IGOR STRAVINSKY
*Symphony of Psalms*
Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia
Died: April 6, 1971, in New York
Work composed: 1930

Stravinsky was, among many other things, one of the 20th century’s outstanding composers of religiously inspired music. His stature as such rests in no small part on his *Symphony of Psalms*. Stravinsky wrote this work in 1930 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. For this occasion the composer wanted to write a symphony, but not the traditional kind. As he explained in his 1936 autobiography: “My idea was that my symphony should be a work with great contrapuntal development, and for that it was necessary to increase the media at my disposal. I finally decided on a choral and instrumental ensemble in which the two elements should be on an equal footing ... .”

Having settled on a symphony with voices, Stravinsky came “quite naturally,” as he described it, to the psalms for its texts. He started setting verses from three of them in Slavonic translations but soon came to favor the sound of Latin. The completed work was performed in Boston, in December 1930, six days after receiving its premiere, in Brussels.

In scoring his music, Stravinsky de-emphasized the role of the string choir in favor of winds and percussion. Violas and violas are absent entirely from his orchestra, while the cello and bass parts are largely limited to accompaniment figures that support more conspicuous foreground events. This instrumental deployment affects not just the composition’s spectrum of aural colors but also its rhetorical character. The music conveys an austerity and remote grandeur to which the traditionally warm and intimate tone of violins and violas is unsuited. It is notable, in view of this, that Stravinsky deplored what he called the “lyrico-sentimental” view of the psalms, describing them instead as “magisterial verses.”

Stravinsky composed the first movement, he remembered, “in a state of religious and musical ebullience.” In writing the second movement, he evidently was inspired by the great chorus-with-orchestra numbers in J. S. Bach’s sacred works. The “Kyrie” of Bach’s *B Minor Mass* may not have been. Stravinsky’s the formal model, but the two movements have a certain kinship of sound and spirit.

The closing lines of this second movement call for “a new song,” and we get just that with the intoning of “Alleluia” at the start of the finale. Here a restrained character and circling repetition of limited melodic material impart a liturgical quality. This forms a preface to the main portion of the movement, which unfolds in a quicker tempo.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: The initial movement begins with an incisive chord that returns periodically to punctuate both the running instrumental lines of the opening measures and the chant-like entreaties of the chorus that follow. The second movement treats two themes in echoic counterpoint, the first given out by the orchestra, the other, by the chorus. These two themes, and their contrapuntal elaboration, intersect to create music of considerable complexity, but also considerable expressiveness.
Stravinsky described the slow introduction to the third movement as “a prayer to the Russian image of the infant Christ with orb and scepter.” (This material recurs at several important junctures.) The faster music that follows, the composer said, “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.” Stravinsky finally returns to the music of the introduction, extending it in a passage of great stillness and concluding the movement much as it began.

Scored for 5 flutes (the fifth doubling piccolo), 4 oboes, English horn, 3 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, piccolo trumpet, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, 2 pianos and harp; cellos and basses; four-part chorus.

© 2016 Paul Schiavo