

Common Misconceptions in the Performance of Igor Stravinsky's Mass for Mixed Chorus and Double Wind Quintet by Garson Olivieri, July 2007

Stravinsky's Mass for Mixed Chorus and Double Wind Quintet is one of the composer's most misunderstood works. It is a Mass intended for liturgical use that has been performed more often in concert settings. In recordings of the work, the author of this essay has most often noticed a separation from Stravinsky's intentions and the actual interpretations (Stravinsky, cond. Craft; Stravinsky, cond. Reuss). Several of these issues will be addressed in this essay and methods for their performance will be suggested.

The composition of the Mass was an uncommissioned act of piety on Stravinsky's part. He had rejoined the Russian Orthodox Church in 1926, and after this event his compositions became more liturgically oriented, through the *Symphony of Psalms* commissioned in 1930 to the Mass which he began in 1944 and completed in 1948 (White 446). He was first inspired to compose the Mass after reading through several Mozart Masses that he had acquired in a second hand music store. He was inspired to compose his own Mass, "but a real one" (White 446), as he put it, meaning he intended his specifically for liturgical use. The decision was made to compose for the Roman Catholic liturgy because his own faith, the Russian Orthodox Church, proscribed the usage of instruments in its services and, as Stravinsky explains in his *Expositions*, he could, "endure unaccompanied singing in only the most harmonically primitive music" (Stravinsky and Craft 77).

Robert Craft, Stravinsky's close friend and frequent translator, recorded a conversation between Stravinsky and Evelyn Waugh which he included in *Stravinsky's Mass: A Notebook*. White quotes the words of Stravinsky:

My Mass . . . was not composed for concert performances but for use in the church. It is liturgical and almost without ornament. In making a musical setting of the Credo I wished only to preserve the text in a special way. One composes a march to facilitate marching men, so with my Credo I hope to provide an aid to the text. The Credo is the longest movement. There is much to believe (qtd. in White 447).

In his Mass, Stravinsky turns to chant as a device to set the text, a device he had employed to this extent only in *Zvezdoliki* and *Pater Noster* (White 447). In his explanation of how the Mass came to be, Stravinsky goes on about the Mozart Mass inspiration, "I was not influenced in my Mass by any 'old' music whatever, or guided by any example" (Stravinsky and Craft 77). I do not believe that Stravinsky denies or argues his use of chant here, however. On setting the Credo, Stravinsky wrote that he wanted to compose "very cold music, absolutely cold, that will appeal directly to the spirit" (qtd. in White 447). This combined with his aforementioned desire to communicate the text effectively and the fact that "Gregorian chant was the original music of the Christian church" (Fowells 51) is enough evidence to believe that, even though Stravinsky makes clear the notion that his Mass is not based on any previous specific work, he was most certainly tapping into a device employed for centuries before him and, through this device, was directly evoking a specific sound, feeling and meaning for the text. Stravinsky may not have been referencing any single work or style, but in his quest of how to best preserve the text of the Mass, chant was the natural choice.

Thus we may be informed toward effective performance of the Mass. With Stravinsky's intention that the text be the focus of the Mass, we can focus on the rhythm of the text itself to

inflect the intended rhythm and accentuation of the chant. Stravinsky often sets unstressed syllables on stressed beats of measures. To perform the Mass with an inflection that is centered on the meter is to not do justice to Stravinsky's intention to, "preserve the text in a special way." The text is the end and the means, after all. Placing the stress on the correct syllables of the text will facilitate two outcomes authentic to Stravinsky's intentions: First, it will allow the performers to communicate the text and its meaning effectively. Second, it will illuminate in the performance several occurrences of rhythmic foreshadowing that occur in the accentuation of the text but not the meter. For example, in the Credo, the bar after Rehearsal 26, Stravinsky sets the text in the meter of 2/4. The stresses of the text however create many occurrences of hemiola and, thereby, an implied compound mixed meter feel reminiscent of Gregorian Chant in the old style of Solesmes, the style of the time when the Mass was composed (Suñol 25-26). This also creates a unity with and a foreshadowing of the change to 3/8 at rehearsal 27. Performing the Mass with these points in mind will evoke the essence of chant without referencing any specific work as Stravinsky mentioned was not his intention.

The other major misconception in Stravinsky's Mass has to do with tonality. This, it is safe to say, is not the first time there have been contrasting views on the subject of Stravinsky's tonality. There is a single chord in the Mass about which the tonality debate is particularly energetic. That chord is the final chord of the Sanctus. As quoted in E. W. White's *Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works*, Ernest Ansermet, the conductor who premiered the Mass, has this to say on the topic:

The [Sanctus] ends with the chord of A major, in which a G/D fifth is inserted. This forms an agglomeration of notes, which the ear cannot take in and which is literally cacophonous. The fifth may be justified on paper by the movement of the parts leading up to the final chord; but once the auditor tries to analyze the sound, he has no idea what it really means. Perhaps Stravinsky intended to bring off some kind of effect; but such an effect is only justified in music (since music is a language) if it conveys a clear meaning to the auditor's conscious mind (450).

White retorts:

It is curious that Ansermet should take exception to this chord. The notes of the guilty fifth have been carefully approached by the two trumpets: The G comes at the end of a descending scale passage, the D at the end of a rising arpeggio passage based on the common chord of G major. When added to the A major chord, they suggest, instead of a full close, a modulation toward D with the tonic D anticipated in the chord of what now becomes the dominant seventh (450).

V. Kofi Agawu suggests that the final chord of the Sanctus is merely a V-I cadence with two, "apparently extraneous" notes (146). Agawu, in agreement with Schenker, uses Schenker's term, "foregrounding" to describe the extraneous notes. Foregrounding "is a process by which is meant that consistent voice leading takes perceptual prominence over the actual resultant sonorities" (Agawu 146). This is to say that given the stepwise and logical approach to the A major portion of the final chord of the Sanctus the G and D are heard but not considered important in the function of the chord, thus it becomes a simple V-I cadence. (Agawu 146)

I would suggest a view that is simpler than those previously mentioned and still acknowledges the function of every pitch of the chord. Before we understand the chord in this manner though, we must have some knowledge of overtones.

“For any given note sounding on a freely vibrating medium (string, air column, etc.), there will tend to be a series of notes (overtones) generated on that medium that will always have the [same] ratios . . .” (McGarry 54)

The pitches are overtones generated by the fundamental. They may not be heard as clearly as the fundamental, but are nonetheless present in the sound and are what give the pitch its resonance. In any overtone chart the ratios on the left refer to the wavelength ratios of the overtone’s pitch to the fundamental, octave reduced. On the right are the various labels for the pitch including its octave reduced interval to the fundamental, the number of the overtone above the fundamental, and its partial number. Sine waves being the exception, in most things that make a sound from clarinets to ceiling fans, overtones are present inside the fundamental.

The ear desires to hear groups of pitches in hierarchical order; that is, their harmonic order referring to which pitches sounding are present in the overtones of which other pitch or pitches, from the least complex ratios to the most (Mathieu). The final chord of the Sanctus can be understood via overtones in the following manner. The chord is actually made up entirely of consonant intervals, namely perfect fifths and a major third. G is the generator of the chord. All other pitches are contained within G’s overtone series. Three of the other pitches are perfect fifths: D, A and E. Each of these perfect fifths can be understood as the third partial of their generator (G generates D, which generates A, which generates E). This spine of compound perfect fifths invokes a tuning system known as Pythagorean tuning, a medieval tuning system that predates equal temperament and in which each of these perfect fifths will be two cents greater than the equal tempered perfect fifth (Mathieu 35). The C# is a major third, or fifth partial, of A. This fifth partial relationship is seven cents flat of the equal tempered major third (Mathieu 27–29).

In this understanding of the harmonic order of the sounding pitches, the chord is transformed from dissonance into a super consonance because each pitch is now functioning according to its order in the overtone series and in the way the ear desires to hear it. The following chart simplifies the logic.

- 3 cents
+ 6 cents
+ 4 cents
+ 2 cents

Major third of A
(fifth partial of A)

Pythagorean perfect fifths
(compounded third partials
of the fundamental)

The plus or minus cent values refer to the note’s relationship between its corresponding piano key and its just intoned position in the overtone series. The C# is only three cents flat to the piano (rather than the aforementioned seven) because its generator, A, is already four cents sharp to the piano. The octave of the pitches in the example does not apply to the actual octave in which they are sounding. Their vertical placement is meant to show the hierarchical harmonic order from the generator up through the overtone series.

The method for achieving success in tuning the chord in this manner would be to sound the fundamental first, then the first overtone and so on all the way up to the most complex ratio. Each added pitch must focus on its consonance with the note that is harmonically beneath it. The

D focuses on the perfect fifth with G. The A focuses on the perfect fifth with D, etc. C#, to clarify, focuses on the major third with A.

It being the case that the instrumentalists will be dealing with miniscule changes in pitch in this instance, they will experience these adjustments more as changes of color and function rather than of pitch. Much like a skier simply looking in the direction he'd like to turn in order to do so, the instrumentalists, given that they are in tune to begin with, will need to merely focus on the perfect or major interval they are creating rather than make extreme embouchure changes or use alternate fingerings. This color shift will come much more naturally to the choir. They are singing the A major portion of the Pythagorean chord and will have a solid foundation created by the instrumentalists to tune the chord appropriately. By treating the chord in this manner, the performers can clearly identify the tuning and function of this most misunderstood chord.

By employing these straightforward and quite simple views on Stravinsky's intentions for his Mass, a conductor may be able to produce a more informed performance of the work. Stravinsky's intentions are clear through his writings and through his score. The informed conductor will take both into account and seek answers that satisfy Stravinsky's intentions.

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