

## 31. Stravinsky

### Symphony of Psalms: movement III (for Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Background information and performance circumstances

##### *Igor Stravinsky*

In 1910 the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) burst onto the Western European musical scene with his ballet score for *The Firebird*. An immediate celebrity, he became notorious three years later with the music of his latest ballet *The Rite of Spring*. This often harsh, dissonant music for a huge orchestra caused a riot at the first performance, but it is now universally regarded as one of the most important compositions of the 20th century.

The First World War put a stop to these large-scale Parisian performances, and Stravinsky turned at first to works for much smaller ensembles. His style changed too, and much of his music from about 1920 until about 1950 was 'neo-classical' – in fact, his reworking of 18th-century music in *Pulcinella* (NAM 7) was one of the first neo-classical masterpieces. (Neo-classicism represented a reaction against much late 19th-century music – in particular against what was perceived as its overblown length, exaggerated emotions, abandonment of tonality and apparent formlessness. With neo-classicism there is usually some clear debt to pre-19th-century music – often to Baroque rhythmic and melodic styles, forms and genres rather than to music from the late 18th-century 'Classical' period itself.)

##### *Symphony of Psalms*

The *Symphony of Psalms* was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in America for its 50th-anniversary celebrations, though its first performance actually took place in Brussels. The style of the piece defies easy classification, as it contains elements of jazz and traditional Russian church music features, synthesised with other 20th-century elements in a purely Stravinsky manner.

Neo-classical elements include:

- Many tonal characteristics, such as the frequent return to a C major chord, for instance on the word 'DOMINUM' in bar 7
- The short imitative section at bar 150.

Jazz influences include:

- Instrumentation dominated by wind, with no upper strings (typical of jazz bands)
- The *pizzicato* double bass ostinatos sounding rather like the walking bass lines of jazz
- Frequent syncopation, especially in the faster sections

Russian Orthodox church influences include:

- The chanting effect of the beginning, and especially
- The often slow, rather static music, especially from bar 163 (evoking ancient church rituals)

Other 20th-century influences include:

- Frequent dissonance, e.g. the first two (quaver) chords in the voices
- Use of bitonality (elements of two keys simultaneously). The choral music at the beginning suggests E flat major, but the piano and harp parts simultaneously outline the tonic chord of C.

### ***Text setting***

The text is Psalm 150, in Latin. Stravinsky insisted that the work should always be sung in Latin, and not translated. In *Chronicle of My Life*, he described Latin as

a medium not dead, but turned to stone and... monumentalized...What a joy it is to compose music to a language of convention, almost of ritual, the very nature of which imposes a lofty dignity! One no longer feels dominated by...the literal meaning of the words...[The composer] can...concentrate all his attention on its primary constituent element – that is to say, on the syllable.

Accordingly, Stravinsky usually avoids the 'obvious' musical response to the text. 'Alleluia' is an expression of praise and rejoicing, but it is given a very restrained minor-sounding setting. Stravinsky does not characterise the instruments mentioned in the expected way. There are no fanfares at 'the sound of the trumpet' ('in sono tubae') – the trumpets *are* playing, but they are not prominent. There are no cymbals in Stravinsky's orchestra, and in fact the 'loud (or well-sounding') cymbals' ('cymbalis bene sonantibus') are referred to in quiet and *cantabile* music.

Other points concerning the setting of the text:

- The text is generally sung syllabically (that is, with one note per syllable), as in the opening 'Alleluia'

- Occasionally, however, a syllable carries two or even three notes – but there are no extended melismas
- Some words and phrases are much repeated – notably 'laudate' (= 'praise', the key word of this text).
- Occasionally words are broken up by rests, rather in the manner of the French mediaeval hocket, e.g. from bar 66 (in *vir-tutibus E-jus'*, etc.)
- Individual syllables are often accented for rhythmic effect, rather than for any intended meaning, e.g. bars 104–106.

## Performing forces

- Large symphony orchestra but with no violins, violas or clarinets
- Five trumpets, including high-pitched trumpet in D
- A large woodwind section, with five flutes (one doubling piccolo), four oboes and cor anglais, and three bassoons plus double bassoon
- The cellos are occasionally divided (notably into three sections from bar 56). One player has a solo part (from bar 61)
- The double basses play pizzicato frequently, in the manner of a jazz walking bass. One player has a solo part (from bar 61)
- There are two pianos and a harp
- Voices are arranged in the traditional four-voice grouping of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. Stravinsky originally intended the work to be sung by all male voices, including boy trebles, but this did not happen at the first performances. The vocal parts are not particularly difficult – there are no extremes of range, and no division of parts.

## Texture

There is considerable variety of texture in this extended movement, especially in the number of parts employed, but there is relatively little contrapuntal writing. Usually the instruments have independent parts: in other words they do not merely double the voices.

The following points refer mainly to the vocal writing:

- The opening word 'Alleluia' is in four-part vocal homophony (each time it appears). Because the same rhythm is used in all four voices, the adjective 'homorhythmic' can be applied. Compare the treatment of 'DOMINUM' ('the LORD' – i.e. God) first heard at bars 21–22

- At 'Laudate' (bar 4) words, there is a reduction to two vocal parts, with tenors and basses singing in octaves
- The following four bars have all four parts in octaves.
- Late in this opening section, tenors and basses sing in octaves still, but sopranos and altos are in parallel 3rds ('Laudate Eum in firmament...')
- There is two-part vocal texture for sopranos and altos at bar 53
- The imitative writing for voice parts from bar 150 is sometimes (loosely) doubled by instruments. Notice how the third and fourth voices enter together in unison at bar 157
- In the slow section that begins at bar 163, there is mostly four-part melody-dominated homophony in the voices (but some contrast is provided by the octave writing for tenors and basses only at bar 175).

## Structure

- The form of this third and final movement of the Symphony of Psalms is completely original
- There is a slow-moving Alleluia at the start (bars 1–3)...
- ...in the middle (bars 99–103)...
- ...and at the end (bars 205–206)
- The Alleluia is followed the first time, and at the end, by 'Laudate, laudate, laudate DOMINUM' (ending with repeated C major chords)
- These repeated C major chords also conclude the opening slow section (bars 21–23)
- A faster section dominated by a repeated-note idea of six notes starts at bar 24. Much of this is instrumental, Stravinsky said that it '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'
- Sopranos enter at bar 53 with a theme that may be related to the 'Laudate theme of bar 4. The music eventually reaches a *tutti* climax at bar 144, leading to the calmer imitative writing at bar 150 (see notes on Texture)
- The long, slow, somewhat chant-like and mostly quiet section at bar 163 (*Molto meno mosso*) is the 'heart' of the movement before the final Alleluia.

## Tonality

- The music has tonal elements, for instance the C major chord in the final three bars
- The section at bar 150 starts by emphasising the tonality of D major, before outlining chords of G major, E minor and A minor

- *Bitonality* is also a feature, with the opening choral music in E flat major, but the simultaneous piano music in C major
- The main tonality of the movement is C (note in particular the C major chord in the final three bars)
- The Alleluia is C minor (modal – notably with Aeolian B flat)
- The imitative section at bar 150 initially sounds like D major, but the following chords of G major, E minor, A minor, D minor, G minor prepare the way for the flat keys that follow
- The soprano melody in the long slow section near the end (bar 163) suggests C minor, but...
- ...there appear to be elements of E flat major in the four-note bass ostinato (E flat, B flat, F, B flat)
- This hints at bitonality – which is more clearly heard as the section goes on (e.g. after the voices have fallen silent near the end of the section)
- Bitonality is a feature of other passages, notably where, very near the start, the choir is in E flat ('Laudate...') while the instrumental parts are in C.

## Harmony

- The harmony is non-functional. There is no real sense of building towards cadences
- There is some strong dissonance. For example, G sharp is heard *fortissimo* against a D major chord in the 'horses and chariot' passage (bars 48–49), and the bitonal ending of the long slow section near the end is very dissonant in places
- Many dissonant harmonic effects are the result of changing harmonies over ostinatos, notably in that same slow section
- Despite all the dissonance, there are some simple consonant chords, such as the C major root position chords at the end, and the D major chord in bar 150
- The C major chords at the end of the movement are unusually spaced, with many Cs and a single high E (and no G).

## Melody

- A distinctive melodic feature is the use of repeated notes, as at the start of the second section (bar 24)
- *Ostinati* – repeating short melodic patterns – are often present in the bass (e.g. the three-note pattern G–C–G at the end of the first slow section, and the pattern E flat–B flat–F–B flat in the long slow section near the end)

- Vocal phrases often move narrowly. The extreme case is at 'Laudate Eum in virtutibus' where for several bars (from bar 53) the sopranos alternate just two notes (B flat and C). The alto part concentrates on F, G and A. Note also the narrow ranges of the upper voices in the long slow section from bar 163 ('Laudate Eum in cymbalis')
- Some melodic passages are founded on scales other than 'ordinary' major and minor ones. In the approach to 'Laudate Eum in cymbalis' the rising soprano line in minims (bars 157–160) mostly alternates semitones and whole tones (the so-called 'octatonic' scale)
- Voices outline triads (broken chords) in the passage that begins at bar 150 (D major, G major, etc.)
- At some climax points, intervals become much larger, like the (descending) diminished 7th and (ascending) diminished 8ve at bar 161, soprano part.

## Rhythm and metre

- At times the music is very static, moving in minims and crotchets at a slow tempo (notably in the opening section and in the long slow section near the end)
- At other times the music is intensely rhythmic, as at the beginning of the second section at bar 24 with repeated quavers and 'walking' bass line in crotchets
- Syncopation is a feature of the same section, where weak beats and offbeats are accentuated
- As this section builds up, there are many triplet quavers in the orchestra (e.g. bar 41)
- Much of the movement is in simple quadruple metre (4/4, with a crotchet beat) or simple duple (2/2, with minim beat where the music is much faster, from bar 52)
- The long slow section (together with and some of the music preceding it) is in simple triple metre (3/2)
- Note how the four-note instrumental ostinato here (E flat–B flat–F–B flat, with each note a minim) 'cuts across' the three-minim metrical structure of the vocal parts. And how the three-note ostinato in the opening section (G–C–G) conflicts with quadruple metre.