“SYMPHONY OF PSALMS” ADLI ESERİ ÜZERİNDEN,
STRAVİNSKİ’NİN YENİ KLASİKÇİ ÜSLUPTAKİ DİNİ MÜZİĞİ
ÜZERİNE BİR ANALİZ

Özet


Anahtar Kelimeler: Symphony of Psalms, Igor Stravinski, Yeni Klasikçi Müzik, Dini Müzik, Koro Müziği

AN ANALYSIS ON STRAVINSKY’S ATTITUDE TOWARDS NEOCLASSICAL MUSIC – SACRED MUSIC BY CONSIDERING HIS SACRED WORK “SYMPHONY OF PSALMS”

Abstract

Symphony of Psalms is the first sacred based work of Igor Stravinsky which is composed in 1930. His neoclassical works which composed between 1920 and 1954, the composer’s second composing period, are the combination of references from historical music elements and the Twentieth Century composition techniques.

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Symphony of Psalms, in this perspective, can be defined as an integration of Latin sacred texts with Byzantine – Orthodox sacred music elements and the presentation of these materials through the contemporary abstract forms.

In this essay, mainly his achievements on neoclassical approach to the sacred music is discussed. The importance of the work, the re-identification of the terms of symphony and choral work according to Stravinsky and the general analysis of the work in terms of musical elements are the main topics of the study.

**Key Words:** Symphony of Psalms, Igor Stravinsky, Neoclassical Music, Sacred Music, Choral Music

**Introduction**

Stravinsky, as generally known, was a composer who promoted the 20th Century Music in terms of new inventions on understanding the form, orchestration and harmonic intensity in the music. He was able to invent sounds [timbre], to rethink the familiar dispositions (Hopkins, 90). His first approach in music was using the nationalist materials within the form in which he used blocks by juxtaposing each one after another. However, with his development on music, he gradually headed for neoclassicism. Therefore, as it is common to use that block materials as a nationalistic characters of music in his earlier ballets, after 1920s his tendency of using those materials would be seen as in not a national atmosphere but in a universal standing (Burholder, Palisca, 946). His new aim was to use different kinds of relationship to history and historical forms (Boucourchliev).

It is possible to see Stravinsky as a composer who was a historical chart of forms. In his neoclassical works, it is possible to make a historical journey; Pulcinella is a collage of Pergolesi, Oediphus-Rex is an imitation of early classical period opera musics and Italian bel canto style, Apollo Musagetes describes 17th and 18th century French Music, the Fairy’s Kiss is the recomposition of songs and piano pieces of Tchaikovsky (Oliver, 129) and the Symphony of Psalms is generally mentions on Renaissanse and Ars-Nova’s counterpoint with chant-singing styles which would also be interpret as it is more about on Byzantine orthodox music.

Boucourchliev claims in his book called *Stravinsky* that, Stravinsky is the only composer who uses the sacral elements in order to create his music and his aesthetic in 20th Century. After the achievement of *the Rite of Spring* (1913), he did not write such a piece for a long time which is in the style of *the Rite* in the manner of intense orchestration. However, later on, Symphony of Wind Instruments (1920) and Symphony of Psalms (1930) were written which also contain familiar structural elements from *the Rite* as vertical rhythmic impacts or horizontal figure variable.

**Symphony of Psalms**

“Symphony of Psalms is his first sizable religious work and beyond question it is one of his half-dozen greatest achievements” (Walsh, 44). After a 13 years receding from Russian-Orthodox Church service, in Roman Catholic Church, Stravinsky regained to his first church in 1926. Under the influence of his deep piety to Russian Orthodox Church (Hartog, 42), with Serge Koussevitzky’s commission, he composed the piece “for the glory of God and dedicated to the Boston Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its existence”
(Mellers, 19). However, this work should be considered as a generalized expression of religious faith, instead of a statement of Stravinsky’s individual beliefs (Bromberger, 1).

Koussevitzky, who was the music director of Boston Symphony Orchestra, had no any stipulations on the content. “The idea of using a chorus and a sacred text was Stravinsky’s own” (Oliver, 124). With Slavonic melodies, he employed Latin texts, psalm 39, 40 and 150 from Vulgate Bible (Kamien, 480). Although, he first intended to use Slavonic text (Oliver, 124), in order to evoke the feeling of ancient and solemn ritual, he decided to turn in to Latin (Kamien, 480).

Stravinsky explained his choices about the components of his work as follows:

“My idea was that my symphony should be a work with great contrapuntal development, and for that it was necessary to increase the media at my disposal. I finally decided on a choral and instrumental ensemble in which the two elements should be on an equal footing, neither of them outweighing the other. In this instance my viewpoint as the mutual relationship of the vocal and instrumental sections coincided with that of masters of contrapuntal music, who also treated them as equals, and neither reduced the role of the chorus to that of a homophonous chant nor the function of the instrumental ensemble to that of an accompaniment” (Boucourchliev, 185).

Stravinsky’s own comment on his work is “it is my religious and musical ebullience” (Boucourchliev, 185). “By employing a chorus Stravinsky could also give free expression to his religious sense, which was particularly strong at this period of his life; and it was natural that he should turn to Psalms for his texts, and in particular to Psalm 150, which is the praise of God through Music” (Boucourchliev, 185). Ansermet, the conductor of the first European performance, mentioned on work as “it expresses the religious feelings of ‘others’ – those of an imaginary chorus to which the choir actually performing the work as an analogon” (Boucourchliev, 185). That is because the used text psalm 150 was chosen due to its universality. In addition, in the light of his aesthetic attitude implies a distancing of the object, which means objectivity and non-expressiveness in music, he easily turns his work to open everyone in the universe.

The General Features of the Work

The term of symphony is not in a usual sense as we know in classical style in four movements; it resembles a baroque cantata form in three movements, prelude-tocata, double fugue and finale (Mellers, 19). As Stravinsky’s choice on chorus and wind instruments, sacred cantata works in baroque era, were used to combine the instrumental music with chorus especially in Lutheran Church service. Thence the formation of his work would also be seen as one of the other neoclassical features. He called his work as “several movements that calls for an orchestra” (Kamien). “It is not a symphony in which I have included Psalms to be sung. On the contrary, it is the singing of the Psalms that I am symphonizing” (Salonen). As can be derived from Stravinsky’s own explanation, his standing on his neoclassical period combines the historical elements as the content and reshape them with the new musical understanding of the Twentieth Century.

The orchestration is also unconventional; there is no any violin, viola or clarinet. Instead of these instruments, there are woodwind and brass dominance with two pianos which replace
upper-strings (Kamien, 480). Besides, timpani, gran casa and harp are involved to the orchestra. Although the concept of the orchestration used is divergent from usual understanding, it is not so interesting for Stravinsky; his one of the main aims was to demolish the romantic orchestration idea. Likewise, the elimination of the violins, violas, and clarinets from the orchestra, and the absence of the bright, resonant upper strings and the smooth sonority of the clarinets would create an equal prominence to the chorus and the orchestra. It would either help to intensify the music’s consciously “archaic” sound (Bromberger, 2). Hence, it is quite understandable and also very familiar with Debussy’s style of orchestration with winds. Using woodwind and brass has the advantage of using non-vibrated notes, which would also be seen a way to reproduce the timbre of medieval – orthodox choral music. Moreover, the chorus has no women when the work first written, they were displaced by young-boys chorus, as just like in renaissance which can be seen as an orthodox religious idea too.

Before focusing on a general analysis of the piece in terms of musical components, finally, the work consists of three different movements which all are bond each other without interruptions. As in many of his works he used Octatonic scales in whole of the work. Although Stravinsky, in general, did not symbolize any idea owing to the fact that he did not want to make the work personalize, in this work each movement symbolize one of the horary virtues which are the main subject of Christianity; in order, faith (3rd movement), hope (2nd movement) and charity (1st movement). As can be seen, he decided to change the placement of the virtues according to orthodox understanding (Steinberg 268).

A General Musical Analysis on the Symphony of Psalms

One of the most important neoclassical features of the work is again using of octatonic collections in the diatonic scheme. In the first and second movements, his thematic materials are grown-up with a basic cell by improving it with tetrachords on building each notes of this cell as can be seen in the picture 1. (E is shown as 0 and 0, 3, 6, 9 represent E – G –Bb – Db) Here is the collection of his theme in the last system of the example and how to build it. The first chord of the piece in E minor and after that chord here is the first octatonic passage.

\[(0, 3, 6, 9)\]

\[(0 1 3 4)\]

\[(034/347/367)\]

\[(037/047/047)\]

\[0 1 3 4 7 9 10 (0)\]

Picture 1: The typical neoclassical format of octatonic scale creation (Toorn, 212)
“The first movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* is a piece wherein octatonic blocks, accountable to Collection I (is shown in Picture I) with a background partitioning in terms of (E, G, Bb), interact with diatonic blocks implicating the E –scale on E. The (E, G, B) “Psalms chord” punctuated as a spacer, is articulatively shared between two distinct collections and orderings of reference” (Picture 2) (Toorn, 213).

Starting from the beginning, in the opening measures of the first movement, sudden discontinuities followed by juxtapositions of the octatonic materials. “Immediate changes of meter and unpredictable rhythms and rests that tend to emphasize elemental pulsation rather than meter is heard” (Burkholder, Palisca, 946)

![Picture 2: The first four bars of the first movement in which “Psalms chords” and octatonic collection is used](image)

His spectacular style in creating the music is shown itself in the first chord (Hopkins, 90). Although it is an E minor triad, he re-builds the chord by doubling the 3rd of the root instead of root or fifth, which is a circumstance that is not accepted in classical era. “One of the most important aspects of neoclassical music is that it is neotonal, establishing a tonal center not through traditional harmony by through repetition and assertion” (Burkholder, Palisca, 947). There is no tonality as a fact; however, he designed a systematic, progressive scheme of tonal and harmonic relationships in an abstract manner. If it would be thought of the first chord with its third dominance as a dominant to C major, it is quite possible to understand the scheme as in Picture 3 (Whittall, 56). It is also needed to be considered that E minor triad in diatonic scale would be seen as a Phrygian mode which can be interpreted as the usage of another neoclassical device by the composer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Mov.</th>
<th>Second Mov.</th>
<th>Third mov.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>E minor</em> --<em>G</em></td>
<td><em>C\Eb Double Fuge</em></td>
<td><em>C</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant of <em>C</em></td>
<td>^</td>
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![Picture 3: The main tonal polar scheme of the work](image)

After the introduction, there are specifically used two thematic sections A and B, and between measures 53 to 64 a middle C section. It would be seen in the scheme shown in Picture 4, he used these blocks in order to create an atmosphere in which abrupt contrast blocks are shown in

![Image of musical notation](image)
“Symphony Of Psalms” Adlı Eseri Üzerinden, Stravinski’nin Yeni Klasikçi Üsluptaki Dini Müziği Üzerine Bir Analiz

an order. When chorus enters in Alto part, there is a sudden change; nothing is unexpected, very steady and divine just as in mediaeval chorus parts in B1 section. “Yet the music is less dissonant than the Rite of Spring, and there are frequent references to the language and styles of the past, including many triads and diatonic scales, an imitation of liturgical chant in the vocal lines, and the fugue in the second movement” (Burkholder, Palisca, 946). In terms of using these sections in a particular order, the first movement resembles, superficially, a baroque rondo form.

Mellers who had substantial analyses on Symphony of Psalms, claims that all of the work consist of two main polarity; Eb (in the second movement) which represents the man as in history like Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony or other in the manner of heroic idea and C represents the god with its name as white key. Between these two polar there is the theme of prayer which is E minor, or E Phrygian. It will later be used in the main scheme character of double fugue; first woodwinds represent the first theme in C and later second fugue will start in Eb with chorus.

For the second movement, the first fugue’s entries in tonic, dominant, tonic, dominant, are not a classical style much like renaissance sacred music tradition. Maybe it is because Mellers called first fugue as god theme, the using of woodwinds also resembles a church organ with no vibrato. When second fugue comes in acaPELLA, human theme presents four orthodox entries, more Slavic melodies. At the end of the double fugue, these two different themes finally meet as in Byzantine-like magnificent demonstration.

An interesting point is that the first theme of the double fugue makes itself to be felt that somehow it has been heard before (Mellers, 19). It is just because the theme is the inversion of the third from where he used when alto part entries in the first movement as an ostinato accompaniment in woodwinds (Picture 5 and 6).
Although in the first movement, he used many familiar structural elements like opening chord with a rhythmic impact and following fluid sixteenth notes in a horizontal line as Stravinsky’s understanding of block usage, he had to make great stylistic concessions to the religious character of his texts (Walsh, 44). It is possible to see the choral lines in Les Noces with fast-moving passages, in Symphony Psalms, his devotion to the text brought slow moving and stately passages especially in 3rd movement. It is also a difference in expectations of Finale part which would be in an atmosphere of triumph. Mellers states Stravinsky’s implementation as “in final hymn the meter beats are in a rhythm which is no longer motorized; steady as the revolving earth” (Mellers, 19). “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’” (Bromberger, 2). His curiosity of using unexpected articulations, chords and passages now disappears owing to the fact that his sacral approach.

**Conclusion**

Symphony of Psalms is the work which was powered by faith and ritual; it is a vital influence on Stravinsky’s subsequent music. It can be derived from the hints in the historical evolution of his music after that work Stravinsky re-identified his new style with his first attempt at spiritual music. After 1930, there would be a huge influence of faith in his new works. He even would take a commission by Papa, and he would compose his cantata and mass.

By choosing a sacral theme, in order to create a work for chorus and wind instruments, he has made unique experiments on re-identifying the understanding of the means of symphony, the timbre of the chorus and orchestration, the neo-tonality by using diatonic triads and combining them with octatonic materials. His new approach to the sacral music altered Stravinskian kind of musical materials by diminishing the dissonancy and the primitivism thorough the meaning of text used in the *Symphony of Psalms*. Nevertheless, the usage of block ideas, sudden changes of meter and rhythmic materials, usage of juxtapositions and superimpositions of multiple layers are still used as in common to Stravinsky first ballet music but no longer as a national characteristic, instead, a device to articulate an abstract form.

Its root leans on Renaissance and before that in order to preserve the soul of universality. He did not mention on Bach, although some of his previous works was done. The taste of his wonder helped him to recreate a sacral music world which is not done before with such kind of an elaborateness.

**CITATION INDEX**

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