

PROGRAM NOTES

Chichester Psalms

Leonard Bernstein

Born 25 August, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died 14 October, 19909, New York City

In June of 1964, Leonard Bernstein began an unusual sabbatical from his post as music director of the New York Philharmonic. The plan was to write a new musical with his old friends Adolph Green and Betty Comden (with whom he'd created *On the Town*) – but the project, a setting of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, ran aground by early 1965. Fortuitously, Rev. Walter Hussey of the Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, England had commissioned a piece from Bernstein for the church's 1965 music festival with Winchester and Salisbury Cathedrals, stating in his letter "I think many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of 'West Side Story' about the music." He would get more theatre music than he realized.

Quite amazingly, of the seven principal themes that comprise *Chichester Psalms* (two presented in the first movement, four in the second, one in the third movement with the added return of earlier themes), none of them are original to the work. Six of the seven derive from material written for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and the aggressive men's chorus in the middle of the second movement was originally entitled "Mix" – a number discarded from the opening of *West Side Story*. The setting of Psalm 23 for treble soloist originally had the lyrics, "Spring will come again, summer then will follow..." and the motive which opens *Chichester Psalms* (and returns throughout) appeared with the words "Save the human race." It's a testament to Bernstein's

compositional resourcefulness – and as biographer Humphrey Burton puts it, “a combination of significant coincidence, minor miracle, and sheer good luck” – that he was able to find appropriate Hebrew psalm texts, match the music to them, and re-combine and order themes to create a coherent and compelling piece. As for the structure, there’s no question Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* served as a conceptual model.

In 1977, Bernstein commented, “The work that I have been writing all my life is about the struggle that is born of the crisis of our century, a crisis of faith.” In the trajectory of this large-scale project, *Chichester Psalms* occupies the space between Bernstein’s third symphony, *Kaddish* (1963), and the piece written to open the Kennedy Center, *Mass* (1971) – pieces which interpolate questions of faith into substantial liturgical texts. The psalms, by contrast, are simpler and more secure in their faith, both in God and tonality. His daughter, Jamie Bernstein, later said the piece was “a resolution of conflicts” articulated in *Kaddish*, and reporting in *The New York Times* on his sabbatical activities, Bernstein himself wrote of *Chichester*:

But there it stands – the result of my pondering,
Two long months of avant-garde wandering –
My youngest child, old-fashioned and sweet.
And he stands on his own two tonal feet.

But even in his “most accessible, B-flat-majorish piece” (as he once called it), Bernstein presents a crisis of faith. In the second movement, after the treble soloist and women sing “The Lord is my shepherd,” the men begin Psalm 2 – “Why do the nations rage?” The two texts come into direct contrast as they are presented simultaneously, the orchestra dividing with the chorus in the conflict between faith, and the crises that threaten it. As Bernstein wrote Hussey, “this

movement ends in unresolved fashion, with both elements, faith and fear, interlocked.” The tension continues into the third movement, where a trumpet/harp motive then recalls Psalm 23 – and the music subsides into G major for Psalm 131: “Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul.” The work ends with a chorale Bernstein called “a prayer for peace” – “Behold how good, and how pleasant it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

Chichester Psalms is scored for SATB chorus and soloists, treble soloist, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, 2 harps, strings, and a variety of percussion instruments.

- By Michael Slon

Symphony of Psalms

Igor Stravinsky

Born 17 June, 1882 in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg, Russia

Died 6 April, 1971 in New York

A Symphony of Psalms seems like an oxymoron: the venerable secular tradition of Austro-Germanic orchestral music crossed with the decidedly religious implications of Biblical choral settings. Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms transcends the boundaries of either camp. None of its movements is in sonata form, nor does the piece even employ a traditional full orchestra. Stravinsky foregoes upper strings entirely, using only cellos and basses; his wind section is expanded. He ignores the conventional four-movement layout of a symphony. These three sections are intended to be performed without a break. What kind of symphony is this?

Conversely, this piece hardly adheres to traditional sacred music. While its source is Biblical (the Latin texts, drawing partially from Psalms 38 and 39 and using Psalm 150 in its entirety, are those of the Vulgate), the Symphony is clearly intended for concert rather than church performance, and holds its own in a symphonic concert hall.

As is so often the case with Stravinsky's music, the Symphony of Psalms is unique. It has no analogue in the composer's output and holds a singular place in the choral/orchestral repertoire. Stravinsky wrote it in 1930, in fulfilment of a commission from Serge Koussevitzky to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The dedication (in French) reads: "This symphony, composed to the glory of GOD, is dedicated to the Boston Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of its 50th anniversary." The overtly religious reference is significant, for Stravinsky had returned to the Russian Orthodoxy of his childhood in the mid-1920s. Koussevitzsky's commission thus became the catalyst for a project he had contemplated for several years, and the Symphony must be regarded as an expression of personal faith. Biographer Stephen Walsh calls it:

. . . the most completely integrated of all Stravinsky's major works and the one which best defines his sense of the spiritual discipline and personal effacement of creative work. . . . [The Latin text] is simply the most natural language for an act of prayer in the spirit of the Church Fathers.

Walsh sees the progression among the three Psalms as being one "from prayer and desolation, through patience and release, to praise and transcendence." Viewed in more strictly musical terms, the opening Psalm, "Exaudi orationem meam," embodies many characteristics of

Stravinsky's music: an octatonic scale [eight pitches per octave, alternating half steps and whole steps] with a strong emphasis on Phrygian mode, chant-like melody (in keeping with the text), frequent metric changes and a strong emphasis on woodwinds. Bassoons arpeggios are punctuated by outbursts -- like a Greek chorus -- from the oboes. Chorus and orchestra establish an equal but separate footing that is maintained throughout the work. "Exaudi" functions as an introduction to the entire composition.

Technically the second movement is a masterpiece: an elaborate double fugue whose first subject is worked out among oboes, flute and piccolo before the chorus enters with the independent second subject ("Expectans expectavit Dominum"). Stravinsky balances chorus and orchestra with consummate skill, always working together but never compromising the one in favor of the other.

The work concludes with a sectional prayer filled with dramatic contrasts: a shimmering and devout "Alleluia," followed by a barbaric, borderline-raucous section that is oddly reminiscent of Bartók's "night music" interludes. In *Dialogues and a Diary*, Stravinsky described this passage:

The Allegro in Psalm 150 was inspired by a vision of Elijah's chariot climbing the heavens; never before had I written anything quite so literal as the triplets for horns and piano to suggest the horses and chariots.

Serenity prevails for the close, however, a transcendent hymn of praise whose pristine C major diatonicism evokes the halos of heavenly angels.

Stravinsky's score calls for five flutes (fifth doubling piccolo), four oboes, English horn, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets in C, one trumpet in D, two tenor trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, bass drum, mixed chorus, harp, two pianos, cellos and basses.

- By Laurie Shulman © 2011

Symphony No.2 in C minor, Op.17 ("Little Russian")

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky

Born 7 May, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka district, Russia

Died 6 November, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

The traditional historical view of Russian music holds that Russian nationalism was embodied in the views and music of the so-called "Russian five" (or "Mighty Handful"): Borodin, Cui, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Their distinguished contemporary, Tchaikovsky (who receives more performances than probably all the others combined) is regarded as a Russian exponent of western musical tradition, adopting conventional forms such as symphony, concerto, and string quartet.

Like most such broad overviews, this one invites argument, although there is certainly some truth to it. Tchaikovsky flirted with both nationalism and the "Mighty Handful" during the late 1860s. For a while, he was quite close to Mily Balakirev, the leader of the new group of

composers. Balakirev was an important adviser in the evolution of *Romeo and Juliet*, one of Tchaikovsky's most beloved works. Lesser known but equally fine is the Second Symphony, on which Tchaikovsky worked shortly afterward. This symphony is the closest Tchaikovsky came to embracing the ideas and techniques of his Russian contemporaries. Compared to his own later, highly charged symphonic essays, it is almost cloudless.

The Second Symphony is known as "Little Russian." The subtitle is not the composer's, but was bestowed by the Moscow critic Nikolai Dmitrievich Kashkin because Tchaikovsky incorporated three Ukrainian folk tunes into its fabric. (Ukraine was called "Little Russia.") As the British musicologist Edward Garden has noted:

There is as much folk-like material in this symphony as in any other Russian symphony, and folksong is at the very core of the work.

That is doubtless why the Second Symphony was greeted warmly not only by Balakirev and his group, but also by the Russian public. The very successful Moscow premiere in February 1873 was one of the sweetest triumphs Tchaikovsky was to know.

Always enthusiastic about his latest composition, Tchaikovsky was effusive in describing it to his brother Modest. In a letter dated 2 November, 1872, he wrote:

My symphony, which I am finishing, has engrossed me so deeply that I am not able to do anything else. The writing of this work of genius (as Nikolai Kondratiev calls it) is coming to an end and it will be performed as soon as the orchestral score is ready. I think this is my best creation, so far as perfection of

form is concerned -- a quality which I have hitherto failed to achieve. I wish you could hear it

By the end of the decade he had withdrawn his initial enthusiasm. In 1879 and 1880, Tchaikovsky overhauled the symphony, rewriting nearly the entire first movement, and making extensive scoring revisions in the remaining three; he also shortened the work significantly. Critics remain divided as to the merits of each version. They agree, however, that the symphony represents a tremendous step forward from the First Symphony (Op.13, 1866) in terms of formal control and orchestral finesse. Lovers of Tchaikovsky's music may be surprised that such a large work as the "Little Russian" is free of the tortured self-questioning that so dominates the last three symphonies. In the Second Symphony, the composer shows us less torment and more charm.

The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam and strings.

SIDEBAR: BACK TO THE FUTURE

A key aspect of Tchaikovsky's Second Symphony is the repetition of a relatively simple tune with a shifting background. Tchaikovsky turns this technique into a sophisticated variation method, challenging the listener to focus attention beyond the foreground theme. He does this with three different folk melodies, prominently showcased among its movements His approach is particularly evident in the first movement and the finale.

The inner two movements reveal the fledgling Tchaikovsky hinting at what he was to achieve in the later symphonies. Hans Keller calls it "quoting from the future."

It seems significant that whereas the First [Symphony] quotes from the past, the Second quotes, as it were, from the future: the basic thought of the second movement, *Andantino marziale, quasi moderato*, was to grow, more than 20 years later, into the (not so called) march of the Sixth Symphony's third movement.

This third movement, a lively scherzo based on a single rhythmic idea, is indebted both to the scherzo of Alexander Borodin's First Symphony and to the *Queen Mab* scherzo from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Tchaikovsky imbues it with his own personality by means of ingenious metrical shifts that help to maintain the interest level, and with irregular phrase lengths of three and six bars.

- By Laurie Shulman © 2011