

PROGRAM NOTE by Eric Bromberger

Symphony of Psalms

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum

Died April 6, 1971, New York City

For the Boston Symphony Orchestra's fiftieth anniversary in 1930, Serge Koussevitzky commissioned a series of new works, and that set of commissions is the most impressive in the history of music. It produced Hindemith's *Concert Music for Brass and Strings*, Roussel's *Third Symphony*, Prokofiev's *Fourth Symphony*, Hanson's *Second Symphony*, Copland's *Symphonic Ode*, and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* (the other the works commissioned that year are seldom heard today: Honegger's *First Symphony*, Respighi's *Metamorphosen*, and Edward Burlingame Hill's *Ode for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra*).

Koussevitzky asked these composers for a symphonic work, but specified that each was free to write for whatever combination of performers he preferred. When this commission arrived, Stravinsky had been thinking for some time of composing a large-scale instrumental and vocal work. Raised in the Russian Orthodox church, he had fallen away from its practice, but in 1926—at the age of 44—he rejoined the church, and in response to Koussevitzky's commission he composed the *Symphony of Psalms*. This work, however, should not be considered a statement of Stravinsky's individual beliefs but rather a generalized expression of religious faith.

For the *Symphony of Psalms*, composed between January and August 1930, Stravinsky turned to the Old Testament, taking excerpts from two Psalms (Nos. 39 and 40) and using one (No. 150) complete; the text is sung in Latin. The title "symphony" may seem a strange one for what is essentially a setting of three texts without the drama and development one associates with symphonic form. Stravinsky explained that "I wanted 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, the latter being simply a succession of pieces varying in character."

Stravinsky wished to give equal prominence to the chorus and the orchestra, but he made some unusual decisions about instrumentation, and these give the *Symphony of Psalms* its unique sound. First, Stravinsky eliminates violins, violas, and clarinets from the orchestra, and the absence of the bright, resonant upper strings and the smooth sonority of the clarinets helps intensify the music's consciously "archaic" sound. Second, Stravinsky includes two pianos and a harp in the orchestra and then uses them percussively—their "strikes" of sound help give this music its characteristic pointilistic sonority. Finally, Stravinsky tries to underline the "ancient" sound he wanted in this music by specifying that the soprano and alto parts should be sung by boys rather than women, as was the practice in early church music (this stipulation is almost never observed, and Stravinsky himself invariably used women rather than boys in the chorus).

Stravinsky's initial musical idea was the repeated six-note sequence in the final movement, and he composed that section first, then wrote the opening movements. None of the movements has an Italian tempo indication; instead, Stravinsky specifies only a metronome marking. The first movement (quarter-note=92; Psalm 39, 12-13)—which Stravinsky said was composed "in a state of religious and musical ebullience"—opens with recurrent cracks of sound generated in large part by the two pianos. The chorus enters with its plea to be heard, and this movement—which functions as an intrada—drives to a soaring climax. The second movement (eighth-note=60; Psalm 40, 1-3) is a complex double fugue, first on a spiky subject for winds, then for voices, and finally for combinations of them. The final movement (quarter-note=48; Psalm 150) is the most varied. It opens with the chorus' *Alleluia*, but instead of being festive, the phrase is somber, imbued with an almost funereal splendor. The original six-note cell pulses quietly, then explodes to life at the *Laudate Dominum*. Stravinsky said that this central episode, with its athletic brass galloping along brisk triplets, was inspired by a vision of Elijah's chariot ascending into the heavens. At the close, the music moves steadily over a pulsing four-note ostinato. Stravinsky himself noted that this "final hymn of praise must be thought of as issuing from the skies, and agitation is followed by the 'calm of praise.'"

new true mirrors, furrowed, flooded, extended quite far
KEVIN ZHANG

Kevin Zhang is a fifth-year doctoral candidate in the Department of Music at UC San Diego, where he studies with Roger Reynolds. He received his MFA in Integrated Composition,

Improvisation, and Technology from UC Irvine in 2012, and has also studied at the New England Conservatory and the Royal College of Music. His works have been heard at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, Dian Red Kechil International Young Composers Residency, Electroacoustic Barn Dance, Oregon Bach Festival, and the Puerto Rican Sound Art Fair.

The composer has supplied the following program note:

“We’re unintentionally equipped to dream
Our thoughts go around our figures
They hold us predicting nothing though they recur”

new true mirrors, furrowed, flooded, extended quite far sets select texts from *The Book of Thousand Eyes* by the writer Lyn Hejinian, who has graciously agreed to allow me to use them in this musical context. Lyn today is commonly associated with the group of Language Poets, emergent from California, whose work often places at the forefront of its project the notion of language itself as something that is the source of experience, as opposed to a framing or translation of experience. This emphasis on the very idea of medium itself is something that I find important to consider in my own work as a composer of notated concert music. Music, after all, is a medium so fundamentally dependent on the ineffability of experience.

“One hears music and outcries
which no one else hears
in this voluntary solitude
consuming thousands of sights

“And sleep which so much helps
breaks out into events
in moments to spend everything,
each thing as it might be”

The texts in *The Book of Thousand Eyes* (a title no doubt in allusion to Scheherazade) tend to coalesce around the themes of night and/or sleep. A rejection of waking consciousness as something that consists of on/off binary states, this thematic metaphor is quite a powerful one with which to explore the slipperiness of language as a mediator and shaper of our cognition and our presumptions about reality or “meaning.”

“your brain is like a lake
being splashed by rain
sleep, little baby, sleep
the droplets spin and spread

“your mind is like a web
being blown by wind
sleep, little baby, sleep
someone's at home in your head”

My musical response to these words is *new true mirrors, furrowed, flooded, extended quite far*, consisting of four interwoven recursive canons plus a lullaby. It is scored for the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, using only a treble choir and adding solo violins.

In the Midst of Flux

GITY RAZAZ

Born March 1986, Tehran, Iraq

Hailed by the *New York Times* as “ravishing and engulfing,” Gity Razaz’s music ranges from concert solo pieces to large symphonic works. She is an active collaborator in projects across disciplines from modern dance to electro-acoustic soundscapes. Her compositions have earned numerous national and international awards, including the Jerome Foundation award, the Libby Larsen prize, Juilliard Composers’ Orchestra Competition, ASCAP, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, among others. She attended The Juilliard School on full scholarship and received her Bachelor’s and Masters of Music in Composition under the tutelage of Samuel Adler, Robert Beaser and John Corigliano.

The composer has supplied the following note:

In the Midst of Flux is a tone poem structured as a series of musical vignettes made up of a compact core of material. Though each episodic passage evokes an independent sound world – lush lyrical passages, bombastic rhythmic moments, chamber-like sections building up into cadences – they follow one another to form a dramatic trajectory, an inevitable arrival of different worlds at a single focal point.

Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Opus 68 “Pastoral”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

After making sketches for several years, Beethoven composed his *Sixth Symphony* during the summer of 1808, and it was first performed at the Theater an der Wien on December 22 of that year. The *Sixth* is unique among Beethoven's symphonies because it appears to be program music. Beethoven himself gave it the nickname *Pastoral* and further headed each movement with a descriptive title that seems to tell a "story": the arrival in the country, impressions beside a brook, a peasants' dance which is interrupted by a thunderstorm, and a concluding hymn of thanksgiving once the storm has passed. Some have claimed that romantic music begins with the *Pastoral Symphony*—they see it as a precursor of such examples of musical painting as Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, Mendelssohn's fairyland scenes, and Liszt's tone poems—while others have tried to stage this music, complete with characters, costumes, and scenery.

Beethoven would have been astonished. He had no use for program music or musical portraiture, which he considered cheap trickery. His *Sixth Symphony* is in classical symphonic forms throughout; even its "extra" movement, the famous thunderstorm, can be understood as a brief transition between the scherzo and the rondo-finale. And while this symphony refers to something outside the music itself, Beethoven wanted it understood as "an expression of feelings rather than painting." The *Sixth* may lack the stark drama and tension of such predecessors as the *Eroica* or the *Fifth*, but it depends on the same use of sonata form for its musical argument, and finally it aims for the same feeling of transcendence those earlier works achieved, even if—as Joseph Kerman has wryly noted—all that is being transcended here is the weather.

Beethoven liked to get out of Vienna during the stifling summer months and would take rooms in a rural village, where he could combine composing with long walks through the fields and woods. A journal entry from 1815, seven years after the *Pastoral*, suggests his feelings about these walks: "The Almighty in the woods! I am happy, blessed in the forests." This symphony seems similarly blessed. Its first movement ("Cheerful impressions on arriving in the country") is built on two completely relaxed themes; these do not offer the contrast that lies at the heart of sonata form, but instead create two complementary "Cheerful impressions." One of the other unusual features of this movement is Beethoven's use of the second measure of the opening theme in so many ways: as theme, as accompaniment, as motor rhythm; this simple falling figure saturates the movement, and over its ostinato-like repetitions Beethoven works

some wonderful harmonic progressions, all aimed at preserving this movement's sense of calm.

The second movement—"Scene by the Brook"—is also in a sonata form built on two themes. The title "Scene" may imply dramatic action, but there is none here. Over murmuring lower strings, with their suggestion of bubbling water, the two themes sing gracefully. The movement concludes with three brief bird calls, which Beethoven names specifically in the score: nightingale (flute), quail (oboe), and cuckoo (clarinet).

Despite the composer's protests to the contrary, the third and fourth movements do offer pictorial representations in sound. The scherzo ("Peasants' merrymaking") is a portrait of a rural festival; its vigorous trio echoes the heavy stamping of a peasant dance. Beethoven offers a *da capo* repeat of both scherzo and trio, yet just as the scherzo is about to resume it suddenly veers off in a new direction. Tremulous strings and distant murmurings lead to the wonderful storm, which remains—two centuries after its composition—the best musical depiction ever of a thunderstorm, with great crashes of thunder in the timpani and lightning flashing downward in the violins (one desperately literal-minded early critic complained that this was the only storm he had ever heard of where the thunder came *before* the lightning).

Gradually the storm moves off, and the music proceeds directly into the last movement, where solo clarinet and horn outline the tentative call of a shepherd's pipe in the aftermath of the storm. Beethoven then magically transforms this call into his serene main theme, given out by the violins. If ever there has been music that deserved to be called radiant, it is this singing theme, which unfolds like a rainbow spread across the still-glistening heavens. The finale is a moderately-paced rondo (Beethoven's marking is *Allegretto*). Along the way appear secondary themes that once again complement rather than conflict with the mood of the rondo theme, and at the end a muted French horn sings this noble melody one last time.

The petulant young Debussy, enemy of all things German, once sneered that one could learn more about nature from watching the sun rise than from listening to the *Pastoral Symphony*. This is strange criticism from the man who would go on to write *La Mer*, which sets out to do exactly the same thing as the *Pastoral*: to evoke the emotions generated by nature rather than trying to depict that same nature literally. Beethoven did not set out to teach or to show his audience anything. Rather, he wrote a symphony in classical form, which he wanted understood as music: "It is left to the listener to discover the situations for himself. . . . Anyone with a notion of country life can imagine the composer's intentions without the help of titles or

headings.”