

Symphony in C

IGOR STRAVINSKY

BORN 1882, Lomonosov, Russia

DIED 1971, New York, USA

FIRST PERFORMED 7 November 1940, Chicago, USA, by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Stravinsky

DURATION 30 minutes

1 Moderato alla breve

2 Larghetto concertante –

3 Allegretto

4 Largo

Stravinsky and the symphony

Many composers have poured some of their profoundest music into major series of symphonies – just think of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, or in more recent times Mahler, Bruckner or Shostakovich, or even Peter Maxwell Davies. For one of the 20th century's most influential composers, however, Igor Stravinsky had an unusual and rather cautious relationship with that most fundamental of classical forms. That's hardly surprising, of course, from a figure who made an indelible mark early on with a striking trio of unforgettable ballet scores, culminating in the unbridled violence of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 (which the RSNO plays next week).

There's a student symphony: Stravinsky wrote an attractive early Symphony in E flat in 1907 while studying with Rimsky-Korsakov, but it's hardly representative of his pioneering later music. His *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* of 1920 only really counts as a symphony in the word's literal sense of 'sounding together', and his 1930 *Symphony of Psalms* is a sacred choral work (it's even been suggested that Stravinsky only called it a symphony when his publisher reminded him that that's what he'd been commissioned to write).



Which leaves us with just his *Symphony in C* and *Symphony in Three Movements*, both of which are performed in tonight's concert – his two most traditional symphonies, although even here Stravinsky takes his notoriously iconoclastic perspective on this traditional form.

Can music express anything?

He's notorious, too, for his pronouncements on musical expression. He wrote in his 1936 autobiography: 'Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. Expression has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence.'

Whether he really believed that or not – and he later attempted to clarify things by explaining he was referring to a musical work never simply acting as a diary of a composer's feelings – there can be few works that epitomise a disconnect between life and music better than his breezy, neo-classical *Symphony in C*, written at one of the darkest, most turbulent times of Stravinsky's life.

He composed the *Symphony* between 1938 and 1940, to a commission from Mrs Robert Woods Bliss, wife of a prominent US diplomat who had commissioned his *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* in 1937. At the same time, however, Stravinsky lost his wife Catherine and daughter Ludmila to tuberculosis, followed quickly by his own diagnosis with the disease and the death of his mother. Then World War Two forced him to leave Europe for the US – not as a refugee, however. He'd been booked to give a lecture series at Harvard University, followed by a performance tour, and he eventually settled in Beverly Hills with Vera de Bosset (with whom he'd been having an affair since 1921), marrying her in March 1940. The *Symphony in C* charts this whole period: Stravinsky completed the first and second movements in the Sancellemoz sanatorium in the French Alps, where he'd been recovering from tuberculosis; he finished the third in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and the fourth was wrapped up in Beverly Hills in August 1940.

The music

Outwardly, the *Symphony in C* is one of Stravinsky's most traditional works, a prime example of the elegant, neo-classical style that he'd been exploring since the 1920s, looking back unashamedly to the music of Bach, Haydn and Beethoven. With its frequently astringent harmonies and predictably unpredictable rhythms, however, it's Stravinsky through and through.

Not for nothing has it been described as a 'cubist portrait of a symphony', as though everything's there and in the right place, but we seem to be looking at it all from unexpected angles.

After a nervy introduction with a distinctive repeated-note theme, the **first movement's** first main melody is on a solo oboe, put through all manner of rhythmic inventiveness before a snapped loud chord leads to the second main melody, a slow-moving theme on solo trumpet, taken up by horn. The central development section tosses both themes around between the orchestra sections, with fragments jostling for our attention, before a traditional recapitulation returns to both of the opening themes, with decisive chords bringing the movement to a sonorous close.

Stravinsky called the **second movement** an *aria*, and its intricately ornamented oboe melody looks straight back to Bach's cantatas and passions. After a more agitated, darker middle section, a brief reprise of the oboe melody brings the movement to a sudden close.

The **third movement** is an eager, propulsive scherzo full of ever-changing rhythms, whose recurring theme is announced in no uncertain terms right at the start, with reprises separated by contrasting music. A brooding melody for bassoons down in the depths of their register launches the fierce, urgent **fourth movement**, and just when things seem to be building to a final climax, Stravinsky brings back the repeated-note theme from the very beginning of the *Symphony*, ushering in a quiet, reflective ending on inconclusive, jazzy chords.

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