

## IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882 – 1971): **MASS**

Igor Stravinsky seems destined to be known among the general concert-going public primarily for the three Diaghilev ballets that established him as a composer: *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. And yet, Stravinsky lived for almost 60 years after the notorious premiere of the last of these ballets, composed an enormous amount of wonderful music, and is regarded as one of the greatest of 20<sup>th</sup> century composers. Although many of his works rapidly become established repertoire pieces, only a few (such as the ballets and the *Symphony in Three Movements*) are performed these days with any regularity, whilst superb pieces such as the ballet *Orpheus* (written concurrently with *Mass*) are rarely heard at all, at least in the UK.

If many of Stravinsky's concert works fail to attract the attention of today's increasingly cautious programme planners, so too do we hear all too little of his sacred music. The *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), dedicated to "the glory of God and the Boston Symphony Orchestra", is perhaps an exception, since it continues to win the hearts and minds of conductors and performers, but much of the sacred repertoire is known only to specialist audiences.

Stravinsky was born into the Russian Orthodox tradition but left the church in his teens. In 1926, he regarded the sudden disappearance of a cyst on his finger shortly before a performance as divine intervention and he regained his faith. (We should remember, however, that Stravinsky was notorious for changing his recollection of events and we might reasonably remain sceptical about this account.) The *Symphony of Psalms* was his first major sacred work and, 18 years later, the *Mass* appeared. After *Mass*, we find a greater concentration on sacred music, right up to his death, with notable works such as *Threni* and *Requiem Canticles*. One can see *Mass*, in many ways, as a stylistic precursor to those late works. And yet, the very first bar takes us back into the world of his *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920), which was written in memory of Debussy, and further echoes can be found elsewhere in the work, notably in the instrumentation (although this evening's performance uses the keyboard transcription).

Stravinsky uses the standard format for his *Mass*: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. The setting is extremely compact, lasting only 20 minutes (compared, say, with Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, which requires in excess of one hour). The mood throughout is generally austere, but there are occasional passages of beautiful luminosity, such as at the end of the Credo.

The *Kyrie* starts with a short chorale-like section, but this soon gives way to characteristic Stravinskian motor rhythms, which continue until a short chorale reprise at the end. In the *Gloria* we immediately inhabit another world, with echoes of renaissance music and pure vocal lines for solo voices. The choir soon then takes over at "laudamus te", with more insistent rhythms and with voices moving in contrary motion. At the end of this movement, there is a wonderful passage for two female soloists over a spare accompaniment, which leads to a choral cadence on "Amen". This music is both simple in construct and extremely moving – it is timeless music, the product of genius.

Stravinsky's genius is evident also in the *Credo*. This part of the mass presents composers with their greatest challenge, since it lacks the extra-musical suggestiveness of the other sections, while at the same time containing the most words. The solution here is blindingly obvious, yet never done before. Stravinsky treats the entire movement as a chant, which is both apposite (it is, after all, the creed, "I believe in one god...") and economical, since it allows the greatest number of words in the shortest possible time. But this is no mere mechanical solution. There is sustained rhythmic and musical interest, requiring a conciseness in performance which challenges the best choirs. Right at the end, suddenly – and in great contrast – there is a beautiful short polyphonic "Amen".

With the *Sanctus*, we have solo voices once more, with florid close-coupled lines interrupted by choral shouts of "Sanctus". The choir's greatest challenge in the whole work comes with

the setting of “Hosanna in excelsis Deo”, heard twice in this movement; it is a paradoxical passage, rhythmically tricky yet freely flowing.

Finally, we have the soft and solemn setting of the “Agnus Dei”, which recalls – in mood, at least – parts of the *Symphony of Psalms*. This is simple, heartfelt, devotional music, bringing to an end this stunningly original setting of the Mass. It reminds us that Stravinsky wrote this music for no other reason than that he wanted to write it. He was at the peak of his contemporary fame, with more commissions and conducting assignments than he could possibly manage, and yet he found the time to write this personal, un-commissioned music. The composition took four years (1944 – 1948) and this, to some extent, is a reflection on just how busy he was. I believe, however, that he lavished much care and attention on a personal statement at a time when he might have thought that his compositional career was near its end (he was 66 when *Mass* was completed). Yet, as we now know, it was the springboard to a change of direction and a further 20 years of marvellous and challenging music.