

## *Great Composers – Stravinsky*

By John Van Sloten

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Igor Stravinsky

### **[Anjanette's Piano Piece] [1965 Video Clip - INTRO]**

“There was practically no genre of music beyond the command of Igor Stravinsky, widely considered **the most important composer of the twentieth century**. He wrote ballet and chamber music, opera, choral and orchestral music, and that’s not all. He composed a polka for Ringling Bros./Barnum and Bailey Circus and a clarinet concerto for Benny Goodman.” Kavanaugh

He truly was a gifted man, given special aptitudes and abilities with music like many other composers... but also possessing another great gift... the gift of integrity. As I read about him this week, it was his personal integrity that most impressed me. He had character and beliefs, and he did what he thought was right, no matter what the cost. Stravinsky was the genuine article when it came to living out who he was.

As you’ve heard in that piece Anjanette played, one of the ways he demonstrated that integrity was in the type of music he composed. Very a-traditional... not **sentimental, or overly romantic**, like so many others before him... it was something unique... something new. One biographer summarized his works this way, “Stravinsky was a musical pathfinder, establishing bold new concepts yet remaining unruffled by the often venomous criticism his innovations provoked. He was not an imitator; he followed his own lead, single handedly creating whole schools of musical thought... Yet none of these moves came about because of exterior pressures or intimidation. Stravinsky leaves the impression that if he ever used a device that was common to other composers, it was due to coincidence rather than imitation.” Kavanaugh

You gotta like a guy who makes his own way... is true to himself and does something seminal, something new! That integrity. The internal fortitude to be true to oneself... and to then have the willingness to stick with that music and stay the course.

One has to think that that integrity had a lot to do with the strong faith he had in Christ. While there were a few early years where he temporarily left his Russian Orthodox faith, by mid life he had adopted a very vibrant and unabashed Christian faith. And true to form he spoke very openly about what he believed. "I regard my talents as God given, and I have always prayed to him for strength to use them. When in early childhood I discovered that I had been made the custodian of musical aptitudes, I pledged myself to God to be worthy of their development, though, of course, I have broken the pledge and received un-covenanted mercies all my life, and though the custodian has all too often kept faith on his all-too-worldly terms." Stravinsky, Roman Vlad

Now to me, that's integrity! He knows who his is... in terms of knowing that his talents are God given... not of his own making. And knowing that fact makes him humble and allows him to have a healthy view of himself. And we see that humility in his honesty about how he was unable to keep his pledge to be a good custodian of those gifts. He readily confesses that he wasn't perfect and often utilized his talents in 'self serving' ways. To me, that's a genuine picture of what a life of faith can look like.

First of all its not all about us... its about him! God's the gift giver... he's the perfect one. Yes we can know God... yes we have this great and beautiful gift of a relationship with him... but honestly, we do often mess it up... break covenant... and then, like Stravinsky, get picked up by God again and again, and receive his un-covenanted mercies... receive forgiveness and a second chance... a new start. To me, that's a real kind of faith. Like his music, Stravinsky's faith wasn't sappy or overly sentimental, it didn't have it

all together, but, instead, was down to earth... and had its feet firmly planted on the ground. It didn't overly romanticize or spiritualize everything. It was real. It connected. Stravinsky once wrote, "Rhythm and motion, not the element of feeling, are the foundation of musical art." Stravinsky, 1936 Chronicles He could have just as easily been referring to his view on **the life of faith**.

**PAUSE...** There is a great Stravinsky composition that fully captures and illustrates his integrity both in faith and in music. It's entitled, Symphony of Psalms. As the title infers, he uses the biblical psalms as lyrical inspiration for the piece. To me that fits perfectly with who he was. Of all the biblical books to choose, the psalms have integrity... the psalms are earthy and real. They're the most human of the books in the bible. That's why so many come back to them again and again as they journey in the spiritual life. The psalms capture the deepest depths of the life of faith... those times when God seems far away... not real to us... and they also contain glimpses of the highest highs... those times when God simply overwhelms us! Through the lens of the psalms we can see and experience a relationship with God at all levels... **PAUSE...** now that's real!

That Stravinsky would choose the psalms should therefore be no surprise... a real guy with a real faith who writes real music... why not use the real psalms? So, in this composition, we have a kind of 'synergy of integrity' happening... a sort of 'spiritual reality plus'... all expressed in Stravinsky's very unique way. This symphony is designed to offer a glimpse of what the life of faith is like. To present a verbal/aural picture what a human being connecting with, and relating to God might look like. Commentators say that S built that human connecting to God element right into the core of this musical score. As you listen to it you'll hear that Stravinsky used both major and minor chords at the same time. He brings together two seemingly incongruent entities and brilliantly makes them one.

**PAUSE...** God and humanity... brought together... made one.

I thought it would be kind of cool to enter into... journey with this composition... with the words of the psalms, the music of Stravinsky... journey with God. It's a journey that has three phases... each of which, I trust, many of us can relate to.

The first leg of the journey describes a time when a person is feeling very far away from God. It's a time of desperation and trouble. I'm sure you've been there. Things are falling apart around you and you need some help... you need a hand out of this pit... you need to know where to go... what to do. This week I sat in a local bar with a friend who's in that kind of place.

The divorce is killing him... and what he's learning about himself hurts so bad. He's wondering where all of its leading... what its all about. **PAUSE...** I thought, "Man... this friend is in the place that the writer of Psalm 39 describes... he's crying out, just like the psalmist was... the tone and tenor of the music mysteriously captures this confused and troubled place... **[PLAY SONG SLIDE SHOW]**

**Been there? PAUSE...** Me too... It's a basic human cry... "Hear my prayer and my pleading oh Lord... do not remain silent" And in response, God does not remain silent. God speaks a word... and his word brings life. In the second leg of this spiritual journey we hear God's responsive word... Stravinsky changes the tone of the music as we hear the words of Psalm 40... **[READ SLOWLY W/PAUSES and background Stravinsky]**

"I waited expectantly upon the Lord,  
and he reached down to me,  
and he heard my prayers;

And he led me out of the lake of misery.  
And out of the dregs of mud.

And he set my feet upon a rock,

And directed my steps.

And he has put in my mouth a new song,  
A hymn to our God.

Many will see and fear,  
And will hope in the Lord.

Psalm 40:1-3

God comes to you in your time of need and he lifts you up... he sets you in a solid place... no more quicksand... and then shows you the way home... and give you a new life... he puts a new song in our mouths. We get to see him... to fear/know him... and we have hope!

**PAUSE...** One of Stravinsky's biographers once wrote, "No one could write such a work without a very secure, rock like, religious faith." Francis Routh

Can the same thing be said of the 'work' that is your life? Stravinsky knew the meaning of the words of this psalm. Do you?

**PAUSE...** This is the life that is offered to us through Jesus Christ. New life... hope. When we were unable to get ourselves out of our mess, God came into our mess... entered into our world and helped us up and out. Jesus Christ, the one who made a new way, cut a new path, sung a new song, is God's hand reaching out to you, saying, I'll help you. And once you've been helped your life changes. First of all its filled with gratitude to God for his grace... his uncovenanted mercies... and then its more. Its not just a 'thanks for getting me out of that mess' its forward looking as well... especially... its an introduction to a whole new way of living... an ongoing relationship with God.

Something very personal, very intimate and very real. Something that God's community is called to together. That something includes a lot of things, like peace, a sense of security, wisdom to make good choices in life,

a source of inspiration and creativity, etc... but one overarching component is something called Praise!... as we know God, for what he's done and what he's doing, we find our heart drawn into this deeply profound need to express praise to him.

It's something that every single human being created is made to experience. The joy of praise is a huge part of who you were ultimately created to be! It's overwhelming if you've ever experienced it... it's more than that feeling of love you have for another person... when you express praise toward another human being... it's greater than the adulation you feel in a roaring sports stadium, or at a U2 Concert... it's simply beyond words. And music, for reasons best understood by God, is a powerful vehicle for releasing that praise.

Stravinsky understood the power of music in terms of its ability to connect us to the mysteries of God. "The church knew what the psalmist knew; Music praises God. Music is as well or better able to praise him than the building of a church and all its decorations; it is the church's greatest ornament." Conversation with Igor Stravinsky, Stravinsky and Craft And in another place he says, "Music comes to reveal itself as a form of communion with our fellow man – and with the Supreme Being." Poetics of Music, Igor Stravinsky Somehow, through the mystery of music and how it connects to our souls, we are able to connect to the heart and soul of God. I believe that this is what music was ultimately created for.

When once asked about the relationship between God and music Stravinsky sort of stumbled in his response... as though the answer were either too obvious or too mysteriously incomprehensible. He then went on to say that God created music and spoke of how he imagined the great symphony that must have been playing as God was creating the earth. It was cool to think of that image. It made me wonder what kind of heavenly music is playing in the heart of God even now as he works in the

world. As God creates faith in your heart or mine... as he creates ideas and products through your life... as he creates new life when we have babies... **PAUSE**... what a beautiful sound that must be... for those of us with ears to hear.

I think Stravinsky heard that music... when asked about the origin of his innovative compositions he said, "Only God can create. I make music from music." Stravinsky's Mass, a Notebook, Craft **PAUSE**... Can you hear it?

Any way... back to praise!... we were meant for it and Stravinsky aimed to capture it in the last leg of his Symphony of the Psalms journey. The psalm he used was psalm 150...

### Alleluia

Praise the Lord in his sanctuary  
Praise him in the mightiness of his power  
Praise him for his great powers  
Praise him according to the multitude of his magnitudes  
Praise him with the sound of trumpets  
Praise him with drums and with dance  
Praise him with strings and with pipes  
Praise him with resounding cymbals  
Praise him with cymbals of jubilation  
All that have life and breath, praise the Lord

### Psalm 150

Here's just a small portion of the praise filled third leg of the symphony of Psalms.

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