

Symphony in Three Movements

Igor Stravinsky

"The unexpected element strikes me. I make a note of it. At the proper time I put it to profitable use. ... An accident is perhaps the only thing that really inspires us. A composer improvises aimlessly the way an animal grubs about." So wrote Igor Stravinsky in his *Poetics of Music* (1947), the published version of the Norton Lectures that he had recently delivered at Harvard.

Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* was composed from 1942 to 1945, while World War II was in full swing, and he conducted the New York Philharmonic in its premiere in early 1946. It was at that concert that Robert Craft "first glimpsed Stravinsky in the flesh," according to the recollection of the young man who would soon become the composer's amanuensis and indefatigable promoter. In 1963 Stravinsky spoke at length to Craft about the inspiration for this work. Here is his account of the composer's words, as reported in the Stravinsky-Craft book *Dialogues and a Diary* (revised slightly from the note that the New York Philharmonic published for the work's premiere):

It both does and does not "express my feelings" about [world events], but I prefer to say only that, without participation of what I think of as my will, they excited my musical imagination. ... Each episode in the Symphony is linked in my

imagination with a concrete impression, very often cinematographic in origin, of the war.

The third movement actually contains the genesis of a war plot, though I recognized it as such only after completing the composition. The beginning of that movement is partly, and in some — to me, wholly inexplicable — way, a musical reaction to the newsreels and documentaries that I had seen of goose-stepping soldiers. The square march-beat, the brass-band instrumentation, the grotesque *crescendo* in the tuba — these are all related to those repellent pictures. ...

In spite of contrasting episodes, such as the canon for bassoons, the march music is predominant until the fugue, which is the stasis and the turning point. The immobility at the beginning of the fugue is comic, I think — and so, to me, was the over-turned arrogance of the Germans when their machine failed. The exposition of the fugue and the end of the Symphony are associated in my plot with the rise of the Allies, and perhaps the final, albeit rather too commercial, D-flat sixth chord — instead of the expected C — tokens my extra exuberance in the Allied triumph. ...

In Short

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov), in the Northwest St. Petersburg region of Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work composed: 1942–45; dedicated to the New York Philharmonic Symphony Society

World premiere: January 24, 1946, at Carnegie Hall, by the New York Philharmonic, the composer conducting

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 8, 2010, Valery Gergiev, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

The Philharmonic Connection



Igor Stravinsky's long relationship with the New York Philharmonic began on January 8, 1925, when the composer conducted the Orchestra in a program of his own works; he was 42 years old. Stravinsky went on to lead the Philharmonic 34 times – including on the world premiere of his *Symphony in Three Movements* in 1946, a New York Philharmonic Commission.

Symphony in Three Movements began with the idea of a commission to celebrate the impending Allied victory in World War II, with the possible title "La Victoire." Stravinsky balked at the Orchestra's request for a composer's program note, writing that,

It is well known that no program is to be sought in my musical output. . . . Sorry if this is desappointing [sic] but no story to be told, no narration and what I would say would only make yawn the majority of your public which undoubtedly expects exciting descriptions. This, indeed would be so much easier but alas

He did, however, provide some thoughts on his inspiration:

During the process of creation in this our arduous time of sharp shifting events, time of despair [sic] and hope, time of continual torments, of tention [sic] and at last cessation, relief, my [sic] be all those repercussions have left traces, stamped the character of this *Symphony*.

The *Symphony in Three Movements*, in Stravinsky's own words, was dedicated "to the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York as an homage in appreciation for my association for the period of twenty years with that eminent musical Institution," and has been performed three dozen times by the Philharmonic since its premiere; the most recent performance was led by Valery Gergiev as part of the three-week Russian Stravinsky Festival in 2010.

– The Editors

From top: Stravinsky conducting; program page from the Philharmonic's 1946 premiere of Symphony in Three Movements

THE PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY SOCIETY

1842 OF NEW YORK 1878

CONSOLIDATED 1928

ARTUR RODZINSKI, Musical Director

1945 ONE HUNDRED FOURTH SEASON 1946

CARNEGIE HALL

THURSDAY EVENING, JANUARY 24, 1946, at 8:45

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, JANUARY 25, 1946, at 2:30

4318th and 4319th Concerts

Under the Direction of

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Guest Conductor

ALL-STRAVINSKY PROGRAM

"Scènes de Ballet"

Symphony in Three Movements

I. *Symphony-Overture*

II. *Andante*

III. *Con moto*

(Played without pause)

(Dedicated to the Philharmonic-Symphony of New York)

(First Performance)

INTERMISSION

Suite from "The Firebird" ("L'Oiseau de feu")

I. *Introduction and Dance of the Firebird*

II. *Adagio (Pas de deux)*

III. *Scherzo*

IV. *Rondo (Khorovod)*

V. *Infernal Dance*

VI. *Lullaby and Final Hymn*

(Played without pause)

(New augmented version)

ARTHUR JUDSON, Manager BRUNO ZIRATO, Associate Manager

THE STEINWAY is the Official Piano of The Philharmonic-Symphony Society

COLUMBIA AND VICTOR RECORDS

"Buy Victory Bonds"

These concerts will end on Thursday at approximately 10:15 p.m.

and on Friday at approximately 4:00 p.m.

The first movement was likewise inspired by a war film, this time a documentary of scorched-earth tactics in China. The middle part of the movement — the music for clarinet, piano, and strings, which mounts in intensity and volume — was conceived as a series of instrumental conversations to accompany a cinematographic scene showing the Chinese people scratching and digging in their fields. ...

The formal substance of the Symphony — perhaps Three Symphonic Movements would be a more exact title — exploits the idea of counterplay among several types of contrasting elements. One such contrast, the most obvious, is that of harp and piano, the principal instrumental protagonists. Each has a large obbligato role and a whole movement to itself and only at the turning point, the *queue de poisson* ["fish tail," colloquial French for "fizzing out"] of the Nazi machine, are the two heard together and alone. ... In spite of what I have said, the Symphony is not programmatic. Composers combine notes. That is all. How and in what form the things of this world are impressed upon their music is not for them to say.

What Stravinsky does not mention in that excerpt is the middle movement, which employs material he originally composed in 1943 for a film version of Franz Werfel's novel *The Song of Bernadette*, about the miracle of Lourdes. Specifically, this was to have been the music for the "Apparition of the Virgin" scene in the movie. Although Stravinsky embarked on a few film projects,

Book Bites

In 1948 the composer Alexandre Tansman published a landmark life-and-works study of Stravinsky in which he viewed the Symphony in Three Movements almost as an object of musical autobiography. He explained (in the English translation of his book, which appeared the following year):

I consider this opus as a sum of Stravinsky's work. It touches upon all the phases of the composer's artistic evolution, without being in the least a repetition or a recapitulation. ... In this work all the "apparent Stravinskys" meet each other through a new Stravinsky in a concentrated creative harmony. ... By its points of contact, the Symphony in Three Movements has the eruptive explosiveness and the breathtaking pulsation of certain fragments of the *Rite of Spring*, the active rhythmic movement of *Petrushka* and *Les Noces*, the constant charm of the melodic spontaneity of the *Jeu de cartes*, the lightness and animation of the Octet or the *Capriccio*. The astonishing plasticity of the timbres for which the utilization in concertino of diverse groups originates in *L'Histoire du Soldat*, the moving tension of the *Symphony of Psalms*, the peaceful serenity of the *Apollon-Musagète*, the solid construction of the concerti and of the Symphony in C, and finally the discursive virulence of the Concerto for Two Pianos.

It possesses the stylistic unity necessary for all those elements which, while expressing themselves in a language characteristic of Stravinsky's method, combine for the realization of a definitive and fresh work.

he never completed any, and in this case, the job was given to Alfred Newman.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, harp, piano, and strings.