IGOR STRAVINSKY *Symphony of Psalms*

BORN: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov), Saint Petersburg, Russia  
DIED: April 6, 1971, in New York City  
WORK COMPOSED: 1930  
WORLD PREMIERE: December 13, 1930, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium; Société Philharmonique de Bruxelles, Ernest Ansermet conducting

The latter years of the 1920s were an emotionally trying time for Stravinsky. He was carrying on an open affair with his mistress in Paris while his wife Katya was in the south of France dying of tuberculosis. (Katya was Stravinsky’s cousin, they married in 1906. She was diagnosed with the disease in 1914 after the birth of their fourth child and was confined to a sanatorium in the Alps where she died in March 1939.) He also was finding little success with his works from this time. Vivid musical evocations of disease, deterioration, debilitation, decay and denial abound in his 1927 work *Oedipus Rex*, which was a failure at its premiere in Paris.

Serge Koussevitzky, Stravinsky’s publisher and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (also a virtuoso double bassist!), made a suggestion to Stravinsky that he should write something popular in order to have a success. The thought was for Stravinsky to write something the people could understand. However, Stravinsky thought it should be about something universally admired; he felt that society had lost the ability to share a sacred experience. Stravinsky was a devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church during most of his life. No doubt that this inspired him to compose the *Symphony of Psalms*. Even though it is a large choral piece, he called it a symphony to appease Koussevitzky because the request was for an orchestral work. For the first time he puts the dedication at the top of the score, as Bach started every work: “To the glory of God.” The commission was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony, but Koussevitzky fell ill the week of the planned premiere and he gave permission for a planned European premiere to go ahead as scheduled. Koussevitzky gave the American premiere of *Symphony of Psalms* on December 19, 1930, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the chorus of the Cecilia Society (trained by Arthur Fiedler).

Stravinsky composed *Symphony of Psalms* in Nice and in his summer home at Echarvines, France. He started with Psalm 150 and after finishing the fast tempo sections, he wrote the first two movements. In a lengthy explanation of the work, Stravinsky wrote:

> I was much concerned, in setting the psalm verses, with problems of tempo. To me, the relation of tempo and meaning is a primary question of musical order, and until I am certain that I have found the right tempo, I cannot compose. Superficially, the texts suggested a variety of speeds, but this variety was without shape. At first, and until I understood that God must not be praised in fast, forte music, no matter how often the text specifies "loud," I thought of the final hymn in a too-rapid pulsation.

The three movements are performed without a break. As the work begins we can envision the children of Israel trudging through the desert, God moving before them, a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. There’s rebirth in the second movement which culminates in an ecstatic dance of joy in the final movement.

You might notice in the instrumentation of the *Symphony of Psalms* that Stravinsky uses a large number of woodwinds and brass while omitting the clarinets, violins and violas. One of the true joys of performing some of the modern repertoire is that we have recordings of the composers conducting their own works. A quick search will come up with the premiere recording of the *Symphony of Psalms*, made in 1931, of Stravinsky conducting the Orchestre des Concerts Straram and the Alexis Vlassay Choir. That recording and others conducted by him display the true essence of his vision of this powerful and beautiful work.

— Vincent Osborn © 2018

**History:**
The only previous DSSO performance of this work was on November 9, 1996. Yong-yun Hu conducted the Orchestra and Symphony Chorus. Stanley Wold was the Chorus Director at that time.

**Instrumentation:** Five flutes (5th doubling piccolo) four oboes and English horn, 3 bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, harp, two pianos and low strings (celli and basses).