

# Symphony in Three Movements

## IGOR STRAVINSKY

**BORN** 1882, Lomonosov, Russia

**DIED** 1971, New York, USA

**FIRST PERFORMED** 24 January 1946, Carnegie Hall, New York, USA, by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Stravinsky

**DURATION** 22 minutes

If there was an obvious disconnect between life and music in Stravinsky's *Symphony in C*, his *Symphony in Three Movements*, written just a few years later, is far more embedded in the events of the real world. Even Stravinsky himself called it his 'war symphony', going on to state: 'Each episode in the *Symphony* is linked in my imagination with a specific cinematographic impression of war.'

The conflict in question is, of course, the Second World War, and the *Symphony* was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra as a 'victory symphony', at the time when the conflict was nearing its end. Stravinsky completed it in 1945, during the War's final days – a period he described as 'our arduous time of sharp and shifting events, of despair and hope, of continual torments, of tension and, at last, cessation and relief'.

### Unusual origins

Once we're aware of the *Symphony's* inspiration, the connections seem obvious. But in fact, Stravinsky drew on several existing projects when putting together the *Symphony in Three Movements*. The piano's strong presence in the first movement comes from his reuse of material originally intended for a piano concerto, never completed. The second movement has a more unusual origin. In 1943 Stravinsky began writing music for a film adaptation of *The Song of Bernadette*, following conversations with his Beverly Hills neighbour, film director Franz Werfel. No



contract was ever finalised, however, and in the end Werfel employed Alfred Newman to write the film's score (Newman later won an Oscar for it). Left with the music he'd written for a scene depicting a vision of the Virgin Mary, Stravinsky simply reworked it as the harp-heavy second movement to his *Symphony in Three Movements*.

Perhaps most importantly, in 1943 Stravinsky had begun work on rescoring his infamous ballet score *The Rite of Spring* (another project he didn't complete). But revisiting that earlier work's dissonance, violence and relentless, pounding rhythms after a couple of decades of elegant neo-classicism must have surely had an impact on the *Symphony in Three Movements's* bolder, more turbulent language – certainly when compared with the *Symphony in C*. There's something about this *Symphony's* unstoppable drive and sense of forward propulsion, even beneath the charm of the slow movement, that fascinates, but also unsettles.

## The music

The **first movement**, Stravinsky explained, was inspired by a cinema documentary he saw about Japanese scorched-earth tactics in China. It begins with an unforgettable explosion of sound, a scale rushing upward to a jarring, dissonant note, followed immediately by a heavy-footed march. In its jazzy, syncopated piano stabs, the second main theme betrays the movement's origins as a piano concerto, and the march theme then returns to build to the opening section's climax. The far calmer, more transparent central section is led by the piano over a quickly pulsing accompaniment from the horns, and Stravinsky explained that a later episode for clarinet and piano 'was conceived as a series of instrumental conversations to accompany a cinematographic scene showing Chinese people scratching and digging in their fields'. There's a sudden return of the 'piano concerto' music to kick off the movement's closing section, and a cackling bass clarinet brings a menacing edge to the movement's seemingly serene final chord.

If the piano was in the spotlight in the first movement, in the graceful, Mozartian (or maybe Rossinian) **second movement**, it's the harp, taking over from the strings in accompanying a sophisticated flute melody, later interrupted by a poignant chorale from the strings. After a more dissonant, slower central section that sounds like a stately court dance, Stravinsky returns to the opening music to guide the movement towards a graceful close – only to swerve sideways into a short interlude of expectant chords that take us directly into the final movement.

And the **third movement's** opening, explained Stravinsky, is 'a reaction to newsreels of goose-stepping soldiers. The square march-beat, brass-band instrumentation, grotesque tuba crescendo are all related to those abhorrent pictures.' The music later takes on a more celebratory tone with a

propulsive, dance-like passage, before the texture suddenly clears for a solo trombone and piano in what seems like the start of a fugue. The counterpoint never really gets going, however (even if this episode looks prophetically ahead to the jagged dissonances of Stravinsky's music of the 1950s and 1960s) – but it's at this point that the harp and piano play together for the first time, symbolising, in Stravinsky's words, the turning point of the war: 'The fugue and the end of the Symphony are associated with the rise of the Allies, and the final, rather too commercial D flat sixth chord tokens my extra exuberance in the Allied triumph.' A scurrying string passage leads to a semi-return of the propulsive dance from earlier in the movement, and there's nothing left but to dash towards the sudden eruption of joy in the Symphony's brash closing chords.

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