

Revision Notes:

NAM 31 — *Symphony of Psalms*:rd3 Movement, by Igor Stravinsky

“Music, by its very nature, is essentially powerless to express anything at all? Its indispensable and single requirement is construction.”- Igor Stravinsky

Context

Europe in the 1920's **declared war on lingering romanticism**: its subjectivism, the use of music for emotional expression or as a reflecting mirror of programmatic ideas.

Detached objectivity was the aim; **structure** the means to this end. The *Symphony of Psalms* was commissioned for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and was the culmination Stravinsky's inter-war works. After the *Rite of Spring* (1913), Stravinsky moved away from extreme sophistication of rhythm and instrumentation towards **economy and simplicity**. What remained constant was the composer's use of **repeated short melodic and rhythmic patterns**. The work was intended for the concert hall, rather than the church service. As Stravinsky said: “It is the **singing of the Psalms** that I am symphonising.” (not, then, symphonising the Psalms themselves. This is the **objective** approach to composition hitherto mentioned.)

Instrumental Forces

5 Flutes and Piccolo	4 French Horns	Timpani	Harp
4 Oboes	5 Trumpets	Bass Drum	Cello
Cor Anglais	2 Trombones		Double Bass
3 Bassoons	Bass Trombone		2 Pianos
Double Bassoon	Tuba		

The ensemble consists of a choral and instrumental section, each treated **independently** and **equally**. There are **no upper strings**, only cello and basses. Stravinsky preferred **trebles** to sopranos for their “coolness of timbre”. He used **no organ, or clarinets** (again, their timbre is too warm), but the wind and brass sections are enlarged. This unique orchestra enables the composer to create **hard-edged timbres** and a variety of **clear textures** that are as vital to his concept of the piece as the notes themselves.

Ideas

- There are **six key motifs** central to this movement:

A	Homophonic setting of Alleluia, serves as a refrain of the utmost simplicity. (Bar 2-3)
B	Hypnotically repeating melodic ostinato: D-Eb-Bb, ending on a repeated C. The narrow range and repetitive patterns are like those of Russian folk songs. (T/B bar 4)
C	An alternation between the two notes of a minor third (S, bars 9-11)
D	A simple chant-like melody consisting of two notes a semitone apart (horns, bars 14-19)

E	Six-note quaver rhythm (bassoons & horns, bar 24) that is often metrically displaced
F	Triplet rhythms which take the form of triadic figures (bars 40-43) and semitonal/chromatic figures (bars 44-45)

Word setting & Text Treatment

Music is created with **ideas** rather than words. Here, the individual phrases are often set with the syllables in the wrong place: rather than having strong syllables within the poetic line on strong beats, they can fall anywhere. He was **more interested in the sound of the words** (phonology) and on the general ideas they refer to. The **crisp, distinctive rhythms** of the piece are enhanced by the **syllabic** word setting, and the use of **hockets**.

There is **minimal word-painting**, leading to some unexpected treatment of text: Alleluia is not given its usual celebratory treatment — it is **quiet and reverent**. In the jubilant and evocative section of the psalm, where the Lord is praised upon various instruments, these particular **instruments are not highlighted** in the orchestration, and the music at this point is mystical and **hypnotic**.

Tonality

For many people, Stravinsky's treatment of tonality represented for many people an escape from the excesses of late Romantic chromaticism: the most obvious feature in this movement is the use of **bitonality** (the combination of two keys at the same time), but there are many factors that contribute to the cacophony of **dissonance** to be heard during parts of the movement.

Form

Defined in part by the mood: the slow outer sections and faster middle section. It is **ternary**, reinforced by the return of the **opening idea**. The work is **unified by the motifs** outlined above, and the homophonic *Alleluia* acts as a refrain.

Things to think about:

- *How is ostinato used both as a structural device and as a way to establish mood?*
- *How does tonal conflict, and its resolution, play an important part in this movement?*