

## Sketches and Superimposition in Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*

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A fundamental issue in the analysis of Stravinsky's music is to describe how the composer juxtaposes and superimposes repeating motivic fragments. Do layered ostinati spin out in opposition to one another or do they interact? Does the progress of one affect the progress of another? Do they create formal relationships beyond their own repetitions? Evidence in sketches for works spanning the Russian period through the early serial work *Agon* (1953–57) suggests that this issue was a primary concern for the composer: many sketches and drafts are dedicated to working out the relationships between and among simultaneously sounding strata so that they jointly shape passages of music.

These documents share a common working method. Early in the compositional process, Stravinsky seems often to have drafted short “phrases” where the constituent motivic fragments are placed in relationship but repeated only briefly or not at all; subsequent drafts expand the lengths of phrases by inserting repetitions of existing material into the original phrases.<sup>1</sup> Such a procedure allows us to compare the longer (and most often retained) versions with their shorter predecessors, giving us insight both into how Stravinsky develops his material and what might constitute a complete formal unit. In other words, we can trace the expansions of phrases through interpolation in order to identify how later versions have a more continuous formal shape and fit more easily into larger formal units.

Consider as an example two sketches for a passage from the third movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* (1929–30); the two sketches are reproduced as *Examples 1a* and *1b* and the final score is reproduced as *Example 2*.<sup>2</sup> A preliminary description of the passage might go as follows. There are three repeating strata: a bass line in lower strings made up of three ordered pitches (F $\sharp$ , G $\flat$ , and A $\flat$ ) and whose repetitions are broken by rests before becoming continuous, a repeating C-major triad in bassoon and horns whose reiterations never follow an exact durational scheme, and a trumpet melody that lasts in most (but not all) cases for four quarter notes. This description, while



Example 1a: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms* for chorus and orchestra (1929–30), sketchbook, pp. [10–11] (Igor Stravinsky Collection).

accurate, fails to describe any larger shaping of the passage; for example do the strata group into episodes? If so, are the episodes themselves ordered in any cumulative or goal-oriented way? Why do the repetitions break off where they do (at the fifth bar after R4)?

Figure 1 is meant to address these issues; it shows the excerpt as consisting of four episodes, based largely on the return of the repeating C-major chord which starts the passage. It demonstrates that while the entrance order of the three strata remains essentially the same (that is, C-major chord, bass line, trumpet line), their placement vis-à-vis each other does not. Note, for example, that while there are two quarter rests between C-major chord and bass line in the first episode, there is only one quarter rest between them in the second episode. Such an arrangement has obvious advantages. First, the four episodes are cumulative because in each the fragments arrive more quickly: in episode 1, only two strata are present and they do not overlap, while in episode 2 both arrive earlier as well as closer to one another, and also overlap before being joined by the third. (This process continues in episodes 3 and 4.)



Example 1b: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms* for chorus and orchestra (1929–30), sketchbook, pp. [14–15] (Igor Stravinsky Collection).

Furthermore, *Figure 1* identifies a larger developmental continuity in the interaction of the two melodic fragments. The first counterpoint of bass line and trumpet takes place in episode 2; the trumpet enters first on their shared pitch class G, a dominant-like pitch class in this C-controlled environment (see the vertical lines between pairs of entrances in *Figure 1*). But because the trumpet melody is four quarters long and the bass line only three, the second trumpet statement (in episode 2 as well) begins over a bass line A<sub>b</sub>; this varied counterpoint constitutes a development between the two voices. And as we might expect, the third trumpet melody, appearing in an earlier position within the third episode, completes the developmental process by aligning with the remaining pitch class in the bass line, F<sub>♯</sub>. Now that all three contrapuntal alignments have been exploited, the relationship between these two lines stabilizes: the final two trumpet entrances each begin over the original bass line G. It may be that Stravinsky chose this counterpoint as the opening and final one because in it a quasi-progression takes place: only in this alignment do the two voices move from a first vertical G-G to a last, “cadential” G-C.

3 Tempo  $\text{♩} = 80$  ( $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ ) sempre in  $\frac{4}{4}$

Fag. 1  
2 3

Cor. 1 2  
3 4

V.-C.  
C-B.

4

Fag. 1  
2 3

Cor. 1 2  
3 4

Tr.-ba Do 1  
Tr.-ni 1 2  
3 8

Tuba

Arpa

P.-f.  $\frac{1}{2}$

V.-C.  
C-B.

Finis *Pizz.* *mf* *resc.* *staccatissimo mf* *Alco.* *staccatissimo mf*

*staccatissimo mf*

B. & H. 16328

Example 2: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms* for chorus and orchestra (1929–30), third movement, full score, p. 30. © Copyright 1931 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Revised version: © Copyright 1948 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. U.S. Copyright renewed. Reprinted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Figure 1 is a musical score sketch consisting of four staves. The first staff begins with a circled 'R3' and a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second staff begins with a circled 'R4' and a similar rhythmic pattern. The third and fourth staves show more complex rhythmic patterns and chord annotations. The score is divided into four measures, with the right half of each measure crossed out with an 'X'.

Figure 1

Now consider the two relevant sketches. *Example 1a* shows all three fragments present and appearing in the proper order, although the rhythmic shape of the C-major chord has not yet been determined and the trumpet does not begin on G but rather on B $\flat$ . Although we can point where this draft begins – at one bar before R4 in the final version – it forms just one episode, and breaks the bass line ostinato much earlier. The insertion on this sketch (the bubble on the upper right-hand side) suggests an earlier beginning to the section, one where the C-major chord begins to have a rhythmic identity not only in its eighth-note reiteration, but also in its syncopated reappearance. The insertion already alters the passage by adding to it an introductory reiteration of the C chord.

It is in the second sketch that Stravinsky shapes the passage more completely (*Example 1b*). First consider it without the intriguing insertion in the upper right-hand side. It is basically the same as the final version, and makes good sense without it: the bass line ostinato continues uninterrupted and the ordering of the three fragments is also intact. In fact, this version corresponds to my episodes 1, 2, and 4. Thus, of course, the interpolation on the upper right-hand side is episode 3. Does the entire section *need* episode 3 in order to be whole? I would argue that episode 3 is essential, for not all the possibilities of superimposition are exhausted between bass line and trumpet without it. Stravinsky's revisions transform mere repetition into formal organization.

- 1 See, for example, the “bubble” insertion reproduced on p. 40 in the Paul Sacher Foundation's facsimile publication of the 1920 score of *Igor Stravinsky: Symphonies d'instruments à vent*, ed. and with a commentary by André Baltensperger and Felix Meyer, Basel 1991.
- 2 These sketches come from a bound notebook Stravinsky used for the *Symphony of Psalms*; they are found on pp. 10–11 and 14–15 (Igor Stravinsky Collection).