 was inspired by a vision of Elijah's chariot climbing the heavens; never before had I written anything quite so literal as the triplets for horns and piano to suggest the horses and chariot. The final hymn of praise must be thought of as issuing from the skies, and agitation is followed by "the calm of praise," but such statements embarrass me. What I can say is that in setting the words of this final hymn, I cared above all for the *sounds* of the syllables, and I have indulged my besetting pleasure of regulating prosody in my own way. I really do tire of people pointing out that "Dominum" is one word and that its meaning is obscured the way I respire it, like the "Alleluia" in the Sermon [*A Sermon, a Narrative, and a Prayer*], which has reminded everybody of the *Psalms*. Do such people know nothing about word-splitting in polyphonic music? One hopes to worship God with a little art if one has any, and if one hasn't, and cannot recognize it in others, then one can at least burn a little incense.

From *Dialogues and a Diary*, by Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. Published by Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

acknowledgment is given to the author and to Chicago Symphony Orchestra. For reprint permission, contact Denise Wagner, Program Editor, by mail at: Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 220 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60604, or by email at wagnerd@csso.org.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs and artists subject to change without notice.