

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Igor Stravinsky

Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.

Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

### Symphony in C

Stravinsky began the Symphony in C in Paris in the autumn of 1938 and completed the score on August 19, 1940, in Beverly Hills, California. The title page bears the dedication: "This symphony, composed to the Glory of God, is dedicated to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of its existence." The composer conducted the Chicago Symphony in the first performance on November 7, 1940. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave the world premiere performances of Stravinsky's Symphony in C on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on November 7, 8, and 12, 1940, with the composer conducting.

Stravinsky wrote a symphony at the very beginning of his career—it's his op. 1—but he quickly became famous as the composer of three ballet scores (*Petrushka*, *The Firebird*, and *The Rite of Spring*), and he spent the next few years composing for the theater and the opera house. When, in 1920, he finally returned to writing music for an orchestra on the concert stage, he composed the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, which omits strings entirely and is no symphony in the conventional sense of the word. Throughout the '20s, Stravinsky began to put his personal stamp on the traditional forms of orchestral music—these scores are the earliest of his so-called neoclassical works. He wrote a series of concertos—two for piano, one for violin, and his own little *Brandenburg Concerto* in the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto*, composed in 1938 to celebrate the thirtieth wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, whose home in Washington, D.C. gave the work its name.

That same year, Mrs. Bliss, along with Mrs. John Alden Carpenter and several of her friends in Chicago, asked Stravinsky to write something to honor the CSO's fiftieth anniversary in the 1940–41 season. (Stravinsky later reported that he was paid \$2,500 for the commission and that he accepted partly because he was nearly broke.) To celebrate a milestone in the life of a great American orchestra, Stravinsky decided to tackle the "standard" by writing a symphony in C in the four orthodox movements—sonata-allegro, slow movement, scherzo, finale—scored for a Beethoven orchestra (throwing in the tuba for added measure). He did not foresee that this work would become, in effect, his American passport—the score that would accompany his move to this country. Nor did he know that its composition would see him through the most difficult time of his personal life.

Stravinsky began the first movement in his flat on the rue Saint Honoré in Paris in the autumn of 1938. On November 30, his daughter Ludmilla died of tuberculosis—the "family disease" as the composer would soon call it, with ample evidence—in the sanitarium at Sancellmoz, where his wife Catherine and younger daughter were also being treated. "It is no exaggeration to say that in the following weeks I was able to continue my own life only by my work on the Symphony in C," Stravinsky later recalled. Three months later, Catherine died. Stravinsky himself then moved to Sancellmoz, as he too had been diagnosed with the disease. That June, his mother died. "For the third time in six months I heard the long requiem service, walked in the field beyond Paris to the cemetery of Sainte Geneviève, dropped a handful of dirt in an open grave," he later wrote. "And for the third time I saved myself—or at any rate recovered—by composing." Stravinsky finished the second movement of the Symphony in C in the sanitarium in Sancellmoz.

The death of three dear family members, compounded by the impending threat of war, persuaded Stravinsky to break with his past and leave Europe. He accepted Harvard University's invitation to give the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton lectures and its offer of a residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He landed in New York at the end of September 1939, never to return to Europe—or to his native Russia—except as a visitor. In Cambridge, Stravinsky gave the Norton lectures (in French, as his English was not yet reliable) and composed the third movement of his symphony. That winter he was reunited with Vera de Bosset, his lover since the 1920s, and they married in Boston in March 1940. The Stravinskys decided to settle in California, and by the beginning of the summer they had bought a house in Los Angeles, where, on August 19, the composer finished the fourth movement of his symphony for Chicago.

Stravinsky always spoke of the two stylistically distinct halves of his symphony—the European half and the American half—although, having lived through the most drastic upheaval of his life, he probably could not help but see, in the page turn between the second and third movements, the clean break that listeners wouldn't even notice. (Twenty-five years later, when he recorded the symphony, he commented that it was still unpleasant for him to talk about the work, since it recalled his most tragic year.)

Stravinsky always insisted that his personal crises at the time were not apparent in this music. (He did confess, however, that “the upheaval caused by the war, though neither tragic nor terrible in my case, was nevertheless a difficult environment for composition.”) The Symphony in C is decidedly abstract, its face turned away from the world in which it was created. “I did not seek to overcome my grief by portraying or giving expression to it in music,” he later wrote, “and you will listen in vain, I think, for traces of this sort of personal emotion.” Stravinsky is not, of course, the first composer whose art reveals nothing of his private life—only consider Beethoven's light and witty Second Symphony, written the autumn he contemplated suicide. But Stravinsky's musical stoicism has often drawn skepticism, and he has sometimes provoked outright anger with his most famous statement on the subject: “I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature.”

Stravinsky admitted that he had scores of Haydn's and Beethoven's symphonies at his side when he began his own. The tightly coiled rhythmic figure with which he begins does recall Beethoven's Fifth—as do the subsequent highly charged passages of rapid, repeated eighth notes—and he borrows Beethoven's favorite device of repeating the first theme a step up, in D. But Stravinsky's understanding of symphonic style is very much his own. As he told a Boston interviewer:

My new symphony is going to be classical in spirit, more concise in its form than Beethoven. . . . Instead of all the chords gravitating toward one final tonic chord, all notes gravitate toward a single note. Thus this symphony will be neither a symphony in C major nor a symphony in C minor but simply a symphony in C.

Stravinsky's first movement is in traditional sonata form (with a “false recapitulation,” an old trick of Haydn's), although the conventions of tonality are treated with characteristic irreverence. Stravinsky chooses not G major, but G minor, as a counterbalance to C, and at one point modulates to the very unclassical destination of E-flat minor. The movement is very much in the spirit of Beethoven—particularly in its rhythmic energy, tight thematic unity, and steady allegro pulse (remarkably for Stravinsky, the master of shifting meters, there is not one change of time signature in the entire movement). But it is Beethoven seen through twentieth-century spectacles, and in the end it sounds like pure Stravinsky. (The conductor Ernest Ansermet said that “the allegro of the Symphony in C is no more than the portrait of a symphonic allegro.”)

The lightly scored second movement—Stravinsky omits most of the brass and the timpani—is a kind of “Italianate song-and-accompaniment.” The fabric is so playfully woven that it's not always clear what is melody and what is accompaniment. The third movement, which begins without pause, is a headlong scherzo propelled by its constantly changing meter—extreme even by Stravinsky's standards, and something of a shock after the rhythmic stability of the previous movements. Stravinsky felt that this music

somehow captured the spirit of his new surroundings in the United States, and he claimed that a jocular bassoon solo, in particular, would never have occurred to him had he not seen “the neon glitter of the California boulevards from a speeding automobile.”

The last movement combines the European and American halves of the piece, integrating material from the first movement into the bustle of a good classical finale. The coda is another of Stravinsky’s signature apotheoses—a slow procession of stately wind chords, the very last mimicked by the muted strings.

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

---

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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