

An analysis of Igor Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms focusing on neoclassicism

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ABSTRACT

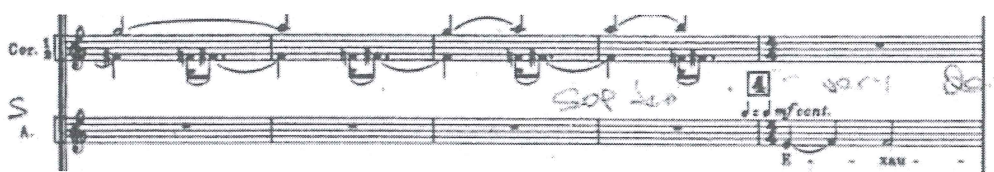
Widely known as one of the most significant composers of the 20th century, Igor Stravinsky's life is often divided into three stylistic periods: Russian period, neoclassical period, and serial period. His ability to intertwine vast varieties of musical ideas, as well as his absolute command of rich, colorful orchestrations greatly influenced later composers. Stravinsky's compositions during the neoclassical period (1920-54) reflected the tonal and harmonic simplicity of the Baroque and Classical era (especially noticeable in comparison to his Russian period). His *Symphony of Psalms* is one such example from this period, and utilizes a full orchestra as well as a mixed choir and two pianos. With that said however, it is also a unique piece that is comprised of both neoclassical and serial motifs and ideas. This paper aims to discover and analyze the materials that show significant influence from the Baroque and/or Classical era in Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*.

Igor Fedorovich Stravinsky was born near St. Petersburg in 1882. His father was a celebrated bass singer in the opera house there, which helped Igor become familiar with the major works and composers of the time. He studied law at St. Petersburg University, but became more involved with music while studying there. He met Rimsky-Korsakov in 1902 through his friendship with Korsakov's son, Vladimir. He studied privately with the composer and developed a close relationship that lasted until Rimsky-Korsakov's death in 1908. The next turning point in Stravinsky's career was his meeting with Sergey Diaghilev, who had heard the *Scherzo Fantastique and Fireworks* in 1909. Diaghilev and Stravinsky collaborated on several works for the "Ballet Russes", beginning with *The Firebird*, and including *Petroushka* and *Le Sacre du printemps*. With these ballets Stravinsky's reputation was made and he was called upon to compose, perform and conduct throughout Russia and Europe until the outbreak of WWI. Stravinsky spent the war years in Switzerland, along with many other artists. After WWI, Stravinsky had quarreled with Diaghilev, his large family of in-laws had moved in with him, and the Russian Revolution had cut off any income from there. For the rest of his life, Stravinsky was kept busy composing, performing, and conducting to support his family. He was never to live in Russia again, moved to France in 1920 where he established himself and became a citizen in 1934. It was in France that Stravinsky began composing in his 'neoclassical' style, and in 1929 he received a commission from Serge Koussevitsky to compose a piece for the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Thus the *Symphony Psalms* is dedicated to the glory of God for the Boston Symphony Orchestra on its 50th anniversary. Stravinsky was deeply religious, but his treatment of the texts he chose for the *Symphony of Psalms* is not sentimental, but vigorous. There are three movements in the work, to be played without a break. The orchestration is unique in its extensive use of winds, including brass, and the use of two pianos. It is also noteworthy for what instruments are not used, including clarinets, even though Psalm 150 talks about loud cymbals. A children's choir is indicated in the score, although women can take soprano and alto parts if necessary. Wilfrid Mellers wrote about the *Symphony Psalms* in an essay dated 1971 in which he compares the form of the work to a baroque concerto-cantata; prelude-toccatto, double fugue, and finale.

Example 2. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm. 46-50.

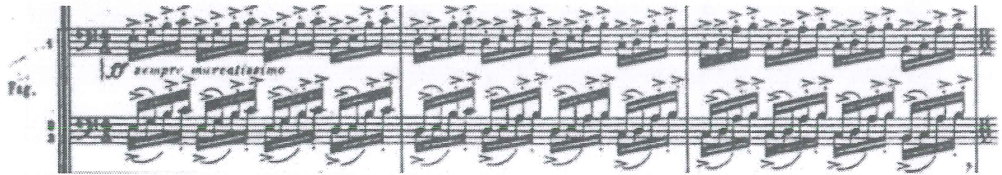


Example 3. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm. 22-26.



An interesting feature of this movement is the occurrence of accompaniment patterns in various voices that are in unison, but use different articulations (staccato against legato) (Example 4) or different rhythms (eighth notes against sixteenth notes) (Example 5). Both of these techniques are combined in a grand climax at the words “remitte mihi” (spare me).

Example 4. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm. 65-67.



Example 5. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm.65-67.

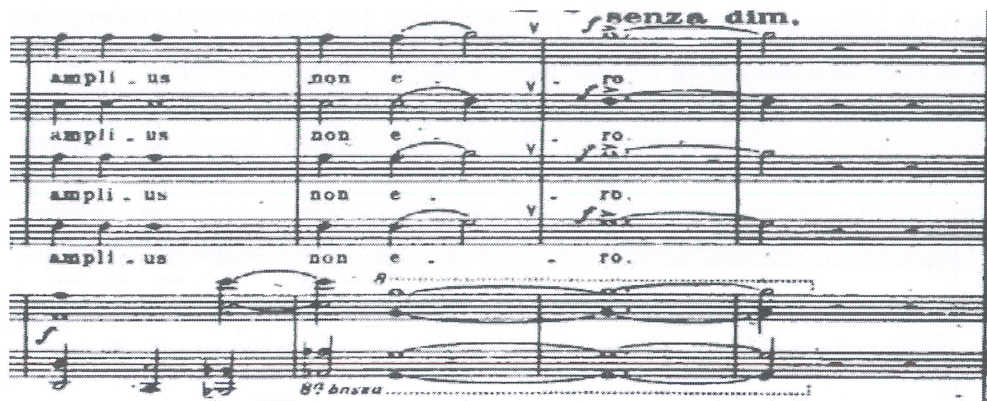
Musical score for Example 5, showing two piano parts. The top part is labeled 'Piano I' and the bottom part is labeled 'Piano II'. Both parts contain dense, rhythmic patterns of eighth and sixteenth notes. The instruction 'fortissimo' is written above the top part.

The choral parts in this movement often are either unison, unison at the octave, open 5ths, or minor 2nds and their inversion, major 7ths. The medieval sound of the open 5ths may be related to the medieval text of the St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible that Stravinsky used (Example 6). The final chord of the movement is a fortississimo G Major to introduce the second movement, which is in c minor (Example 7).

Example 6. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm. 66-67.

Musical score for Example 6, showing four staves of vocal parts. The lyrics are 'Re - mit - te mi - hi,'. The notes are arranged in a way that suggests a medieval-style unison or open 5th interval.

Example 7. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 1, mm. 75-78.



The text of the second movement is from Psalm 39 and recounts the gifts God promises. The music is a double fugue, with the instruments stating their 4-voices fugue in c minor first. Oboe and flute have the first two statements of the theme (Example 8); more flutes are added until a flute quartet with piccolo finishes the exposition.

Example 8. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 2, mm. 1-14.



The sopranos then enter with the choral subject, which is then answered and finished in the other voices, while the instruments continue their own fugue subject in fragments against the choirs' subject. The descending 4ths of the choral subject create harmonic dissonances as new voices enter at close intervals (Example 9).

Example 9. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 2, mm. 27-30, 31-34.

Musical score for Example 9, showing vocal parts S. (Soprano) and A. (Alto). The tempo is marked *mf tranquillo*. The lyrics are "Ex - pec - tans ex - pec -".

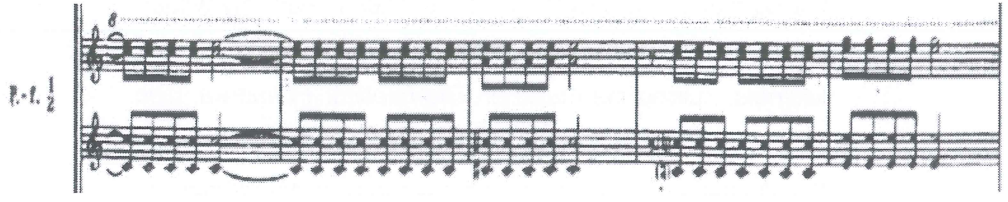
To this point, the chamber character of this movement has been foremost with numerous solos in all of the sections. At the words “et immisit in os meum canticum novum”, the full choir sings fortissimo and the orchestra states its own subject with a dotted rhythm for emphasis (Example 10).

Example 10. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 2, mm. 68-72.

Musical score for Example 10, showing vocal parts S. (Soprano), A. (Alto), T. (Tenor), B. (Bass), V-C. (Violin/Contra), and C-B. (Viola/Celli). The tempo is marked *ff*. The lyrics are "Et im-mi - sit in os me - um". A box with the number 14 is present above the vocal staves.

At this point a background ostinato of fourths in the timpani and pianos begin that continues almost to the end (Example 14).

Example 14. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 3, mm. 88-92.



The last bars of the movement return to the first tempo and the opening Alleluia is repeated with a brief laudate dominum statement. Ending quietly on a widely spaced C major chord, this tonality of God (according to Mellers) seems to indicate that good triumphs in the end (Example 15).

Example 3. Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, movement 3, mm. 202-209.



Stravinsky's career spanned his long life, and his popularity waxed and waned as his style changed and evolved. In 1935 he wrote his regarding lack of popularity at the time:

At the beginning of my career as a composer I was a good deal spoiled by the public... But I have a very distinct feeling that in the course of the last fifteen years my written work has estranged me from the great mass of my listeners... Liking the music of *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* and *The Wedding*, and being accustomed to the language of those works, they are astonished to hear me speaking in another idiom. They cannot and will not follow me in the progress of my musical thought. What moves and delights me leaves them indifferent, and what still continues to interest them holds no further attraction for me.⁴

Stravinsky's strong influence on music of the 20th century is clear, and the importance of his music to musicians and audiences alike is still strong. According to Groves, "For younger... his work has continued to offer inspiration and a source of method...(Stravinsky) has emerged as the archetypal product of and source for an epoch."⁵

⁴ White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His works*, 114.

⁵ The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "Stravinsky, Igor, &11: Posthumous reputation and Legacy". <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.library.ndsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/52818og11#S52818.11>

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