

Spiritual dualities revealed by the hermeneutic analysis of *Symphony of Psalms* by Igor Stravinsky

Alexandra BELIBOU¹

Abstract: *In this paper, I wish to bring about a parallel between music and spirituality, by appealing to the spiritual dualities that appear in the musical structures of the composition on psalm texts, signed by Igor Stravinsky – Symphony of Psalms. Through music-hermeneutic analysis, I will demonstrate that the sonorous art urges the living in balance and harmony, at the center of spiritual antonyms.*

The dualities I chose to support the hypothesis refer to: human - divine, hope - hopelessness, collective prayer - individual prayer. The balance of the world in which we live is a result of careful positioning at the center of dualities. Before discussing the spiritual dichotomies found through hermeneutic analysis, I consider that a minimum research of the general bibliography is necessary to confirm the above opinions.

Key-words: *hermeneutics, spirituality, dualities, psalms.*

1. Introduction

The balance of the world in which we live is a result of careful positioning at the center of dualities. Before discussing the spiritual dichotomies found through hermeneutic structures, in Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, I consider that a minimum research of the general bibliography is necessary to confirm the above hypothesis. I think that a certain notion cannot be discussed without indicating its antithesis. *“There are conflicting pairs that cannot be overcome rationally”* says Petre Țuțea (Țuțea 1992, 154); therefore, the conscious movement between the elements of the dualities maintains the balance of the independent man. Referring to the musical expressions, I observed a permanent pendulum between the ideal and the imperfect, which confirms the inability of man to leave the dialectical

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, alexandra.belibou@unitbv.ro

contradictions. Petre Țuțea offers examples of contradictory relationships, saying that they have a common origin, such as matter and spirit (Țuțea 1992, 156): perfection - imperfection; unity - multiplicity; concrete - abstract; real - apparent; revelation - search; form - content; diachronic - synchrony; time - eternity; harmony - chaos; gnosis - pistis; beautiful - ugly; preaching - intuition. The danger regarding these dichotomous couples is found in the behavior of the modern man, who, damned to target a single notion from a double, annihilates the perspective of infinity (Țuțea 1992, 157).

Saint Augustine suggests that *"the world is a phrase that is being spoken, an order that is just formulated. You cannot understand the meaning of the phrase before listening to it all the way"* (Pleșu 2017, 44). I use these words to support my argument, which aims at the premise that music - a micro-cosmos, is a replica of the world - the macro-cosmos, which cannot be conceived without beginning and end, without the order generated by disorder, without the silence preceding speaking.

In Mircea Eliade's thinking, we find the conception that *"any construction or manufacture has as an example the cosmology model. The making of the World becomes the archetype of any creative gesture of man"* (Eliade 2000, 37). Eliade emphasizes that there is a Center from which the creation extends, outwards, meaning that we speak again about dichotomies: center - periphery, chaos - order. This cosmogonic principle also applies naturally to the idea of musical creation, the core of a sound structure being the Center about which Eliade mentions.

As music represents the balance between man and time, the visual arts are positioned between man and space. Thus, we understand that time is equivalent to becoming and space to existence. The duality of existence - becoming is translated by Kramer, in his publication *The Time of Music*, in the notions of linearity - nonlinearity, opposite components fixed by the author on the basis of the expression of the art of sounds (Kramer 1988, 5).

Music is a spiritual experience in itself, because it involves an inspired act of creation, an imitation of the supreme creative act. Spirituality imposes specific values that are found in genius creations: the meaning of life is a problem that appears as a leitmotif in musical compositions, human values lead the creative subjects. *"Music, through its harmony, is not only a symbol of the return of human beings to the virtues that unify them, but is itself a means of this unification"* (Stăniloae 2004, 705). So, we understand the power of music to bring man back into the balance discovered between spiritual dichotomous elements.

2. Discussion

Composed to celebrate 50 years since the founding of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1930, the *Symphony of Psalms* highlights the composer's predilection for the complexity of religious experiences. By using a form of psalmody, a song with limited ambitus, using church modes as well as Latin, Stravinsky proposes a neoclassical composition, a choral symphony, on the texts of psalms 38, 39 and 150. Overlapping the score on psalm texts, belonging to Stravinsky, to a hermeneutic analysis with the role of emphasizing the musical structures that refer to spiritual dichotomous pairs, I classified the research results as follows:

2.1. Human – Divine dualitie

The human-divine dichotomy is noted, in the *Symphony of Psalms*, by the permanent existence of two contrasting sound entities (in the orchestral debut, part I). The first musical reality we refer to is the emblematic chord with which the symphony begins, a balanced vertical architecture, which sporadically interrupts the sinuous melodic approach - considered the antonymic element. The two positions of the given musical cells are suggestive in arguing that the minor chord is a symbol of the divine - its composition is vertical, and the horizontal melodic sequences represent its opposite - the human essence (flowing, changing, sinuous). The contrast that the composer draws is based on both the direction of the musical motives and their relation to the theory of sound systems. If we said that the opening chord of the symphony is an allusion to the divine, we argue this opinion by the conception that it is a chord subject to the tonal rules, which confers the illusion of stability. In the case of the second entity, we observe an unstable sound behavior, derived from the use of the octatonic scale. Thus, the sacred experience is revealed by the existence of a fixed landmark, whereas, in the case of profane existence, we are talking about relativity, about an infinite number of places in which man moves (Eliade 2000, 21).

Also, the antithesis of the two types of writing can be seen in the existence-becoming binomial, the chord construction being the symbol of independent existence, and the melodic sequences being based on transformation. "*I am who I am*" (Exodus 3, 14), God tells Moses, so God does not define Himself by reference to something else. In the case of man, from a spiritual perspective, we understand that he is under the sign of becoming, "*with a natural dependence on the world, meant to be constantly transformed into communion with God*" (Schmemmann 2001, 47).

The image displays a page of a musical score for a symphony, marked with a Roman numeral 'I' at the top right. The tempo is indicated as 'Tempo' with a quarter note equal to 92 (♩ = 92). The score is organized into several staves, each representing a different instrument or section:

- FLAUTI GRANDI** (Flutes)
- FLAUTO GRANDE (poi PICCOLO)** (Flute)
- OBOLI** (Oboes)
- CORNO INGLESE** (English Horn)
- FAGOTTI** (Bassoons)
- CONTRA FAGOTTO** (Contrabassoon)
- CORNI FA** (F Horns)
- TROMBA PICCOLA RM** (Trumpet)
- TROMBE DO** (Trumpets)
- TROMBONI** (Trumpets)
- TROMBONE (basso)** (Trombone)
- TUBA** (Tuba)
- TIMPANI GRAN CASA** (Timpani)
- CORO** (Chorus), including **SOPRANI** (Soprano), **ALTI** (Alto), **TENORI** (Tenor), and **BASSI** (Bass).
- ARFA** (Harp)
- PIANOFORTI 1. 2.** (Pianos)
- VIOLONCELLI** (Violoncellos)
- CONTRABASSI** (Contrabasses)

A prominent feature of the score is a large, light blue oval that highlights a specific chord and melodic sequence. This sequence begins in the first measure and spans across several staves, including the Flute, Oboe, English Horn, Bassoon, and Contrabassoon parts. The sequence consists of a series of notes and rests, with some notes beamed together, creating a complex melodic line. The tempo marking 'Tempo' and the instrument list are also visible on the page.

Fig. 1. Chord and melodic sequence at the beginning of the score

2.2. Hope – Despair binomial

The Symphony of Psalms refers to the duality in discussion through the textual meanings of the psalms chosen by the composer. The first part of the creation

presents itself, from the point of view of the text, as a prayer of mercy, addressed by a person in despair. The second part emphasizes the divine mercy, by repeating the words referring to the good received from the Lord, after listening to the prayer of mercy. Thus, we observe how, from a hermeneutic point of view, the transition from the state of despair, to the feeling of gratitude and hope is made. The third part, with its text of praise, manages to crown the entire compositional journey so far, by recognizing the victory of the divine power.

Musically, the aforementioned are interpreted by the existence of musical structures, positioned, one against the other, in relation of tension-relaxation. If in the case of the first part of the symphony we notice incisive instrumental constructions, both vertical and horizontal, a dense and repetitive writing, a vocal style of lamentation, the second part – written as a fugue - proposes a wider breath, with the accent placed on the horizontal framing, as a sign of relaxation under the idea of hope. The two-themed fugue, from the second part of the composition, highlights three spiritual stances: the exhibition fragment can be interpreted as a waiting area for divine mercy, as the text of the psalm emphasizes: *Expectans expectavi Dominum, et intendit mihi. Exaudivit preces meas*. We observe an overall formal stability and, in particular, a stability related to the architecture of the subject of the choral fugue, characteristics that remind us of the steadfastness in faith. The choir presents the second spiritual image in a cappella writing, in stretto, using the following words: *Et statuit super petram pedes meos, et direxit gressus meos*, which can be translated by trusting the divine power, which guides the steps in life, in the vertical sense, which is seen, musically, in the frozen thematic appearances, created by giving up the orchestral contribution - aspects that present the man as a singular entity before God.

Even though I have argued that the parts of the symphony bring to light the dichotomous elements contained in the hopeful - hopeless binomial, they never appear singular, but complement each other. The final spiritual picture encompasses an antonym, presented musically through two distinct sections: the first musical hypostasis is energetic and wide, exposing the choir and orchestra in homophony, on the words *Et immisit in os meum canticum novum, carmen Deo notre. Videbunt multi, et timebunt*, with a rhythm built on punctuated values, with a dynamic that serves the sound overflow with shades of fortissimo; contrasting section, embroidered around the words *Et sperabunt in Domino*, is attested by the dynamic contrast (subito piano) and a choral recitation in unison of the words about hope.

The final part of the symphony is one of praise, with an explicit sense of solemnity, proof of the supremacy of hope. The Symphony of Psalms, signed by Stravinsky, assures us of the truth of the following quote: "*This is what hope means, to remain steadfast in the midst of the greatest misfortunes*" (St. John Chrysostom 2011, 494). We are witnesses of a sound journey, from despair to hope, with the triumph of good.

2.3. Collective prayer – Individual prayer dichotomy

Regarding the choral timbral choices in the Symphony of Psalms, I noticed that the work begins with an introverted approach, with alto voices- that present a lament on the words *Hear my prayer, Lord*, and then, through transitional sections, the whole choral approach speak to us about universality, by mentioning the condition of *a stranger like all ancestors*. Thus, we subdue the choral timbre option to the messages of the psaltic texts and conclude that the antonym of individual prayer and collective prayer is present in the first part of the Symphony of Psalms, in the form of vocal dialogue.

"In general, we consider musical syntax as a way of apprehending temporal relationships between geometrically represented sound objects. In an article published in 1980, Ștefan Niculescu defines and also classifies the typology of musical syntax into 4 categories: monody, homophony, polyphony, heterophony. They are configurable in relation to two fundamental aspects/ principles of temporal exposure - succession and simultaneity - to which are added the most general relations between objects: repetition and change. The author also states that the monody is a monovocality, while the other three categories are in the area of plurivocality" (Balint 2012, 33).

The second part of Igor Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms gives us an example of dual writing in terms of syntactic approach. As I said, this section is built in the form of fugue with two themes. Starting with bar no. 29 and ending with bar no. 60, the composer displays the chorus in a balanced polyphonic writing, following the rules of fugue, on the words: *Exspectans exspectavi Dominum, et intendit mihi. Et exaudivit preces meas, et eduxit me de lacu miseriae et de luto faecis. Et statuit super petram pedes meos, et direxit gressus meos*. From bar no. 71, until the end of the symphony, part 2, Stravinsky changes the musical syntax (in homophonic presentation) in the choral texture and gives a collective role to the vocal ensemble, for the appearance of the lyrics *Et immisit in os meum canticum novum, carmen Deo nostro. Videbunt multi, et timebunt, et sperabunt in Domino*. We

overlap the principles of temporal exposition, mentioned above, with the two spiritual dichotomous ideas as follows: Successivity - Individual prayer; Simultaneity - Collective Prayer. Thus, the composer chose to exhibit, in successive expositions, psaltic words with a rich personal connotation, highlighting particular diachronic supplications in the first half of the score of the second movement, in antithesis to the second half. Concerning the last, the psalmic words: *And he put in my mouth a new song, a song to our God; Many would see and fear and hope in the Lord*, claim a choral approach based on simultaneity, in homophony and isorhythmia, with the sense of collective praise.

3. Conclusions

"The number of musical works signed by Stravinsky, inspired by religious texts is not too large (...). But the intrinsic significance that these compositions have seems to us to be able to justify the opinion that the true background of Stravinsky's spiritual life and the logic of his entire evolution can be revealed precisely by studying his religious works" (Vlad, 1967, p. 163). The existence of dichotomous hermeneutic structures in the *Symphony of Psalms* validates our hypothesis that the balance of human life is achieved only by careful placement in the center of antitheses, music being an example of valid developments. Because we discussed a work based on a religious text, we understand that it encourages us to live in spiritual stability and harmony. Through its samples of antithetical construction, the music based on psalm texts offers examples of duality mediation, towards a spiritual ideal.

References

- Balint, George. 2012. "Câteva adăugiri teoretice în perspectiva sintaxei muzicale (Few theoretical opinions about musical syntax)". *Muzica journal* 1: 33-49.
- Chrysostom, John. 2011. *Omilii la Psalmi (Psalm comments)*. Iași: Doxologia.
- Eliade, Mircea. 2000. *Sacrul și profanul (Sacred and profane)*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.
- Kramer, Jonathan. 1988. *The Time of Music*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Pleșu, Andrei. 2017. *Minima moralia*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.

- Schmemmann, Alexander. 2001. *Pentru viața lumii (For the world's life)*. Bucharest: Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru. 2004. *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă (Spirituality and communion in the orthodox Liturgy)*. Bucharest: Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church.
- Țuțea, Petre. 1992. *Între Dumnezeu și neamul meu (Between God and my people)*. Bucharest: Anastasia Foundation.
- Vlad, Roman. 1967. *Stravinsky*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.