

Symphony of Psalms

Commissioned in 1930 by Serge Koussevitsky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Stravinsky's setting of the Psalms is one of the pinnacles of post World War I neo-classicism: structural, restrained and impersonal. For those who are more accustomed to the overt expressionism of the great romantic era works for large chorus, *Symphony of Psalms* may feel dry, ritualistic, calculated and intellectual. Indeed, one of the very reasons Stravinsky chose to write a psalm setting was, in his own words, to "counter the many composers who had abused these magisterial verses as pegs for their own lyrico-sentimental feelings."

Stravinsky was raised in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and was a devout practitioner for the majority of his life, believing, for instance, that the healing of an abscess on his finger just before he was to play an important piano recital in Venice had been the result of hours of praying the night before. The Eastern Orthodox tradition emphasizes asceticism: practicing restraint, reflection, and dispassion to achieve *theosis*, or unity with the divine. And Stravinsky's writing throughout his life suggests he intended to create music for this purpose rather than individual expression. "Individualism," he said, "in art, philosophy, and religion implies a state of revolt against God." As he wrote in the epilogue to his *Poetics of Music*:

For the unity of the work has a resonance all its own. Its echo, caught by our soul, sounds nearer and nearer. Thus the consummated work spreads abroad to be communicated and finally flows back towards its source. The cycle, then, is closed. And that is how music comes to reveal itself as a form of communion with our fellow man – and with the Supreme Being.

Stravinsky conceived of this setting in Church Slavonic, eventually found this impractical and proceeded with Latin. Although we do not know what motivated this choice, Stravinsky was frequently drawn to Latin, a language he described as "not dead, but turned to stone and so monumentalized as to have become immune from all risk of vulgarization." With its fixed texts, he felt free to focus on setting the sounds, the syllables, as he felt the great masters of early polyphony had. "This too, has for centuries been the Church's attitude towards music, and has prevented it from falling into sentimentalism, and consequently into individualism."

Stravinsky's specific choice of psalm texts may even be intended to reflect the Greek Orthodox concept of *theoria*, meaning coming to see God or understanding the presence of God, one of the steps to *theosis*. The first movement is one of supplication, with its conjunct melody highly reminiscent of church chants. In the second movement, after an exquisite double fugue on the text, "I waited for the lord," the prayers are answered and a new song placed "in os meum" ("into my mouth"). Stravinsky described the "alleluia" of the third movement as being that song. And one can certainly imagine that in the final, crystalline minutes of the third movement, which seem to exist in a state of infinitely prolonged time, Stravinsky has captured the rapturous bliss of those who have experienced seeing the divine.

Chichester Psalms

In 1964, Leonard Bernstein took a sabbatical from his role as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic to focus on composition. Six months into the sabbatical, his plans to complete a new musical on Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* had fallen apart. He turned his energy to composing a commission for a combined choral festival of the Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester Cathedrals in 1965, which the Dean of Chichester Cathedral, Walter Hussey, had been urging him to write.

In describing his plan for the work to Rev. Hussey, Bernstein wrote, "A conception occurred to me that I find exciting. It would be a suite of Psalms, and would have a general title like *Psalms of Youth*. The music is all very forthright, songful, rhythmic, youthful. The only hitch is this: I can think of these Psalms only in the original Hebrew." This youthful rhythmic nature was a delight to Hussey, who would later write, "I wanted something that would, as far as possible, send a breath of fresh air through Church music. Also I was anxious to get someone in the popular idiom without being vulgar and it seemed to me that Lennie Bernstein was just that."

The original working title, *Psalms of Youth*, may also help us understand why Bernstein was insistent that the solo part in the second movement be performed by a boy soprano or, if that were not possible, a countertenor, but never by a woman. Bernstein imagined these words (Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd") as being spoken by the young King David, with a terrifying interruption by the raging of the warring adults.

We are lucky today to have the fine Noah Underhill, a singer with the Oberlin Choristers, who has been coached by their excellent director, Jennifer Call.

In recalling the course of his sabbatical, following the failure of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Bernstein reflected, in verse:

For hours on end I brooded and mused
On *materiae musicae*, used and abused;
On aspects of unconventionality,
Over the death in our time of tonality;
Over the fads of Dada and Chance,
The serial strictures, the dearth of romance,
"Perspectives in Music," the new terminology,
Physiomathematomusicology;
Pieces called "Cycles" and "Sines" and "Parameters"—
Titles too beat for these homely tetrameters;
Pieces for nattering, clucking sopranos
With squadrons of vibraphones, fleets of pianos
Played with the forearms, the fists and the palms;
—And then I came up with the *Chichester Psalms*.
These psalms are a simple and modest affair,
Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square,
Certain to sicken a stout John Cager

With its tonics and triads in E-flat major.
But there it stands, the result of my pondering,
Two long months of avant-garde wandering—
My youngest child, old-fashioned and sweet,
And he stands on his own two tonal feet.

On their fiftieth anniversary, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of Bernstein's death, these psalm settings remain just as quirky and delightful as he described them.

- Notes by Gregory Riston