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## FUGUE IN NEOCLASSICISM: THEMATIC PROCESSES IN THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF IGOR STRAVINSKY'S *SYMPHONY OF PSALMS*

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**Abstract:** In 20th-century music, the fugue became a relatively frequent subject of interest for many composers. Neoclassicism, as a broad artistic movement in the first half of the 20th century within the framework of post-tonal music, contributed to the transcendence of the fugue genre, which is often characterized as “unconventional.” The second movement of Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* serves as a representative example of a neoclassical fugue.

This study relies on the hypothesis that thematic processes serve as a means of achieving intensification in the selected example of a neoclassical fugue. The methods of achieving intensification within the layered thematic texture can be summarized as follows: a gradual departure from the basic form of the theme to the point of its most intensive transformation; changes in the temporal spacing between statements of the theme, i.e., changes and convergence in the imitation interval. The wide spectrum of diverse thematic modifications, spanning between two extremes, can be classified into four categories that are part of the same process: the basic form of the theme, variation of the theme, division of the theme, and transformation of the theme. By relying on Sposobin's general system of thematic development, it is possible to conclude that these modifications establish a hierarchical relationship directed toward increasing the dynamism of the musical flow. In addition to these theme modifications, changes in the temporal interval between the theme and its answer are also present in the musical example, which can lead to a change in the type of imitation according to a classification characteristic of Serbian music theory (Peričić, Živković), and consequently to a rise in tension in the musical flow.

**Keywords:** Fugue, Neoclassicism, thematic processes, Igor Stravinsky.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the term *fugue* has been widely used among musicians in academic, pedagogical, and compositional practice since the late Middle Ages, there is no agreement on the characteristics that define its meaning in the context of music theory (Walker, 2001). This polysemy of the concept can be distilled into several possible categories: the fugue as a musical composition based on the consistent use of the imitative technique; the fugue as a musical form (Peričić, 1998; Živković, 1991); and the fugue as a musical genre (Walker, 2001). Despite often conflicting opinions, the British theorist and musicologist Donald Tovey (Donald Francis Tovey) emphasizes that the prevailing view among contemporary music theorists is that the fugue is not a definitive musical form but rather a compositional technique based on the imitative presentation of thematic material (Tovey, 1962: 17). In the broader sense of the term, the only characteristic common to all fugues is the continuous use of the imitative technique (Walker, 2001).

The abandonment of the tonal paradigm leads to the erasure of the seemingly inseparable connection between the fugue and tonality—a link that had been continually affirmed up to the nineteenth century. Consequently, the transcendence of the fugue genre in the twentieth century has often been characterized as “unconventional.” The relatively frequent appearance of the fugue in the first half of the twentieth century was closely linked to the spirit of the age as well as to historical and theoretical circumstances. The first reason for the reappearance of the fugue—which is regarded as the representative and most complex form of the polyphonic style—is the diminished role of tonal harmony, making it more natural for the musical texture to be characterized by polyphony rather than homophony (Walker, 2001).

The French theorist, pedagogue, conductor, and composer René Leibowitz observes: “We are confronted with a historical moment comparable to the transition from modal music to tonal music”. As the modal system ultimately proved incapable of coherently encompassing certain polyphonic achievements, so the tonal system has become insufficient for understanding certain polyphonic phenomena (Leibowitz, 1949: 74–75).

The second reason for the frequent presence of the fugue in twentieth-century music is the existence of neoclassicism as the dominant artistic movement in the first half of the twentieth century (Difruk, 1982: 143). By “neoclassicism” one means a broad artistic movement under whose influence composers imitate or revive a particular form, genre, or style of the past; in other words, they revive music that predates the Romantic era. Thus, neoclassical composers often return to Classical or Baroque models of polyphonic or homophonic structure, among

which the fugue—whether conceived as form, genre, style, or compositional procedure—is frequently represented (Shaffer, 2010).

A work often cited as one of the most representative examples of the neoclassical fugue (Walker, 2001) is the fugue from Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) composed by one of the most influential representatives of musical modernism from the last two centuries (Feng, 2023, p. 22). This work was composed in 1930 and belongs to the composer’s neoclassical period according to the generally accepted categorization by musicologists. It was premiered in Brussels on 13 December of the same year (Campbell, O’Hagan, 2021, p. 9).

## 2. THEMATIC PROCESSES IN THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF IGOR STRAVINSKY’S *SYMPHONY OF PSALMS*

The second movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* is conceived as a double fugue, articulated in three parts: the exposition of the first and second subjects (mm. 1–51), the development of both subjects (mm. 52–70), and the concluding section (mm. 71–88). Within both the exposition and the development, the first and second subjects are treated in discrete segments, whereas the final section features their simultaneous presentation. Alluding to the gradational structure between the fugue’s constituent parts, Stravinsky suggested in interviews with Robert Craft that the fugue resembles an inverted pyramid in structure (Stravinsky, Craft: 76). This architecture is visually summarized in Table 1. The first two columns outline the formal structure of the movement (its parts and sections). Given the double fugue structure, the column titled “Subject treatment” is divided into two sub-columns—“Subject I” and “Subject II”—enabling an analytical trace of thematic transformations based on the following categories: basic form, variation, segmentation, and transformation across both thematic materials. The symbol “/” denotes the absence of a particular thematic material in a given segment. The column titled “Imitation” distinguishes the types of imitation present in the successive entries of the subjects within each part/section; “/” indicates the absence of imitation. The “Gradation” column highlights the direction of increasing musical tension as a result of the interaction of the aforementioned parameters (subject structure and type of imitation). This gradation, on the thematic level, can be observed through the relationship between adjacent parts and sections, and thus the structural framework of the present analysis follows the temporal unfolding of sections within the second movement of Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*.

**Table 1: Thematic Processes and Formal Structure of the Second Movement of Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms***

Part	Exposition mm. 1-51		Development mm. 52-70		Final section mm. 71-88
Section	Exposition of Subject I (mm. 1-29)	Exposition of Subject II (mm. 29-51)	Development of Subject II (mm. 52-60)	Development of Subject I (mm. 61-70)	Simultaneous entry of I and II Subject
Subject treatment	Subject I	Basic form	/	Segmentation	Segmentation
	Subject II	/	Basic form	Variation	Transformation
Imitation	Subject I	Natural	/	Artificial	Artificial
	Subject II	/	Natural	Artificial	/
Gradation	—————				

Source: Author

The fugue’s exposition is divided into two sections. The first part introduces Subject I in the woodwind section, while the second incorporates the choir to present Subject II. In both sections, the subjects are initially presented in their original form via strict natural imitation. (In Serbian music theory, a distinction is made between *natural imitation*—in which the second voice enters with the subject only after the first has completed its statement—and *artificial, canonic, or stretto imitation*, in which the second voice enters with the subject before the first voice has completed its statement.)

The exposition of Subject I (mm. 1-28) begins with a successive entry of voices, each introducing the subject. A notable feature of this section is its relatively narrow pitch range, restricted to solo woodwinds: first and second oboes, and first and third flutes. This opening section is characterized by strict natural imitation without a linking tone, adhering closely to the model of literal thematic presentation. Following the entry of Subject I in the first oboe

(mm. 1-5) in C major in the second octave, the response appears a fifth above (in G) in the first flute (mm. 6-10), entailing a modulation from the initial tonic center (in C). After the subject presentation in the first two voices, an internal episode (mm. 11-12) follows, based on the final motive of Subject I (in the flute) and the countersubject (in the oboe).

The third appearance of the subject occurs in the lowest voice of the exposition, in the second flute (mm. 13-17), returning to the original pitch level and restoring the tonic center in C. In mm. 16-17, slight alterations to the subject arise, primarily due to the instrumental range limitations; the lower voice in this latent polyphony is transposed an octave upward, maintaining the thematic identity. The answer, a fifth above, appears in the second oboe (mm. 18-23), establishing a new tonal centrality in G.

The next section – the exposition of Subject II – mirrors the earlier approach but is marked by strict natural imitation with a linking tone. Unlike Subject I, the thematic material is entrusted to the choir. The subject is presented in descending order of vocal entry – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – matching the downward intervallic and melodic trajectory (catabasis) of the subject's opening. Though this study does not focus on text-music relationships, it is noteworthy that Stravinsky himself emphasized the use of Latin rather than a contemporary language, as this created a more distanced and impersonal expressive environment in which the music could remain independent from the text (Rovner, 2020, p. 32).

This section begins with the statement of the subject (dux) in the soprano (mm. 29-33) in E-flat minor, followed by the answer (comes) at the dominant in the alto (mm. 33-37), modulating to B-flat minor in m. 32. An internal episode (mm. 37-38), based on motivic material from Subject II, functions as a return to the original tonal center (E-flat minor). A re-entry of the subject in E-flat minor appears in the tenor (mm. 39-43), followed by another answer in the dominant (mm. 43-46). In accordance with Baroque fugal practice, an external episode (mm. 49-51) follows, further developing Subject II material. Here, the male choir (tenor and bass) carries the thematic material, while the female voices (soprano and alto) are silent. This episode features increasing modulatory frequency with brief shifts to D-flat major (m. 49), E minor (m. 50), and back to the subdominant E-flat minor (m. 51).

Following the strict presentation of both subjects in natural imitation, musical tension intensifies in the development part (mm. 52-70). This intensification arises through the use of *stretto*, which shortens the temporal interval between subject entries, along with successive thematic variation and segmentation, introducing greater instability into the musical fabric. The development comprises two sections. In contrast to the exposition, the first developmental section (mm. 52-60) elaborates Subject II, while the second (mm. 61-70) focuses on Subject I.

The first section of the development (mm. 52-60) begins with an a cappella choir treatment of subject II in descending order – soprano, alto, tenor, bass (Example 1). Its key feature is the *stretto*: a reduced temporal distance between entries (equivalent now to a quarter note), resulting in significant voice overlap. This polyphonic convergence reduces the perceptibility of the subject as an independent entity (Zatkalik, Vlajić, Medić, 2003). A second feature is the successive variation of the subject in each voice, producing a kind of deformation. These variations affect all four subject statements, with each voice presenting a distinct variant. Modifications include changes in rhythmic duration, interpolation or omission of tones, and metric displacement of motives. Variants of motives “c<sub>1</sub>,” “c<sub>2</sub>,” “c<sub>3</sub>,” “c<sub>4</sub>,” “d<sub>1</sub>,” “d<sub>2</sub>,” “d<sub>3</sub>,” etc., differ in duration, number of pitches, and metric placement. While the “c” motive variants follow a top-down (soprano to bass) order, the subsequent “d” and “e” motives appear in altered sequences—soprano, bass, alto, tenor. Measure 55 features the simultaneous appearance of “d<sub>1</sub>,” “d<sub>2</sub>,” and “e.” This variation technique resembles a specific kind of stratification, defined as metric displacement of repeating motives or chords according to independently varying cycles (Van den Toorn, 2023, pp. 3-4).

**Example 1: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, Second Movement, mm. 52–59 – First Subsection of the Development**

52  
Soprani Et - sta - tu - it su - per pa - tram pe - des me - os: et di -  
Alti Et sta - tu - it su - per pe - tram pe - des me - os:  
Tenori Et sta - tu - it su - per pe - tram  
Bassi Et sta - tu it su - per pe - tram pe - des me - os:

57  
S. re - xit gres - sus, gres -  
A. et di - re - xit gres -  
T. pe - des me - os: et ti -  
B. et di re - xit gres -

Source: Author

The second section (mm. 61-70) develops the “head” of Subject I (its initial motive), essentially fragmenting the theme. It is presented in artificial imitation, which could be described as a “false *stretto*” (Example 2). This passage begins with ascending voice entries: bass trombone (m. 61), horn in F (m. 63), clarinet (m. 64), and oboe (m. 65). After the horn’s presentation of motive “as” (m. 63), imitation follows in the clarinet and oboe (mm. 64-65). A defining feature is the successive diminution and fragmentation of the motive (“a<sub>6</sub>,” “a” and “b<sub>5</sub>”) aimed at achieving a synchronous cessation of musical activity across all participating voices—although other motivic techniques may also be at play.

An external episode (mm. 66-70) follows, featuring artificial imitation in descending voice order – flute, oboe, horn – beginning with motive “f,” which shares rhythmic-melodic traits with motive “a” (e.g., identical rhythm, initial third, and inverted melodic contour). This is followed by motive “b” (from the countersubject). A full-bar rest in all parts at m. 70—after a stretch of continuous polyphony—serves as a highly effective structural caesura, marking the transition from development to the concluding section of the fugue.

**Example 2: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*, Second Movement, mm. 61-70**

61  
Flute  
Oboe  
Clarinet in Bb  
Horn in F  
Bass Trombone  
p: ma marcato

Source: Author

After the aforementioned caesura in the musical flow, the **final section** of the fugue follows, representing the movement's apex. It is characterized by the simultaneous entrance of choir and orchestra, presenting both Subject I and Subject II together at differing pitch levels, in fortissimo (ff). At the thematic level, the climax is achieved through the transformation of Subject II, as well as the convergence—or mutual approximation—of the two thematic materials (i.e., a reduction in the temporal interval of imitation). The transformed subject form represents the highest degree of thematic contrast and material alteration; accordingly, domestic literature has termed this the “derived contrast” (Zatkalik, Vlajić, Medić, 2003). After the simultaneous statement of the transformed Subject II with its “false *stretto*” embedding the head of Subject I (mm. 71-77), an episode ensues (mm. 78-83), followed by a coda (mm. 84-88), which concludes the entire movement.

Subject I appears here in a varied guise: the eighth-note figure that is prominent in the subject's basic shape undergoes fragmentation by repeated articulation of the same value. The sixteenth-note motion inherent in the subject is rhythmically altered to establish a continuous dotted rhythm (dotted sixteenth–thirty-second note). One also observes thematic segmentation, since Subject I now spans two measures instead of five. The head of Subject I (mm. 71-72) enters in a false *stretto* imitation across the trumpet parts. In contrast to the second section of the development—also based on Subject I material—here the temporal interval of imitation is further reduced, heightening the effect of gradation (development II: whole-note spacing; final fugue: half-note spacing). Three voices carry Subject I's material—one in the cello/bass duo and two in the trumpets. The final presentation of the head of Subject I features an ascending entry in successive tonal centers: in G, in B, and in C.

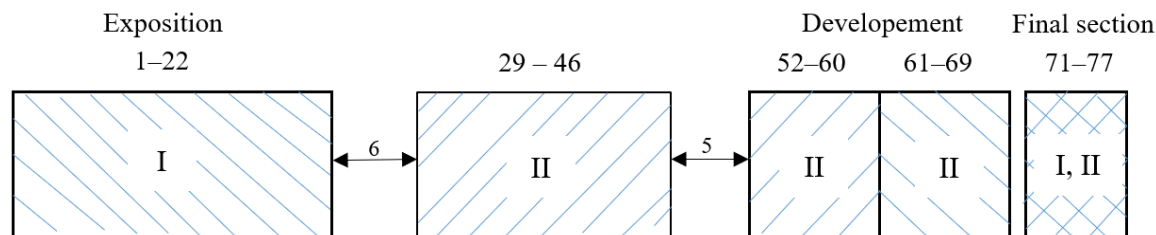
A striking contrast in the musical flow is achieved by the simultaneous appearance of the transformed Subject II (mm. 71-77). Although one might debate whether this material is entirely derived from pre-existing motifs or partly novel, an evident high degree of equivalence exists between certain motives, especially at the openings and closings of the subjects. Of course, such perceived equivalence partly reflects our analytical impulse towards economy—our desire to reduce the musical stream's informational richness to the fewest categories possible (Ibid.). The “derived contrast” effect in the musical flow is further intensified by: the synchronous entry of the transformed subject in all voices—functioning homophonically if considered out of context—and the simultaneous presence of Subject I and Subject II at different pitch levels (in G and in B).

An external episode follows (mm. 78-83), built on the sequential repetition of the last two measures of the transformed subject, transposed down by a second each time. The movement culminates in a coda in which the ostinato of Subject I's initial motive appears in the cello and bass, while a variant of Subject II's motive is sustained by the choir. Subject I's opening motive is stated literally, whereas Subject II's initial motive undergoes continuous variation—presumably in response to the textual demands of the Latin psalmic source.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In the course of this study, the thematic processes within the second movement of Igor Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms have been examined. Throughout the musical flow, gradual modifications of the subjects are evident, leading to ever-greater degrees of their transformation and ever-shorter temporal intervals of imitation: in the movement's exposition, Subjects I and II are presented in their basic form through natural imitation; in the first section of the development, material from Subject II is notably varied; while in the next section, Subject I is segmented through artificial imitation. At the movement's climax – in the fugue's concluding section – the simultaneous appearance of the transformed Subject II and the modified opening (i.e., the “head” of Subject I) in a false three-voice *stretto* is especially striking. A convergence of the “fields” of Subjects I and II is also apparent in the musical flow: by “fields” we mean those segments of the musical stream in which each subject is consistently articulated. One observes their gradual rapprochement and eventual “integration” at the fugue's conclusion, marked by the simultaneous statement of both subjects (Scheme 1). Such analytical observations corroborate the validity of those authors who speak of the perfect balance between choir and orchestra present in this section (Farcas, 2022, p. 187), or even of a veritable apotheosis of sacred and concert music practice within it (Moody, 2020, p. 48).

**Scheme 1 illustrates the convergence of the “fields” of Subjects I and II in the second movement of Igor Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms.**



Source: Author

In Stravinsky’s neoclassical fugue, one observes a diverse array of thematic modification techniques. Incremental alterations to the subject’s fabric occur to a markedly greater extent than in the practices of Baroque composers. It is reasonable to surmise that the heightened complexity of these thematic processes—and the prominent emphasis on subject transformation—serves, in the context of the neoclassical fugue, as a compensatory device for the diminished role of tonal harmony, which had been a crucial determinant of musical flow in earlier epochs.

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