

## 31. Stravinsky

### Symphony of Psalms: movement III

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Background Information and Performance Circumstances

In 1910 the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky 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 huge orchestra caused a riot at the first performance, but many now regard it as the most important composition 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 as he became a prominent figure in the new neo-classical style. His reworking of 18th-century music in *Pulcinella* (NAM 7), composed in 1920, was one of the first neoclassical masterpieces.

*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 neoclassicism and traditional Russian church music, synthesised with other 20th-century elements in a uniquely Stravinskian 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, and the cadential V-I movement in the lower strings at each of the three Alleluias (bars 1–3, etc.)
- The broken chords (simple major and minor triads) in bars 150–156 ('Lau-(hau)-da-(ha)-te-(he)'), with canon between the voices.

Russian orthodox church influences include:

- The often slow, static music evoking ancient Russian Orthodox church rituals and chants, notably at 'Laudate Eum in cymbalis' from bar 163.

Other 20th-century influences include:

- Strong frequent dissonance, e.g. opening vocal chords parts of the first fast section such as bars 48–49 (with G sharp against D major chord).
- Use of bitonality. The choral music at the beginning suggests E flat major, but the piano and harp parts simultaneously outline the tonic chord of C.
- Instrumentation dominated by wind, with no upper strings (the inclusion of the pianos at times produces sonorities reminiscent of those of the Concerto for piano and Winds, composed in 1924).
- The importance of ostinatos and repeated rhythmic figures.
- Frequent syncopation, especially in the faster sections (e.g. from bar 24).

#### Instruments and Voices

- Large symphony orchestra but with no violins, violas or clarinets.
- 5 trumpets, including high pitched trumpet in D.
- Quintuple flutes (with piccolo often replacing flute 5) and four oboes plus cor anglais.

- Double bass frequently playing pizzicato.
- 2 pianos and harp.
- Voices are arranged in the traditional four-voice grouping of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. Stravinsky originally intended the work to be sung with children's voices on the top two parts. (The anthology recording has boys on the soprano line.)

### Text Setting

- The (Latin) text is Psalm 150 (which repeatedly urges us to praise God).
- The text is generally sung syllabically, like the opening 'Alleluia'.
- At bar 150 note the unusual effect of the extra syllables with added initial 'h' ('Lau-(hau)-da-(ha)-te-(he)', etc.)
- Stravinsky deliberately does not as a rule 'express' the text in his music, preferring a more objective approach. At the mention of trumpets they are hardly audible in the score. The word 'cymbals' is not accompanied by cymbals in the orchestra, indeed it is sometimes set to very quiet choral music. (But see the reference to 'horses and chariot' under Structure below).
- Stravinsky himself said 'In setting the words of this final hymn [from bar 163] I cared only for the sounds of the syllables and I have indulged to the limit my besetting pleasure of regulating prosody in my own way.'
- Words and phrases are constantly repeated, e.g. 'Laudate Eum' ('Praise him [i.e. God]').
- Words are broken up by rests somewhat in the manner of the French medieval hocket from bar 65 ('in vir-tutibus E-jus', etc.)
- Individual syllables are often accented for rhythmic effect, rather than for any intended meaning, e.g. bar 104 ('Laudate DOMINUM. Laudate Eum').

## Texture

Varied, for example:

- The opening section includes homophonic music for voices, e.g. on the word.
- 'DOMINUM'. Compare the last main section (bar 163).
- At the first 'Laudate' (bar 4) tenors and basses sing in octaves.
- There is two-part vocal texture for sopranos and altos at bar 55.
- The imitative section for four voice parts beginning at bar 150 is sometimes (loosely) doubled by instruments. Notice how the third and fourth voices enter together in unison for the first three notes.

## Structure

- The form of this third and final movement of the Symphony of Psalms is completely original.
- The movement has 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 have a new theme at bar 53 based on the Laudate theme of bar 4. This is extended and developed until the music eventually reaches a tutti climax at bar 144, leading to the calmer imitations at bar 150 (see notes on Texture)
- The slow chanted section (from bar 163), marked *molto meno mosso* has all voices singing together, interrupted by a series of repeated notes in octaves in tenor and bass, before the final Alleluia.

## Tonality

- 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 appears to begin in D major, but the following chords of G major, E minor, A minor, D minor, G minor, all underlaid by G major broken chords in double bassoon and bass trombone, prepare the way for the flat keys that follow.
- The soprano melody in the 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 mostly non-functional. But note the V–I bass movement in the Alleluia.
- Dissonance is an important feature of the music. For example, on the third syllable of Alleluia in bar 3, the G bass clashes against A flats; G sharp is heard fortissimo against a D major chord during 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, such as the seemingly endlessly repeated four notes, each a fourth apart towards the end of the movement (from bar 163).
- Despite all the dissonance, there are some simple consonant chords, such as the C major root position chords at the end, or the D major chord in bar 150.

## Melody

- One of the most distinctive melodic features is the use of repeated notes, as at the start of the second section (bar 24).
- Vocal phrases often have narrow or very narrow ranges. See for example the passage for sopranos and altos ('Laudate Eum in virtutibus') from bar 53, and the upper parts in the long slow section from bar 163 ('Laudate Eum in cymbalis').
- Many other passages have smooth flowing, conjunct music, as in the opening Alleluia.
- Some melodic passages are founded on scales other than 'ordinary' major and minor scales. In the approach to 'Laudate Eum in cymbalis' the rising soprano line in minims (bars 157–160) is mostly an alternation of semitones and whole tones (the so-called 'octatonic' scale). The recurring soprano melody in the following slow section ends with some chromatic movement in semitones (doubled in octaves by the basses for emphasis).

- 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 diminished 7th and 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 frequent, as in the same section, where weak beats and offbeats are accentuated.
- As this section builds up there are many triplet quavers in the orchestra music (e.g. bar 41).
- There are occasional changes of time signature.