

Igor Stravinsky- (17 June [O.S. 5 June] 1882 – 6 April 1971)  
A compilation of facts for the study of Symphony of Psalms (1930)  
Prepared by Carmen-Helena Téllez for Choral Literature Seminar II ©2021

#### •Context

1. The *Symphony of Psalms* is a three-movement [choral symphony](#) and was composed by [Igor Stravinsky](#) in 1930 during his [neoclassical](#) period. The work was commissioned by [Serge Koussevitzky](#) to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#). The symphony derives its name from the use of [Psalm](#) texts in the choral parts.
2. According to Stravinsky, the commission for the work came about from "a routine suggestion" from Koussevitzky, who was also Stravinsky's publisher, that he should write something "popular" for orchestra without chorus. Stravinsky, however, insisted on the psalm-symphony idea, which he had had in mind for some time. The choice of [Psalm 150](#), however, took place in part because of the popularity of that text. The symphony was written in Nice and Echarvines, which was Stravinsky's summer home in those years.<sup>[1]</sup> The three movements are performed without a break, and the texts sung by the chorus are drawn from the [Vulgate](#) versions in [Latin](#). Unlike many pieces composed for chorus and orchestra, Stravinsky said that "it is not a symphony in which I have included *Psalms* to be sung. On the contrary, it is the singing of the *Psalms* that I am symphonizing."<sup>[2]</sup>

#### •Musical influences from the Russian Orthodox Church

Stratification, drones, bells, Bizantine chant style, the austerity of icons  
The third movement was inspired by the Church Slavonic phrase "gospodi pomiluj" (Lord, have mercy)

#### •The Symphony of Psalms within the evolution of Stravinsky's style

For a sense of Stravinsky's life-long style, read: Edward T.Cone's "[Stravinsky and the Progress of a Method](#)."

#### •Some critical musical materials used in the composition to remember (make sure you understand the definition of the terms in bold)

**octatonic scales** and other *sui generis* scales  
**tonal axis** and ambivalence between major and minor thirds of a triad  
"two minor thirds separated by a major third"  
**ostinato**  
black and white design  
**double-fugue**  
**pre-classical *sinfonia*** structures  
Baroque **prelude and fugue** format  
Baroque **exordium and postlude** format  
oscillation patterns, but rhythmically and harmonically  
paradigm of "bells", derived from Orthodox aesthetics

## •Unconventional orchestration

5 flutes (5th doubling piccolo), 4 oboes, cor anglais, 3 bassoons, and contrabassoon;

4 horns in F, piccolo trumpet, 4 trumpets in C, 3 trombones, and tuba;

timpani, bass drum, 2 pianos, and harp;

cellos and contrabasses

and a four-part chorus (soprano, alto, tenor, bass).

**Notably, the score omits clarinets, violins, and violas.** In the score preface, Stravinsky stated a preference for children's voices for the upper two choral parts.

## •Significant musical features in each movement

1. **First movement** (this segment has some Wikipedia links to start your search for definitions, if you are not yet conversant with these terms)



Psalms chord

The first movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* is marked "Tempo  $\text{♩} = 92$ " and uses the text from [Psalm 38](#), verses 13 and 14. This movement was finished on August 15, 1930, which is [Assumption Day](#) in the Roman Church and is written as a prelude to the second movement, which is set as a [double fugue](#).

The movement is composed of flowing [ostinato](#) sections punctuated with E-center [block chords](#), in a voicing known as the "[Psalms chord](#)", that stop the constant motion. The first ostinato section in measure 2, played in the oboe and bassoon, could be six notes from the octatonic scale starting C#-D-E-F, etc., but incomplete sets such as this illustrate the controversial nature of the extent of its use.<sup>[8]</sup> Stravinsky himself regarded this ostinato as "the root idea of the whole symphony", a four-note set consisting of a sequence of "two minor thirds joined by a major third", and stated that it initiated in the trumpet-harp motive at the beginning of the allegro section of the third movement, which was composed first.<sup>[9]</sup>

If a liturgical characterization is suggested by the use of [modal](#) scales even before the chorus's entrance (in measures 12–13, the piano plays an F-[dorian scale](#) and in measures 15–16, the piano plays in the E-[phrygian mode](#)), apparently it was not a conscious decision by Stravinsky:

"I was not aware of "Phrygian modes," "Gregorian chants," "Byzantinisms," or anything else of the sort, while composing this music, though, of course, the "influences" said to be denoted by such script-writers' baggage-stickers may very well have been operative."<sup>[7]</sup>

The presence of the chorus is used to create a church-like atmosphere in this piece, as well as to appropriately set the Psalm. It enters with a minor 2nd motif, which is used both to emphasize the C#/D octatonic scale and set the pleading text. The minor second motif in the chorus is continued throughout the movement. The use of the octatonic scale and the church modes pervade the sound of the movement, contributing to both the ritual feel of the piece and the plaintive setting of the text.

There are various ways of analyzing the tonal structure of the first movement. The most popular analysis is to view the movement in E minor, pronounced at the opening chord.<sup>[10]</sup> The following arpeggios on B $\flat$ 7 and G7 act as dominants to the other tonal centers in the next two movements, E $\flat$  and C respectively. However, the strong presence of G in the movement also points to another tonal center. The opening chord is orchestrated in such a way so that the third of E minor, G, is emphasized. Moreover, the movement concludes with a loud G major chord, which becomes the dominant to C minor at the start of the second movement.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Text (Psalm 38 verses 13 and 14 [KJV = Psalm 39 verses 12 and 13])**

**Latin**

Exaudi orationem meam, Domine, et  
deprecationem meam. Auribus percipe  
lacrimas meas. Ne sileas.  
Quoniam advena ego sum apud te et  
peregrinus, sicut omnes patres mei.  
Remitte mihi, ut refrigerer prius quam abeam  
et amplius non ero.

**English Translation**

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with Thine  
ears consider my calling: hold not Thy  
peace at my tears.  
For I am a stranger with Thee: and a  
sojourner, as all my fathers were.  
O spare me a little that I may recover my  
strength: before I go hence and be no more.

**2. Second movement**

The second movement is a [double fugue](#) in C minor,<sup>[12]</sup> and uses as text [Psalm 40](#), verses 2, 3, and 4. The first fugue [theme](#) is based on the same four-note [cell](#) used in the first movement,<sup>[13]</sup> and begins in the oboe in measure one. The first entrance of the second theme starts in measure 29 in the soprano, followed by an entrance in the alto in measure 33 a fourth down. The third and fourth entrances are in the tenor in measure 39 and bass in measure 43. Meanwhile, the first fugue theme can be heard in the bass instruments at the entrance of the soprano at measure 29. A [stretto](#) is heard in measure 52 based on the second fugal theme.

At measure 71, the voices sing in [homophony](#) on the text "He hath put a new song in my mouth". In the [accompaniment](#), a [variation](#) of the first fugue theme is played in stretto. Finally, [unison](#) is heard in the voices in measure 84 on the text "and shall put their trust in the Lord." This completes the gradual clarification of texture from [counterpoint](#) to unison.

The piece concludes with E $\flat$  as the tonal center.<sup>[14]</sup> Some analyses interpret the E $\flat$  as being part of an inverted C minor chord which creates a suitable transition into the third movement in C.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Text (KJV Psalm 40, verses 2, 3 and 4)

#### Latin

Expectans expectavi Dominum, et intendit mihi.  
Et exaudivit preces meas; et eduxit me de lacu miseriae, et de luto faecis.  
Et statuit super petram pedes meos: et direxit gressus meos.  
Et immisit in os meum canticum novum, carmen Deo nostro.  
Videbunt multi, videbunt et timebunt: et sperabunt in Domino.

#### English Translation

I waited patiently for the Lord: and He inclined unto me, and heard my calling.  
He brought me also out of the horrible pit, out of the mire and clay.  
and set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings.  
And He hath put a new song in my mouth: even a thanksgiving unto our God.  
Many shall see it and fear: and shall put their trust in the Lord.

### 3. Third movement

The third movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* alternates "Tempo ♩= 48" and "Tempo ♩= 80", and uses nearly the complete text of [Psalm 150](#). Stravinsky wrote:

The *allegro* in Psalm 150 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.<sup>[16](#)</sup>  
The final hymn of praise must be thought of as issuing from the skies; agitation is followed by the calm of praise. In setting the words of this final hymn 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.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

The second part of the slow opening introduction, setting the word "Laudate Dominum", was originally composed to the Old Slavonic words "Gospedi Pamili", and Stravinsky regarded this as his personal prayer to the Russian Ecumenical image of the Infant Christ with the scepter and the Globe.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

### Text (Psalm 150)

#### Latin

Alleluia.  
Laudate Dominum in sanctis Ejus.  
Laudate Eum in firmamento virtutis Ejus. Laudate Dominum.  
Laudate Eum in virtutibus Ejus. Laudate Dominum in virtutibus Ejus.  
Laudate Eum secundum multitudinem magnitudinis Ejus.  
Laudate Dominum in sanctis Ejus..  
Laudate Eum in sono tubae.  
Laudate Eum. Alleluia. Laudate Dominum. Laudate Eum.  
Laudate Eum in timpano et choro,  
Laudate Eum in cordis et organo; Laudate Dominum.  
Laudate Eum in cymbalis bene sonantibus,  
Laudate Eum in cymbalis jubilationibus. Laudate Dominum.  
Laudate Eum, omnis spiritus laudet Dominum, omnis spiritus laudet Eum.  
Alleluia. Laudate, laudate, laudate Dominum.

#### English Translation

Alleluja.  
Praise God in His sanctuary:  
Praise Him in the firmament of His power.  
Praise Him for His mighty acts:  
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.  
Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet:  
Praise Him with the timbrel and dance.  
Praise Him with stringed instruments and organs.  
Praise Him upon the good sounding cymbals,  
Praise Him upon the cymbals of jubilation.  
Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Alleluja.

