

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ANALYSIS: ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

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IGOR STRAVINSKY: *Canticum Sacrum*. Musicologists agree on one thing: 1600 is the most important date in the annals of musical history. Then, the old world of ecclesiastical ideals was successfully challenged by a new humanism, and the era of modern musical thought began. For our time, 1950 may well be of parallel importance, for it marks the beginning of Igor Stravinsky's interest in composition with twelve tones. Although Arnold Schoenberg's conception of twelve-tone music dates back to the 1920's, Stravinsky and Schoenberg represented opposing musical sympathies. Both men, respectively, seemed to perpetuate the schism between a romantically wild chromaticism and severely disciplined diatonic classicism. With the advent of Stravinsky's first tone-row-composed music, the world was startled by the rapprochement of these opposites, but not impressed.

Everything was as it had always been, simply another influence the seventy-year-old master had absorbed and was now treating to the ink of his parody pen. Those disappointed in the "bloodless simplicity" of these works were as slow to understand Stravinsky's present intentions as they had been in misunderstanding his neo-classical turns. Critics expected every work born of a tone-row to be emotion-drenched, sublimating Freudian complexes, painting Kafka-esque nightmares or *sinfonia eroica*s of twentieth-century remoteness and despair. Angst is not part of Stravinsky's aesthetic credo. Furthermore, critics had not learned that when adopting new techniques, Stravinsky always contributes a fresh poetic dimension. As in his neo-classical works, where he hones a farcical edge on eighteenth-century rococo elegance, Stravinsky now imposed classical restraint on an expressionist-derived technique. Always a musical weather vane,

Stravinsky's acceptance of the twelve-tone premise ushers in the tone-row millennium. The *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), Stravinsky's first large-scale twelve-tone work, leads the way.

The *Canticum Sacrum ad Honorem Sancti Marci Nomis* was commissioned by the City of Venice to celebrate the one-thousandth anniversary of Saint Mark's Cathedral. Conceived for chorus, soloists, and an orchestra of unique timbre (winds, brass, organ, harp, violas, and contrabasses), the texts are chosen from both Testaments and sung in the Latin of the Vulgate. In analyzing the *Canticum*, one is first struck by the work's formal plan, so closely bound up with the architecture of Saint Mark's. "To the City of Venice, in Praise of its Patron Saint, the Blessed Mark, Apostle." This inscription, sung in the manner of Byzantine priests (*protopraepositi*) is a nine-measure aisle leading to the altar of Stravinsky's church. Like the domes of Saint Mark's, the five movements of the cantata are concentrically balanced. The first movement reappears as a retrograde final movement, the fourth corresponds to the second, while the third, or middle movement, balances the others centrifugally in construction and in length (see illustration). The *Canticum* is the only example where the erroneous saw, "music is frozen architecture," applies. The significance of Stravinsky's architectural parallel goes deeper than surface resemblances; the *Canticum's* formal plan and texts become a musico-theological parable.

Taken together, the texts concern themselves with discipleship, the nature of love before the Fall, and the problem of belief. Movements one and five command, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:7). Although serial in implication, these movements are not twelve-tone in

construction; emphasizing as they do definite tonal boundaries, they are the cornerstones of Stravinsky's edifice. The more reflective, philosophical inner movements are distinguished from the directness of God's command in being strictly composed with a series of twelve notes. "Surge, aquilo" (Song of Songs 4:16), for example, is a tenor aria describing prelapsarian love. The exotic splendor of this movement leads the listener into regions of new musical dimensions where contrabasses are permitted to sing soprano to a harp bass line. The cantata's inner sanctuary (movement three) is divided into three balancing sections, which, like the inner buttresses of a cathedral, support the entire structure. "Ad Tres Virtutes Hortationes" consists of sermons on Charity, Hope, and Faith, the basis of humanistic Christianity.

In purely technical terms, perhaps the *Canticum's* greatest contribution to musical theory is its juxtaposition of modified tonal materials (movements one and five) with a new method for achieving

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tonality. Movements two, three, and four abandon the key-constructive principle of Baroque tonality, the polarity of soprano and bass. "Surge, aquilo" is composed with pure intervals, without relation to a bass line. Tonality, as a concept, still functions; however, as a historical definition (that is, musical flow controlled by a generating tone) tonality is here defunct. In

Stravinsky, the movement of intervals is melodically directed; it is the gravitational pull one *hears* that defines a new feeling for tonality. Much twelve-tone music devalues the purity of intervals in favor of a dense sonoric texture. Stravinsky, amazingly, restores dignity to the long-degraded perfect fifth. The music of the *Canticum's* inner sections is created by horizontal rows of notes orbiting in the sphere of their own tension, set free from vertical considerations, yet melting into the space of their own perfection.

Rather than sleuth the technical subtleties of row manipulation, let us focus on poetics. Many factors complicate the composition of sincere contemporary sacred music. Stravinsky has said that in order to compose good sacred music "one must believe in the persons of the Holy Trinity and the Devil." Philosophical inquiry, questioning not only the absence of God but His existence and the ascendancy of nationalism over religious conviction, has contributed to making sacred composition most difficult, if not impossible. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the gradual weakening of organized religion is reflected in the crumbling boundaries between sacred and secular musical styles. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* is composed in the con-

cert manner of his symphonies; it represents one man's sacred expression that eventually culminated in a symphony with Schiller's humanistic but nonliturgical text. A secular form now is made to carry a sacred meaning. Verdi's operatically influenced *Requiem* further undermines sacred and secular musical categories. Current jazz suites on Mass texts altogether obliterates a two thousand-year-old distinction. Since the beginning of the century, sacred music has been a confused and often vulgarized affair. Alongside Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron*, the *Canticum Sacrum* forms a diptych of our century's supreme sacred works.

All great music exhibits various facets and levels. Wholly contemporary in sound, the *Canticum's* sense of history-propelling style is strong. Concentrating only on the vocal writing, one finds a kaleidoscope of styles ranging from Byzantine cantillation to Netherlands mirror-canon. Contemporaneity results from the total choral sound, and while the individual parts are difficult, they are perhaps more vocal than Bach's instrumental vocalism. The problem is one of intonation. (Tonal music does minimize intonation difficulties, yet would it not be a mistake to define choral possibilities only in terms of tonal music?) Like Bach's, the

effect of Stravinsky's choral technique is revealed in its ensemble sound, and there are few moments in choral literature matching the austere beauty of the *Canticum's* "Diliges Dominum." Ever mindful of music history, the similarity of Stravinsky's "canon in moto contrario" setting to Byrd's treatment of the same text is hardly accidental. Stravinsky's choral writing is particularly unique in its suggestive abilities. By invoking musical impressions of the antique world, the Christian ethos of the *Canticum* is given historical depth. In its avoidance of elegance, and preference for the starkly etched line, the work's severe Byzantine facade may well represent Stravinsky's recurrent taste for classical reminiscence, his mathematically inspired approach to beauty, emphasizing symmetry and order.

At its deepest level the *Canticum* achieves greatness because of its divine involvement in an essentially profane age. Robert Craft has pointed out the symbolic significance of the first movement's repetition in retrograde as a final movement. God's initial command ("Go preach the gospel") is finally fulfilled ("And they went forth and preached everywhere") at the work's end. God's past command has been realized in the future. Past and future have exchanged places; future and past have become indivisibly one. As God's time is nontemporal but fluid, Stravinsky's reversible rhythms mirror without beginning or end. While this aspect of the composition echoes orthodox theology, the virtue of Faith is subjected to an existential gaze. From Saint Mark's account of Jesus healing an epileptic boy, Stravinsky extracts a phrase of impaled anguish—"Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief" (Mark 9:23). The meaning of these words is limited neither to the Roman times of Marcus nor to the modern predicament. The eternal problem of belief is heightened by the choral setting. A solo voice sings this phrase, emerging from the impenetrable chanting of the chorus. It is man alone.

In evoking the past, Stravinsky illuminates the present. This sense of perpetual renewal is only within the timeless reach of the masterwork. ■

