STRAVINSKY'S "NEW" SONG
(Jeffrey Baxter – May 15, 2009)

"Et immisit in os meum canticum novum" [and He put in my mouth a new song].

The "new"-ness of Stravinsky's 1930 composition is still fresh, nearly a century later. –And its appeal to audiences shows no sign of diminishing.

Why?

Because, as with all masterpieces of art, it is a perfect combination of technique and spirit. -Inspiration and perspiration, a Western form of enlightenment achieved through the transcendence of these so called non-western "pairs of opposites."

Below are a few points of explanation for each side of this "classic" coin:

CRAFT
On the left side of the brain, we have a master musical craftsman in Stravinsky. In many ways Stravinsky's aesthetic was like that of Bach's: the musical "art" was to him more like science, or a language like mathematics. –And like Bach, Stravinsky was both well versed in this "skill" and had the historical perspective to draw upon.

In Stravinsky's milieu, the approach to artistic creation was largely a reaction to a century's-worth of heavy handed German Romanticism. At one point in the first third of the 20th century, you were as a composer either a neo-classicist like Stravinsky (and the painter Picasso) or a modernist of the 12-tone approach (like Schoenberg or Webern and Expressionist painters like Schiele and Kokoshka). Stravinsky's voice to sing these three Psalms involves some of the following constructs:

1. FORM – The non-Romantic detachment that Stravinsky sought in works like his *Symphony of Psalms* begins with the choice of the form itself: a Symphony not in a typical Beethovenian 4-movement Sonata-form, but more a *sinfonia* (or "sounding together") in the early Baroque sense, as in the works of Giovanni Gabrieli.

2. FORCES – The selection of performing forces themselves reflect a steering away from any hint of the echoes of Wagner and the 19th century: the orchestra for Stravinsky's *Psalms* uses no post-18th century "modern" instruments" like clarinets, and the largest section of the traditional orchestra (the violins) is dispensed with completely. The use of voices also sets this work apart. Stravinsky even specifies in the score the use of children's voices, to avoid a Romantic operatic delivery. Even so, this choral symphony is not a Beethoven 9th, but rather a neo-Baroque work where the orchestra and chorus are on equal footing for contrapuntal development.

3. LANGUAGE – Stravinsky's texts are sung in Latin – a "dead" language, in spite of or maybe even because of its ecclesiastical use – further distancing himself from any heart-on-sleeve Romantic or vernacular expression.

4. HARMONY – Stravinsky's Syntax

a. Polytonality - Stravinsky's breakthrough harmonic language of using more than one tonality at once (so skillfully and scandalously used in his *Rite of Spring*) is an aural version Picasso's cubism – simultaneous perspective. With Stravinsky's inventive use of polytonality, one hears more than one tonal center at the same time. He uses this at the opening of the third movement at the first sung "Alleluia:" the chorus cadences in E-flat (V-I) while the orchestra cadences in C (V-I).

b. Modal Harmony - Stravinsky, though, takes this a step further and reaches even farther back into musical history by using the ancient church modes of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, sometimes piling on top of them traditional diatonic harmonies and polytonalities.

In the first movement, Stravinsky has crafted a "Gregorian chant"-like melody based on the Phrygian mode on E at Figure [4]. It is accompanied by oboes and bassoons that vacillate between C-Major and E-flat (G7 and B-flat 7 chords that are heard in the movement's opening measures). At Figure [10] "Quoniam advena ego" ("for a newcomer am I"), a shift is made to the Hypophrygian mode (on B) – like a shift to the "dominant" key area that Mozart so often skillfully employed.

c. Harmonic Series – In truth Stravinsky has reached even further back in musical time than the Middle Ages and Renaissance – for this piece's opening movement, he has crafted a harmonic language based on a prehistoric song-of-the-earth that arises naturally from the Harmonic Series itself. It is a language of minor thirds based on a fundamental tone and its overtones. The minor third is the interval so common in all folk music and one that many think may have comprised the first songs sung – think of the teasing taunt little kids devise on descending minor thirds: "nah-nah, nah-nah" In this primitive sound of minor (and major) thirds, Stravinsky has created a harmonic language for his setting of this ancient text. Thirds predominate the melody and harmony, from beginning to end.

The work's striking opening note, a dissonant sounding thwack, is nothing more than an E-minor chord. But because of Stravinsky's careful voicing of the chord in a non-traditional way (incorporating a low E and low G), he sets up an overtone series on E and G so that in the upper partials there are clashes between G# and G-natural. It sounds dissonant, but technically isn't.

The *Symphony*'s striking ending, its final chord in the final measure, is a graphic "depiction" of the Harmonic Series itself: it is an empty octave of Cs with a tiny high-pitched E-natural on top, like an overtone.

5. TECHNIQUES – The neo-classical part of this composition is much more than Mozartian. Stravinsky has plundered much older musical techniques to make this neo-"everything:"

a. Fugue - Perhaps the most "neo" of techniques is the 18th century Bachian double fugue of the second movement (based on minor thirds and their inversion, Major 6ths). It is a full-blown traditional fugue for orchestra that then becomes the "accompaniment" of the choral fugue at Figure [5].

b. Diminution and Augmentation – the orchestral fugue-subject in Movement II is given in a sped-up dotted version at Fig. [14] and slowed down in the solo trumpet at Fig. [17]. Perhaps the greatest use of these techniques is in the accompanimental figures of the first movement at Fig. [7], where a simultaneous use of the minor third melody is played in 8th-notes by the oboes and in quarter-note values by the basses – and at Fig. [9] where 8ths are pitted against 16ths.

c. Ostinato – a recurring rhythmic pattern that undergirds and unifies a composition. In the first movement an ostinato of constant, chugging of 8th notes (that outline a sequence of alternating minor thirds) is employed, and in the *Symphony*'s final pages the ostinato is a slow-moving repeated hemiola of perfect 4ths in the timpani, piano and harp (creating a timeless sense of eternity).

d. Hocket – a 14th century musical technique where the notes of a melody are tossed back and forth (in sequence) by different "voices," or instruments). In the second movement, the orchestral fugue-subject is "hocketed" between two horns in the two measures before Fig. [7]. Even the text is "hocketed," or more precisely, fragmented like body parts in a Picasso cubist painting, at the first movement's ending text, "non e-ro" and in the second movement's final "DO-MINO." Hocket is also suggested in the primitive, broken unison chants of "Laudate Dominum" in the allegro section of the third movement.

e. Hemiola – That Handelian technique of three duples in a triple meter (ONE-two-THREE one-TWO-three) is employed in abundance by Stravinsky in the first movement and in the third movement's final pages.

f. Cross relation – The old Renaissance appearance of dissonant pitches resulting from voice-leading – often adjacent; sometimes simultaneous – is found throughout the choral writing in the work, especially in the "battling" E-flats and E-naturals in the third movement's opening pages, Fig. [1] – [2].

INSPIRATION

-And now for the right side of the brain…the inspirational, intuitive artist that was Stravinsky.

Stravinsky was famously quoted as saying "Music, by its nature, is incapable of expressing anything." Undoubtedly this sensational statement was made as something for critics to chew on, but it is more to the point of Stravinsky's neo-classical or anti-Romantic aesthetic. In such a long life devoted to musical creation, what was he getting at? As regards the *Symphony of Psalms*, what might be some of the "why" behind the "how?" To what expressive end did he employ the skillful techniques described above? Here are just a very few examples:

1. DISSONANCE VS CONSONANCE – Stravinsky flips the paradigm and asks us to re-think, or re-experience, tension versus release in music.

a. In the second movement Stravinsky boldly creates the most dissonant measure in the piece to underscore one word: one bar before Fig. [15]: "Et immisit in os meum canticum NOVUM" [and He put in my mouth a new song]. Stravinsky's "new" song is this very work (and by extension) all his life's work. In seeking a voice, he created a bold new way of communicating an artistic truth. The text continues, "Many will see it and fear, and hope in the Lord." Could he perhaps mean, in the creative act of putting pen to paper: "Many will hear it and be inspired, and find solace in the Flesh-Made-Word?"

b. In the first movement one finds a more traditional approach of text-painting. Stravinsky's move from dissonance to consonance at Fig. [10] to Fig. [11] underscores the text's existential tenor and creates a building drama ("For I am a newcomer to you"). For the brief moment when he lands on the word "te" ("You") the clean consonance of an open fifth on D and A prevails, but the mounting dissonance only briefly abates for that one word ("te" = "God"). The dissonance grows on "et peregrinus sicut patres mei" ("and a stranger like my fathers before me") only to "resolve" on the last word with a sense of inevitable desperation. The following "Remitte mihi" ("spare me") is given in the emptiness of a *forte* open fifth in the "home key" of E-Phrygian, but the final measures see a unison ascending shift by the chorus to the note G (the old dominant of the Hypophrygian mode). Does this modulation represent a fleeting moment of hope? Why the break in the last word "e-ro?" Perhaps out of sheer exhaustion, it would seem that the Psalmist (and in this case the composer) is confronting the emptiness of his own mortality. –Or maybe he is gathering his strength by taking one last breath to say "I'm still here!"

Is Stravinsky painting a portrait not only of the lone Psalmist, but of 20th century Man? -Or even a portrait of himself, the lone Artist, struggling to find his voice? Given the piece's longevity thus far, Stravinsky seems to "speak" for all of us.

2. INTUITIVE GENIUS – Stravinsky, like Mozart and Bach, was blessed with an intuitive sense of proportion. His highly ordered second movement, with its double fugue, is constructed on principles of the Golden Mean (just like the Parthenon). In great music, something significant usually happens close to a point a little over halfway in a movement. Of this second movement's 88 measures, the Golden Mean (.618) is at m. 56 (the first *a cappella* moment in the work). -And even further, there is a Golden Section (.618 of .618) around m. 74, "canticum NOVUM," Stravinsky's "new" song. The real miracle of this design is that it was most likely intuitive and not planned in advance: Stravinsky's art came artlessly.

3. ONE HAS YET TO GET THE BETTER OF WORDS – Stravinsky's most original text-setting is found in the third movement.

a. Here the *forte* reiterations of the text "laudate Dominum" ("Praise the Lord") at Figures [8] and [14]-[18] devolve into syllables. Words have lost their impact. Stravinsky "de-constructs" the words (as Picasso did to images) to get at their original intent or the motivation of their intonation. –Perhaps a distant memory of a time in human history before language existed?

b. Perhaps most striking, however, is the use of an intentional opposite form of text-painting – the *pianissimo* setting of the text "cymbalis bene sonantibus"("loud sounding cymbals") at Fig. [22]. This slow-moving, timeless angelic song is not to be disturbed by earthly instruments or by words of an earthly tongue. "Meanings" are turned around in this vision of eternity. Even traditional harmony is eschewed for a pan-diatonicism in all parts. –And what about that final chord, based on the Harmonic Series? Is it the fading echo of the Song of the Earth? -the Harmony of the Spheres? -the Voice of God or the Voice of Man? Is the voice of God and Man one in the same? Stravinsky provides no easy answers. He merely concludes with a "still small voice" and poses an eternal enigma for us to ponder.

-And, of course, this is the great thing about great art. To quote Robert Shaw, the arts "burn no books or heretics…"

and "Across the boundaries of Time and Space the Arts are an open hand, instead of a closed fist…"

–And further, "It does not require a graduate degree in Musicology or Art History to what they call 'appreciate' great Art. What it does require is equal parts of modesty and vulnerability – and a preference for the small truth over the big lie."

Of course, by your sensitive singing in last night's concert, I knew that already!

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