

Igor Stravinsky
Symphony in C

IGOR FEDOROVICH STRAVINSKY was born at Oranienbaum, Russia, on June 17, 1882, and died in New York on April 6, 1971. He began work on the Symphony in C in the autumn of 1938 in Paris, where he composed the first movement. He began the second movement at Sancelmoz in late March 1939, completing it in August. The third movement took form during the autumn and winter of 1939-40, which the composer spent in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He composed the fourth movement in Beverly Hills, California, during the summer of 1940, completing the score on August 19. The title page bears the following dedication: "This symphony, composed to the Glory of God, is dedicated to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of its existence." Stravinsky himself conducted the Chicago Symphony in the first performance, on November 7, 1940, and also led the first Boston Symphony Orchestra performances two months later, in January 1941.

THE SCORE OF STRAVINSKY'S SYMPHONY IN C calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Over the years, many labels have been applied to the protean Igor Stravinsky, who could shed styles (and even countries) as easily as a snake could skins. In the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky*, one contributor describes him as "a conservative innovator" and "a traditionalist, conservative modernist." To another, he was "a magpie consumer and purveyor of musical styles." For musicologist Kenneth Gloag, the essence of Stravinsky's influence lies in the dialectic between modernism and tradition that propels the music, the way that the "modernity of the material is formed as an appropriation and reinterpretation of the past." Stravinsky's Symphony in C presents yet another fierce (and somewhat inconclusive) battle in the war between tradition and modernism.

Stravinsky disliked conventional labels, and the word "symphony" was no exception. It appears rarely in his large oeuvre, and even when it does, the works to which it is applied rarely conform to the classical rules of the genre. Just as Stravinsky for the most part avoided the conventional variety of opera, instead producing hybrid works for the theater and ballet (*L'Histoire du soldat*, *Pulcinella*, *Perséphone*), he also avoided the classical symphony. He preferred to experiment with mixed forms and unusual combinations of instruments.

Like so many composers, Stravinsky began with a youthful symphony—the Symphony in E-flat composed when he was in his early twenties—as a kind of academic exercise. But unlike prominent "serious" composers of the nineteenth century, he made his early reputation on the strength of ballet scores—*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring*.

Actually, it was only in 1920, after he was well established as a theatrical composer, that Stravinsky wrote his first large-scale concert work for a symphonic-type ensemble, the brief *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. In the very title (plural rather than singular, and referring to a "harmony of sounds"), Stravinsky rejects the *idée reçue* of a symphony with a capital "S." The piece does not employ sonata form, the structural foundation of the classical symphony, and excludes strings, the backbone of the conventional symphonic ensemble. Stravinsky described it as "an austere ritual which is unfolded in terms of short litanies between different groups of homogenous instruments." Stravinsky biographer Stephen Walsh has compared the resulting effect to what contemporary constructivist painters achieve on their canvases by juxtaposing colored squares and rectangles.

Symphonies of Wind Instruments was not a success, however, which perhaps helps to explain why ten years went by before Stravinsky again used the title "symphony." This time, the result was *Symphony of Psalms*, scored for children's and mixed voices (singing in Latin) with orchestra. Again, the instrumental ensemble was highly unconventional, heavy on brass, but without violins and violas. Written on a commission from Serge Koussevitzky and the BSO on the occasion of the orchestra's fiftieth anniversary in 1930, *Symphony of Psalms*, said Stravinsky, was an attempt "to create an organic whole without conforming to the various models adopted by custom, but still retaining the periodic order by which the symphony is distinguished from the suite."

Throughout the 1930s, Stravinsky continued to produce works of uncertain genre for unusual ensembles, including *Perséphone* (a melodrama in three tableaux), the *Dumbarton Oaks* Concerto in E-flat for fifteen instruments, and the Concerto for Two Solo Pianos. Viewed in this context, the Symphony in C appears surprisingly conservative. It is, in fact, Stravinsky's only work that can really be considered a symphony in the conventional sense.

First of all, the scoring is relatively traditional, for an ensemble close to the one encountered in the symphonies of Beethoven (whose First Symphony serves as a partial model for the opening movement). Second, the first movement is structured in unmistakable sonata form, with an exposition having two theme areas, followed by a development section and a recapitulation. In this movement, and in the Symphony in C as whole, Joseph Straus has written, Stravinsky

confronts the classical style in its most powerful and prestigious manifestation, challenging the classical masters on their home ground. Here, Stravinsky attempts to appropriate the sonata form for himself, to wrest it away from traditional tonal relations, to reanimate and recreate it in a new musical context, to, in his own words, “build a new music on eighteenth-century classicism using the constructive principles of that classicism.”

Stravinsky began composing the Symphony in C during what he later called “the most tragic year of my life.” Between November 1938 and June 1939, still living in France, he had to confront the deaths of his daughter, his wife, and his mother. He also discovered that he had himself contracted tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his wife and daughter. Stravinsky protested (rather too energetically, perhaps) that the symphony he was writing was not a direct response to his personal trials, although he confessed that composing helped him to retain his sanity. “It is no exaggeration to say that I survived...only by working on the Symphony—which is *not* to say that the music exploits my grief.”

Nor did the increasingly tense international situation in 1939 provide much cheer. The growing threat from Nazi Germany made it necessary for Stravinsky and his companion Vera Sudeikin (soon to become his second wife) to leave Europe and settle in America. So it happened that the Symphony in C’s rhythmically complex third movement (switching rapidly between 3/8, 5/16, and 7/16) was composed in early 1940 in Boston, where Stravinsky had come to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University. Harvard, the composer observed, was “a nursery of good manners and good taste.” The New England climate (“whose only seasons, so it seemed to a Mediterraneanized European, were winter and the Fourth of July”) produced a less positive impression. As he had done so often before, Stravinsky fled in search of warmer surroundings, moving to southern California. It was there that he wrote the symphony’s finale.

Later, some critics suggested that the two “American” movements were “different in spirit and design” from the first two “European” ones. Stravinsky responded by admitting that a particular passage toward the end of the finale (at measure 145, where the trumpets enter with a staccato phrase that sounds a bit like a car horn) “might not have occurred to me before I had known the neon glitter of Los Angeles’ boulevards from a speeding automobile.”

Stephen Walsh has called the Symphony in C “an exercise in modelling,” a modernist response to the idea and image of a classical symphony. Significantly, the work is not (as would be expected) in C major or C minor, but in C. Especially in the first movement, Stravinsky fails to provide the anticipated harmonic progression, instead staging a struggle between two pitch centers, C and E, and their basic triads (C major and E minor) that ends in a standoff. The resulting tension replaces the conventional relationship between the tonic and dominant chords (in this case, C and G) characteristic of the classical style. Stravinsky retains the outer shell of sonata form, but remakes the harmonic language from inside. Throughout, easy resolution is avoided, creating a certain unease and instability that subverts the comforting equilibrium of the apparent classical architecture.

In *Themes and Conclusions*, completed shortly before his death, Stravinsky tried to reassess his accomplishment. “How do I evaluate the Symphony thirty years afterward? The answer is that I don’t. It may be too episodic, the key centers may be over-emphasized, and certainly there *are* a great many *ostinati*. And these faults, if such they are, glare a little more obviously because of the ascendancy of another aesthetic, which is no more absolute than that of the Symphony, and which, in another thirty years, may look bad itself in the very directions which now seem to counter these ‘weaknesses’ of the Symphony.”

Harlow Robinson