

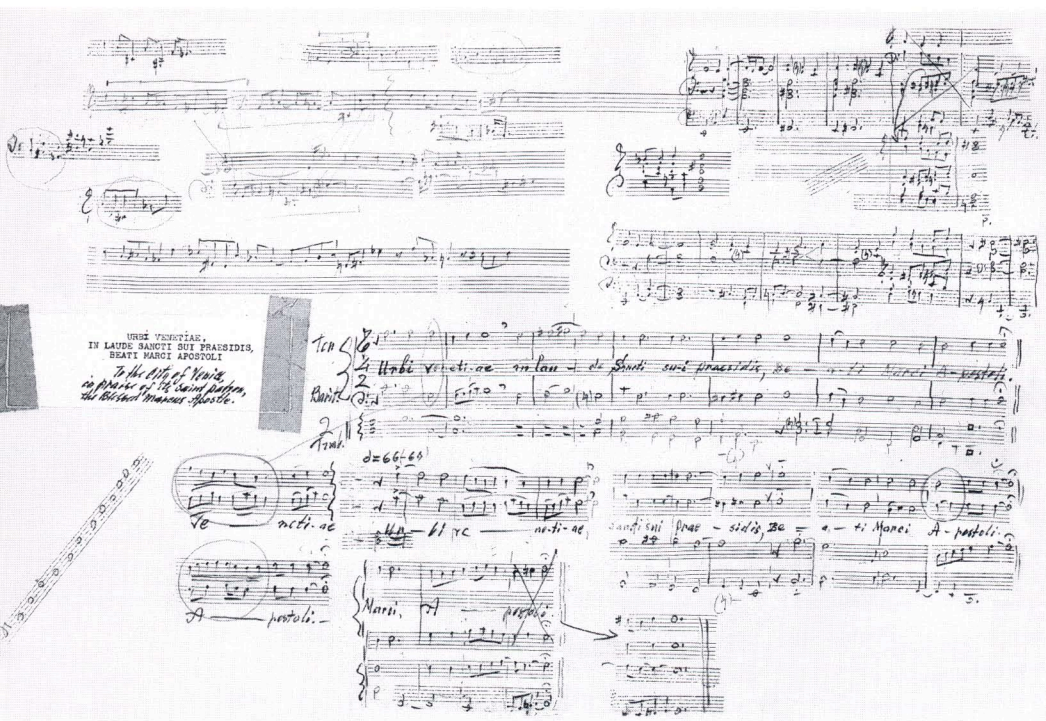
Stravinsky at the Threshold A Sketch Leaf for *Canticum Sacrum*

by David H. Smyth

One of the most provocative (and to some, disturbing) developments in post-World War II music was Stravinsky's adoption of twelve-tone technique. That Stravinsky at seventy was capable of such a turn surprised everyone – including, apparently, the composer himself. He described the period as a “crisis,” followed by a “slow climb through the 1950s,” leading to and beyond the *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*, which he called the “cornerstone” of his serial output.¹ Little wonder that this remarkable process has been described and analyzed by dozens of theorists, composers, and historians.

Stravinsky's sketches provide a fascinating perspective from which to view the shifts in his compositional technique. They confirm Stravinsky's retention of long-favored devices as he ambitiously experimented with rigorous new controls. Close study of the sketches reveals surprising aspects of continuity within and among the early serial works, and provides a series of intimate portraits of Stravinsky at work and at play with his musical material.² Of particular interest are sketch pages bearing evidence of early stages in the creative process, or upon which a multitude of ideas are juxtaposed. The example discussed below is suggestive in its combination of both, and speaks volumes about the genesis of *Canticum Sacrum*, the 1955 score containing Stravinsky's first entirely dodecaphonic movement, the tenor solo “Surge, aquilo.”

The page in question is an oblong sheet (approximately 12 by 18 inches) of the kind Stravinsky tacked up on an easel at his piano.³ A reduced reproduction of the leaf appears in *Example 1*. Individual staves were ruled as needed using the “Stravigor,” a device the composer patented. The size, format, and content all suggest that this may be one of the first sketch leaves for *Canticum Sacrum*. It contains three groups of sketches. Taped onto the page is the text of the opening “Dedicatio,” typewritten in Latin, with an English translation handwritten in red ink. Sketches for the “Dedicatio” cover most of the bottom half of the page, excepting a single bass staff ruled diagonally in the left margin, to which we shall return. Sketches in the upper right quadrant appear to relate to the organ ritornello of the first movement (“Euntes in mundum,” mm. 17–25, repeated in mm. 32–40), although neither the rhythms nor the pitches yet match those of the final version. Finally, the upper left

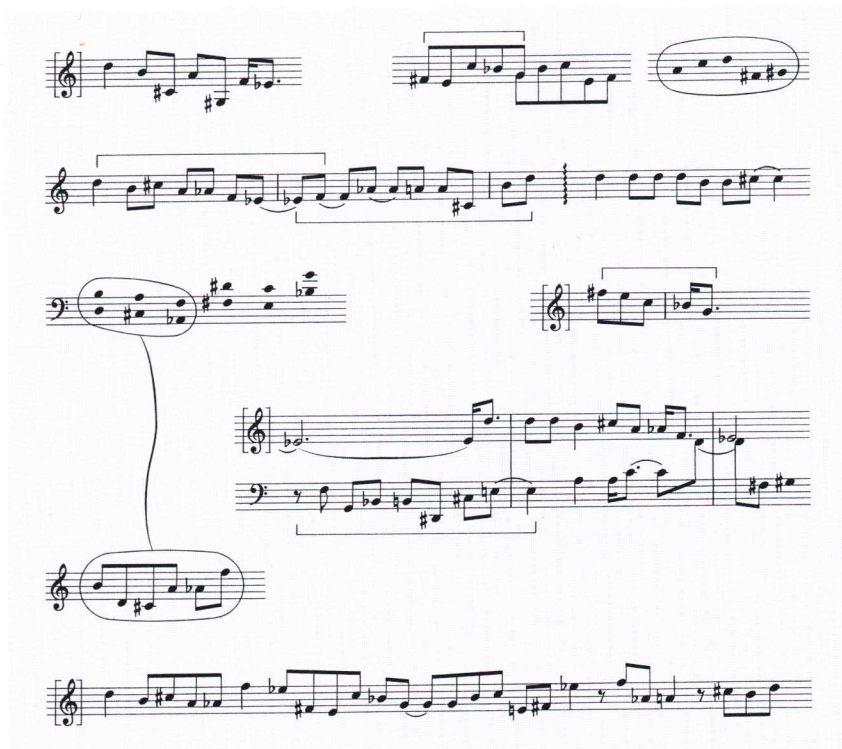


Example 1: Igor Stravinsky, *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), sketch leaf (Igor Stravinsky Collection).

quadrant contains an intriguing example of “serial play.” Its exact relationship to the finished work initially seems quite mysterious.

We cannot be certain about the order in which these sketches were made, but in all likelihood, Stravinsky began in the upper left quadrant. A transcription appears in *Example 2*. Unlike the first, the second staff is continuous, and extends into the upper right quadrant; it was probably drawn and filled first. It contains a seven-note musical idea, followed immediately by a syncopated statement of its untransposed retrograde, thus creating a palindrome that is bracketed in red and blue pencil. The intervallic succession displays a certain regularity: thirds or sixths alternate with seconds or sevenths, though without regard to specific interval class (i.e., major and minor intervals occur in no particular order). The palindrome thus combines two kinds of “serial” manipulations: a strict retrograde of pitch classes, and a looser chain of alternating interval types (not interval classes).

In the sketches on the bottom half of the page, Stravinsky explores similar techniques. As can be seen in *Example 3*, the “Dedicatio,” in its final form, features a stepwise succession of eight notes (first presented by the bass trombones at the opening: D, C, B, C, B, A, B, C). This motive appears at various transpositional levels (F, E, D, E, D, C, D, E at the beginning of the tenor solo;



Example 2: Igor Stravinsky, *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), transcription of sketches.

and C, B, A, B, A, G, A, B in the baritone solo, m. 3), and also in inversion (F, G, A, G, A, B, A, G) in the tenor trombone at the opening. Here, as in the seven-tone palindrome sketched above, the general interval succession (a chain of seconds) is preserved, although the exact succession of major and minor seconds varies. Stravinsky confines statements of this motive to the “white notes,” perhaps to impart a modal flavor.

The motive does not occur in the first draft of the “Dedicatio” on the sketch leaf (the four staves to the right of the typed text in *Example 1*), but its genesis is chronicled in a pair of sketches just below and to the left. Stravinsky circles in red pencil a sketch juxtaposing the motive and its transposed inversion, and indicates that this is to be added as a melisma on the word “Venetiae.” A new setting of the first two words follows immediately, in which the eight-note motive and its inversion are now incorporated, although still not exactly as they will appear in the final version.⁴ This pairing of the motive against its transposed inversion survives in the score, although its presentation is masked by more complex contrapuntal relationships than occur in the sketches. Such inversional pairing may be viewed as a vertical analog to palindromic pairing in the horizontal dimension. Both play prominent roles throughout Stravinsky’s early serial works.

CANTICUM SACRUM

AD HONOREM SANCTI MARCI NOMINIS

Dedicatio

IGOR STRAWINSKY
1955

♩ = 66 (-69)

Tenore

Soli

Baritono

tenore (I)

Tromboni

basso

Tromboni

contrabasso *

mf

marc. ma non f

Ur - bi Ve - - ne - ti - ae, in lau - -

5 6 7 8 9

Ten.

Soli

Bar.

(²)

allargando

legato

legato

* *gva bassa*

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Example 3: Igor Stravinsky, *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), full score of "Dedicatio." © 1956 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd 1997.

Let us return to the mysterious material in the upper left quadrant of our leaf (transcribed in *Example 2*). In a highly notable development, the initial idea on the second staff (the seven-note-interval series) is copied over on the top staff (note the contour changes), where it is extended by continuing the pattern until all twelve tones have appeared. The final five tones are written in a palindrome (as were the first seven), and in the circle at the right, the last five notes are transposed up a step. On a third staff, to the left, Stravinsky writes the entire twelve-note series as a succession of vertical dyads – in this case, a succession of sixths. After this, several bars of two-voice counterpoint combine transposed and untransposed segments of the palindromic series. Finally, another rhythmicized statement of the entire twelve-tone palindrome occurs on the next staff.

Although this particular chromatic series is not used in *Canticum Sacrum* (nor, to my knowledge, anywhere in Stravinsky's works), its appearance on this page of sketches is highly relevant. The play with pitch class palindromes clearly forecasts the large-scale palindromic form of the entire work, as well as the nearly literal retrograde symmetry of the pitch material in the outer movements. The first and last dyads of the series (B-D and Bb-G) may relate to the typically Stravinskian signature harmony of the outer movements. The series begins on D, which is the first and last note of the "Dedicatio" and, at least arguably, the overall "tonic" of *Canticum Sacrum*.

One final conjunction remains to be explored. In the lower left margin, Stravinsky ruled a single diagonal staff, upon which he wrote a series of whole notes (D, E, F, D, C, E, D, F, E, G, A, G). These are the bass notes of the "Euntes" organ ritornello in its final version (mm. 17–25), for which early sketches appear in the upper right quadrant of this leaf. The new bass line bears several similarities to the serial doodling above. First, it is a series of exactly twelve notes, beginning on D. But in addition, this bass line also features a palindromic interval succession: step, step, third, step, third; followed by third, step, third, step, step.⁵

Thus Stravinsky's sketches on this single leaf indicate a need to revise the commonly held view that the opening sections of *Canticum Sacrum* are not significantly "serial" in construction. The sketches demonstrate Stravinsky's ongoing fascination with diatonic/chromatic intersections, and show that as he explored the realms of seven and of twelve, he experimented with similar structures in both: interval chains, palindromes, and pairs of inversionally related lines. While at the beginning of *Canticum Sacrum*, these procedures are largely constrained to operate within the austere, modally resonant domain of "white notes," Stravinsky's virtually concurrent exploration of a fully chromatic twelve-note palindrome both forecasts his imminent turn toward dodecaphony and underscores how short a step that actually required.

- 1 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Episodes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 23.
- 2 The author is preparing a study of Stravinsky's works from the 1950s, based on materials in the Igor Stravinsky Collection at the Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel. He gratefully acknowledges a research grant from the Foundation, March–June 1996.
- 3 The leaf corresponds to Microfilm 214, frame 903. A color facsimile was published in *Stravinsky: Sein Nachlaß, sein Bild* (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel in Zusammenarbeit mit der Paul Sacher Stiftung, 1984), p. 165 (top).
- 4 Further experimentation with this motive in various rhythms and transpositions occurs on a smaller, separate sketch leaf (see Microfilm 214, frame 902), on which one can clearly discern the emergence of the opening trombone accompaniment.
- 5 A brief sketch in the margin of another leaf corresponding to Microfilm 214, frame 911, clarifies this relationship with a pair of brackets and a dotted line separating the hexachords.