

Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms  
Analysis by David Mitchell

*Symphony of Psalms* was written by Igor Stravinsky for the Boston Symphony in 1930. It is a work for mixed chorus, two pianos, and orchestra in three movements. The text is a Latin setting of Psalm 38, versus 13 and 14, Psalm 39, versus 2, 3, and 4, and Psalm 150. Stravinsky chose this text because he had recently returned to the Russian Orthodox faith. According to Oxford Music Online, "Stravinsky was telling everyone about a miracle in Venice when an abscess on his right index finger had inexplicably vanished just as he was sitting down to play the Sonata. A few months later, at Easter 1926, he returned formally to the Orthodox communion, to which his parents had always paid lip-service but without any particular commitment or regularity."<sup>1</sup> The inspiration for *Symphony of Psalms* stems from this experience and the Psalm text. His choice of melody and harmony are governed by the Psalm text.

The melody and harmony in the first movement are primarily built upon major and minor thirds. For example, the first page is in pitch class Oct. 1. In this class, there are a number of major and minor seventh chords and quite a few major and minor third intervals. Stravinsky used these intervallic and chordal sonorities to symbolize the sacred nature of the Psalm text. For example, the first movement starts with the following sonorities: E minor seven, Bb seven and first inversion G seven. All of these chords have an abundance of both major and minor thirds. In fact, they all contain three sets of thirds in their vertical structure. Additionally, most of the sonorities in the first movement contain chords build upon three sets of thirds. These thirds represent the holy trinity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Music online*, Updated 2009, s. v. "Stravinsky, Igor."

In the first movement the melody is similar to medieval chant. When the altos enter at rehearsal four, the melody in the choral part is virtually static. The only notes they sing are E's and F's for seven full measures. This is similar to reciting tones found in medieval-period Gregorian chants.

The flute and oboe introduction in the second movement captures the mood of the text from Psalm 39, versus 2, 3, and 4. The text of versus 2-4 says, "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned:"<sup>2</sup> The second movement starts in the key of C minor with a meandering oboe solo that captures a sort of musing introspection and sorrow. The minor mode and unresolved-raised sevenths throughout page one creates a sense of tension and foreboding. Page one captures the essence of the words "...my sorrow was stirred." It also captures Stravinsky's internal spiritual conflict before his conversion to Orthodox Christianity.

The third movement harmonically depicts Stravinsky's spiritual struggle with the decision to convert to Orthodox Christianity. The beginning of the movement is harmonically ambiguous as if Stravinsky has not yet made a commitment to a particular key or religion. Most of the notes fit into diatonic collection DIA -2. The first measure could be in the key of Bb major because C minor seven moves to an F major seven chord which is a dominant seven chord in the key of Bb major. In the second measure, two bass notes resolve to an open fifth between notes Bb and F. Stravinsky suspends portions of the previous dominant seven chord across the Bb to F open fifth interval to deny confirmation of the key of Bb major. In the next four measures the chorus is in the key of Eb major while bass notes in the strings indicate that this could be the key of C minor instead. In measures 7-23, the bass notes are exclusively notes C and G, while the chorus sings notes that include both Eb and E natural. The notes in the choral

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<sup>2</sup> Psalms 39:2-4.

part indicate that this movement could be in the key of C minor or parallel C major. Will Stravinsky choose the dark key of C minor or the bright key of C major? Will he spiritually turn toward light or darkness? These questions remain unresolved until the final measures of the third movement. Stravinsky chooses to end this piece on a bright C major chord. All is not lost. Stravinsky turns toward the light, Alleluia. Laud te Dominum!