

Sacred Music in Igor Stravinsky's work. *Symphony of Psalms*

VIVIANA FARCAȘ, PhD Student
"George Enescu" National University of Arts Iași
ROMANIA*

Abstract: Researching the music of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, devoutness is not the first attribute that I have offered it. He has remained in collective memory rather as a music revolutionary, not at all a pious spirit, bent towards divinity. The modernism of his works, the tendencies that he was the first to impose but especially the scandal that chaperoned him ever since the 1913 premiere of the ballet *The Rite of Spring*, all these have imposed him as a "rebel" of music in the early 20th century. The composer nevertheless claimed that his music was not modern but traditional. The order and discipline which constituted the pillars of his compositions go hand in hand with his claim, the return to tradition and his love for the ancient leading audiences towards the discovery of his mystical, religious side. A far too little explored direction in that period laden with marked social and cultural events was the composition of religious music. Too few of Stravinsky's opera were inspired from sources of this nature – this is exactly why the discovery of and finding their meanings is important. One of the representative opera of this compositional direction is represented by *Symphony of Psalms*, considered to be a masterpiece placed in Stravinsky's neoclassical compositional period. The work wanted to be a return to Christian values through a musical language adapted to the times, the music being led in the spirit of the Gregorian chant, simply, to which a text in the Latin language was added. The lines of the psalms chosen in order to be capitalised on underline his predilection for the complexity of religious feelings, departing from humble imploration to glorification. Thus, although this work firstly reflects a personal religious experience, at the same time it suggests the unbounded expression of constancy in faith of a community, which seems to participate in a collective prayer.

Keywords: Stravinsky, religious music, the 20th century, *psalm*.

1. Introduction

In the musical landscape from the first half of the 20th century Igor Stravinsky came to the fore as the musician who ignored compositional rules, his works being placed in opposition to Arnold Schoenberg's music. The critics of the time formulated this comparison without realising that the primordial element of the first half of last century was represented exactly by this richness of stylistic orientations and meanings. However, a far too little explored

* vivianafarcas@gmail.com

direction in that period laden with marked social and cultural events was the composition of religious music. Too few of Stravinsky's opera were inspired from sources of this nature – this is exactly why the discovery of and finding their meanings is important. As musicologist Roman Vlad stated, “the intrinsic significance and the importance, which these compositions have in the complex of their author's production we think can justify the opinion that the true background of Stravinsky's spiritual life and the logic of his entire evolution can be revealed exactly by the study of his religious works.” (Vlad, 1967, p. 163).

Stravinsky's religious music was approached by the mentioned musicologist from several points of view. Firstly, he stated that experts' erroneous opinion of considering Stravinsky an “anti-mystic” is an idea that was implemented by Alexander Tansman, who stated that “Stravinsky's attitude regarding divine mystery remains in the darkest secret of his soul.” (Tansman, 1948, p. 155). Thus, new opinions on the style and content of his music were formed, gainsaying previous judgements. A different idea, according to which Stravinsky would have been a profoundly religious nature, is questioned by his small number of religious opera. Although they sum up only 50 minutes of music, compositions like *Symphony of Psalms*, *Mass*, *Three a cappella choirs* or the *Babel* cantata are thought out in order to serve the true goal of religious music, that of profound contemplation of the Divine mystery. Nearing sacred music was done through extreme humility, the Latin text being the one that attracted Stravinsky in doing the project, as he wanted an ascension to come into being through music.

2. Igor Stravinsky's religious works in a historical context

For the understanding of the development of religious music in Stravinsky's work the fact that there was not a compositional direction in this sense in the musical world of the early 20th century has to be remarked: the period in which Stravinsky asserted himself was a preponderantly “lay” period, in which contemporary composers did not deal with composing pieces of a religious character. If there was no work in this direction with Maurice Ravel, a single opus has been left to us from among impressionist Claude Debussy's compositions, *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* – composers' interest for other genres and other sources of inspiration in this period being obvious.

Debussy's work premiered in 1911, when Stravinsky had received the order for the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. Up to the finalisation of the score, a work, which raised question marks regarding the character and the approached message was cantata *The King of The Stars*. Influenced by Debussy's only opus with a religious character being published, this cantata is the precursor of Stravinsky's declared religious works, having a strong mystical impulse. Amazing in this was the link to the sacred world, different from what would be realised in *The Rite of Spring* – the comparison between the cantata with an

apocalyptic mystical subject and the profane ritual, which followed it, placed the works in opposition. However, Roman Vlad considered the two works as being complementary. The first – *The King of The Stars* – surpassed the earthly connexion, while *Sacre* was an “infernally dance of the same earth” (Vlad, 1967, p. 34).

The number of the composer’s works with a religious character is low but the value they possess in the author’s creative context is great, as it reveals to us this contradictory, so much debated upon side of Stravinsky. His compositions can be regarded from two perspectives: works thought out for concert halls and works destined for religious services. For instance, an opus less known to audiences is represented by the *Three a cappella choirs*, which is part of the second category, the pieces being explicitly destined to the sermon. Through *Our Father*, *The Credo* and *Hail Mary*, the composer created a different world from the grandeur found in past religious works.

3. *Symphony of Psalms*

Many experts believe *Symphony of Psalms* to be Stravinsky’s masterpiece. He wrote it in 1930, being ordered by the symphonic orchestra from Boston, which celebrated its 50th anniversary. The composer dedicated it to “the glory of God”, the three movements of the work using the texts of David’s psalms 38, 39 and 150. The music capitalises on the lines in a manner, which passes from states of imploration to thanks and praise of the divinity, having a trajectory, which departs from trouble and suffering on earth to the adoration of God in heaven. From a musical point of view, the symphony adds to the Gregorian chant Bach’s polyphony, Russian rhythms and Debussy’s impressionist harmonies, filtering them all in obvious modernism. In the third movement, *Laudate Dominum*, Stravinsky resurrects some of the “barbaric” energy of the ritual from *The Rite of Spring* but uses it to suggest the exalted joy of the praise of divinity. The emotion accumulated over the course of the entire work is dissolved in eternal silence, offering the feeling of suspended temporality. So that this music manages to combine modernity with religious tradition and offer audiences a sonic icon.

The secret of achieving Stravinsky’s symphonism in this work is in the relation between choir and orchestra. Stravinsky composed in order for these two elements to be on an equal footing, the instrumental music to complete the vocal one with lines full of spirituality. Thus, he composed a whole, using an own recipe supported on pillars of symphony. His not adapting to forms and standards offers his Neoclassicism new valences. *Symphony of Psalms* brings references to old styles and modes of musical discourse, especially the fugue of the second movement, with the appearance of the counterpoint between choir and orchestra and the melody referencing Bach’s music. But the sounds and textures, which make up the work, offer it a profound, not at all ironical

expression, the sincerity of this religious manifesto being an essential component of Stravinsky's approach. From this composition there results special respect towards psalms, religion, a meditation on his own faith.

The dramatism of the first movement, which can be considered a prelude to the double fugue, which constitutes the second part, is prefaced before the appearance of the choir through the figural motif of the piano joined by long notes at the other instruments on sonorities, which offer a general state of suspension, of waiting.

Fig. 1 Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, 1st movement, mm. 18-22

The reprise of the initial solo from the alto is achieved through its addition to an *ostinato* accompaniment at chordophones, which leads to another tense moment. The pianistic figurations from the start also return, this time joined by the lamentations of the choir. The simpleness with which the melodic line unravels references the medieval chant, the constant repetition of notes offering a static feature characteristic of ancient Gregorian music.

However, these moments of melodic simplicity alternate all through the first movement with moments of orchestral tutti laden with dramatism, which are achieved through moments of sonic accumulation. After a sinuous harmonic itinerary, in which the limits between major and minor are overcome, the section closes brightly. If the entire movement offered us a state of anxiety, a new spiritual disposition appears with the final cadence, since the choral voices wish to receive forgiveness before ceasing to exist.

Another link with the past is realised in the second movement, in which Bach's counterpoint carries audiences to the period of glory of the church organ – Pre-classicism. After a long exposition of the orchestral fugue, there are moments of sonic force in the melodic line of the choir; the subject of the vocal fugue is displayed in turn by the voice of the sopranos, followed by alto, tenor and bass.

Fig. 2 I. Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, 2nd movement, mm. 1-23

The vocal fugue continues with an *in stretto* entry, after which the melodic and harmonic profile becomes extended. The mode in which the voices are built and led in reference to the lines that, as opposed to the first movement, are laden with optimism and hope shows the composer's involvement, not so much on a lyrical, sentimental connexion but through expressive force, which manages to convey the message of the psalm. The fugue has a very personal character, the form leading towards an orchestral accumulation, which would become more rarefied in the last bars of the section. After the accumulated tension, calm is achieved through the voices, which sing in unison cadence.

After two sections based on lines referencing devoutness and nothingness, the third movement brings lines of praise and glory addressed to the divinity, from melodic, rhythmic formulas or lines to the alternance of contrasting musical motifs. The composer treats "glory" in an original, personal manner, adding two different types of sonorities: evocative sighs,

which offer atemporality to the beginning of the movement, followed by the violent shock of the ensuing music.

The section introduced through *Hallelujah* brings along new melodic progress based on the initial *Laudate Dominum*. In the incisive *ostinato* accompaniment, the theme is extended and developed until it reaches through crescendo an orchestral tutti, in which the brass offer vitality and expressive force to the choral melodic line. As the composer states about the creative process of the symphony, the music was inspired by one of his specific images: "...a vision of Elijah's chariot ascending towards heaven. I have never written anything so literal in order to suggest the horses and the chariot" (Griffiths, 1982, p. 96)



Fig. 3 I. Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, 2nd movement, mm. 117-122

A new ambiance is installed in the *molto meno mosso* moment, characterised through an *ostinato* bass of the harp and piano, above which there are the constant signals of the cymbals, which ritually join the swing music of the choir on sonorities, which return us towards the calm of C major. The swing, almost enchanted movement of the repetitive melody installs lines of praise. The contrast between the two types of music, which define this final movement causes the closing with the same sonic material, with which it had begun, to offer the third movement renewed calm. This music offers the

sensation of monumentality, as was desired in the tradition of the Roman Catholic mass through the organ accompaniment. Although we do not have this instrument capitalised on by the composer in the symphony, it can be stated that Stravinsky manages to successfully simulate the presence of an organ through the use of the orchestral tutti, together with the vocal one. The composer thus fulfils his mission of rendering the message of ancient wisdom of the psalms, to bring it to contemporaneity.

4. Conclusions

Stravinsky covered a long road from *The Rite of Spring*, which established him. The festive spirit of his compositions, which reference Christian or pagan practices, can be interpreted both as joy and exuberance full of optimism and as tragic and mortuary. His inner world is, however, deeply linked to ritual, mass, ceremony and tradition. We can thus understand how a composer, who offered the world a work of the magnitude of *The Rite of Spring*, could pass onto the other side in order to write religious masterpieces, which also keep their full value nowadays.

As Pascal Benteiu states (1973), the musical world of last century divided composers in two categories: on the one hand progressive temperaments and on the other conservative temperaments. Observing that this way of thinking is outdated and false, because it is based only on the quantity of new techniques, which composers use, the musicologist developed the idea, according to which our interest should concentrate on the compositional process, on the relation between the projected sense and the used means. From this point of view Igor Stravinsky's compositional vision proved that it can offer a deeply religious meaning to a work that does not quote from religious cult music but, overcoming this threshold, expresses through its own style and means the relationship between humans and God like established works of past eras.

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