

Igor Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms" – a testimony of the composer's faith

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Abstract: *In the musical landscape of the first half of the 20th century, Igor Stravinsky (1882- 1971) asserted himself as a musician who undermined the normative values of the elements in the musical discourse. His creations were regarded from an analytical perspective in opposition with Arnold Schonberg's music, the musical critics trying to limit the compositional amendments of the 20th century to the scores of the two composers. We find this view unjust, the musical wealth of the 20th century stemming precisely from the multiple meanings framed within various compositional patterns by the composers which music history placed among the unforgettable ones.*

Key-words: *faith, modernity, psalm, composition, style*

1. Preliminary considerations

In the musical landscape of the first half of the 20th century, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) asserted himself as a musician who undermined the normative values of the elements in the musical discourse. His creations were regarded from an analytical perspective in opposition with Arnold Schonberg's music, the musical critics trying to limit the compositional amendments of the 20th century to the scores of the two composers. We find this view unjust, the musical wealth of the 20th century stemming precisely from the multiple meanings framed within various compositional patterns by the composers which music history placed among the unforgettable ones. It is worth noting that Stravinsky and Schonberg "constitute the poles towards gravitate the tendencies of the other composers of the century" (Vlad 1967, 7) (our translation).

The need to adopt another musical system than the harmonic tonal one represented the beginning of the changes in the compositional language which Stravinsky brought to his music. From a bird's eye view, we can state that the composer's growth and the crystallization of his own norms of musical expression

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were achieved gradually, with unexpected bursts of originality which occur periodically in master pieces such as “Petrushka” and “Le sacre du printemps”.

“There are not many compositions by Stravinsky which are inspired from religious texts (...). But we believe that their intrinsic significance and importance in the composer’s creation can justify the opinion that the true background of Stravinsky’s spiritual life and the logic of his entire evolution can be revealed precisely by studying his religious works.” (Vlad 1967, 163) (our translation)

The image shows a musical score for the first part of the symphony "Exaudi orationem meam" by Igor Stravinsky. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Fg.), with a vocal line (A.) below. The second system continues the instrumental parts and the vocal line. The vocal line contains the lyrics "E - xau - di o - ra - ti - o - nem me - am, Do - mi - ne".

Fig. 1. Musical fragment from the first part of the symphony
(Exaudi orationem meam)

Created in 1930, “Symphony of Psalms” is a masterpiece of the composer’s neo-classical period. These musical pages reveal the desire to return to the sources of

religious music, “by using a form of psalmody, a chant with limited ambitus, in the spirit of the Gregorian music, by exploiting church modes and the Latin language” (Larousse) (our translation). The composer’s intimate religious feelings are present in his entire vocal-symphonic creation. The lyrics of the psalms chosen by Stravinsky underline his predilection for the complexity of human religious feelings, his musical creations being based on psalms 38, 39 and 150: “for the text of this Symphony, Stravinsky selected from the Vulgate verses 13 and 14 of Psalm 38, verses 2, 3 and 4 of Psalm 39 and the whole of Psalm 150” (White). „Stravinsky scored the piece for unconventional musical forces - a big contingent of woodwinds, brass and percussion, plus low strings, two pianos and harp. Clarinets, violins and violas are notably missing” (Baker, 2012).

SYMPHONIE DE PSAUMES 1

I Igor Stravinsky
1910

Tempo $\text{♩} = 92$

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral layout. The instruments listed on the left are:

- FLAUTI GRANDI (2 staves)
- FLAUTO GRANDE (poi PICCOLO) (1 staff)
- ORCI (2 staves)
- CORNO INGLESE (1 staff)
- FAGOTTI (2 staves)
- CONTRA FAGOTTO (1 staff)
- CORNI FA (2 staves)
- TROMBA PICCOLA RE (1 staff)
- TROMBE DO (2 staves)
- TROMBONI (1 staff)
- TROMBONE (basso) (1 staff)
- TUBA (1 staff)
- TIMPANI (1 staff)
- GRAN CASO (1 staff)

The vocal parts are grouped under the heading "CORO" and include:

- SOPRANI (1 staff)
- ALTI (1 staff)
- TENORI (1 staff)
- BASSI (1 staff)

Other instruments shown include:

- ARPA (1 staff)
- PIANOFORTI I. 2. (2 staves)
- VOLONCELLI (1 staff)
- CONTRABASSI (1 staff)

The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and rests. Dynamics markings such as *mf* and *f* are present throughout the piece.

Fig.2. Musical fragment from the first part of the symphony

Although this religious creation reflects personal religious experiences, it also represents a universal expression of the religiousness of a community in collective prayer. Composed to celebrate 50 years from the creation of the Boston Symphonic Orchestra, the score of the symphony fulfilled both the expectations of the instrumental ensemble to perform a symphonic piece, but also Stravinsky's wish to publish a composition appreciated by the public.

S.
A.
Ch.
T.
B.

Lau-da-te, lau-da-te, lau-da-te Do-mi-num

Fig. 3. Musical fragment from the third movement of the symphony (Psalm 150)

The composer combined these ideas in an unexpected way, "Symphony of Psalms" is a symphonic-like composition for the general public, but it cannot be subscribed under the classical genre of symphony (Stravinsky and Craft 1963, 44). The three parts of the composition are meant to be sung together, and, from a formal point of view, the composer chose to represent David's Psalms by a prelude, a double fugue and a finish with tempo contrasts, dynamics and orchestration. "Though the symphony evokes sacred music of the past, it does so obliquely. This is music about other music. As you listen, you can almost hear Stravinsky asking himself: "What is it about the heritage of sacred music that I love? What baffles me? What speaks to me as a contemporary composer?" (Tommasini, 2003).

mf

Ex-pec-tans ex-pec-ta-vi Do-mi-num

Fig. 4. Theme from the fugue in the second movement of the symphony



Fig. 5. Motif from the third movement of the symphony

Stravinsky explains his choice of psalm 150 by the fact that it is a popular one among churchgoers but also among composers; his wish was to compose music suitable for the atmosphere of David's Psalms, in contrast to the common musical representations of the psalms in a lyrical sentimental fashion. In the composer's opinion, the psalms express exaltation, anger, fear of judgement, and can turn into curses (Stravinsky and Craft 1963, 44). „The finale, the familiar Psalm 150, is a call to praise the Lord with the sounds of trumpet, psaltery, harp and timbrel, and with dance. Stravinsky's music of praise is tinged with mystery, awe and fear. Indeed, the simple, recurring three-chord setting of the word "alleluia" is surely the most sadly beautiful harmonization of this timeless word" (Tommasini, 2003).

These extreme states cannot be poured into classical musical forms and genres, and "Symphony of Psalms" supports this statement. "As any organic reality, the musical creation, the masterpiece, is individual and, consequently, unique both from the point of view of its content and of its form" (Niculescu) (our translation). The choice of the psalmic texts for the three parts of the symphony is not random, the composer treated the lyrics musically.

3. Conclusions

Stravinsky talks about his inner composition engine and clarifies the fact that the first level of his symphony creation was occupied by the tempo-text relationship. The importance of the text and of the way in which it develops on music demonstrates that this masterpiece is a testimony of the composer's faith.

Also, Stravinsky was guided in his composition work by the idea that a prayer to God cannot take the dynamic musical forms of permanent forte and rapid tempo. These features of the choral score "Symphony of Psalms" show the creator's

affiliation to the Orthodox church, a cult with a dramatic and rich expression of the relationship between man and God, in an introvert background of prayer.

4. References

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