

## Program Notes

The Pines of Rome (1924).....Ottorino Respighi

*Here is an elegant way of writing, in the sense of the rhetoric of another day; a beautiful harmonizing; a splendid method of orchestration; and with these is a desire to be agreeable, well-mannered, and respectable at all costs.*

~~Guido M. Gatti, on the music of Respighi

Ottorino Respighi was born in 1879 in Bologna, Italy, into a family of trained musicians. At the age of twelve he began his own formal musical education at the *Liceo Musicale*, where he studied for ten years, taking his diploma in violin performance. At the end of this period, he made summer visits to St. Petersburg, where he studied with Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov. From there, he moved to Berlin and studied with Max Bruch. During these years, he was a performer as well as a composer, playing violin, viola, and piano. He finally settled down in Rome in 1913 to a life of composition and education. As an educator, he achieved the status of director of Santa Cecilia Conservatory from 1924 to 1926. He cut short his tenure there to pursue full-time his composition and performance career.

Respighi's catalog of works includes no fewer than eight operas, nearly fifty songs, over half a dozen concertos, and even a pair of string quartets, yet, unfortunately, it doesn't matter. Respighi will always be remembered for his trilogy of Roman tone poems—*Fountains of Rome* (1916), *Pines of Rome* (1924), and *Roman Festivals* (1929)—whose splashy theatrics display his considerable orchestral gifts and coloristic sense to remarkable advantage.

*I know I shouldn't like his music; yet I have a sneaking regard for it....it is often just film music, vulgar.*

This is typical of the sort of comment one would read in reviews of Respighi's music a few years ago. It was (and, to some extent, it still is) fashionable among "politically correct" musical opinion-makers to belittle and patronize Respighi's music. They considered it to be strident or derivative and accused Respighi of being just a *pasticheur* lacking a distinctive, personal style. Most damaging of all, he was accused of being a supporter of Mussolini.

The truth is that the shy and retiring Respighi was not interested in politics; he preferred to be left alone to get on with his music. Yet, he was condemned because his music was associated with the fascist cause. Even in 1979, his centenary celebrations met with Italian political opposition. It was only in 1986, on the 50th anniversary of his death that which the tide began to turn.

In *Pines of Rome*, Respighi uses nature as a launching pad, in order to recall memories and visions. The century-old trees that so naturally overlook the Roman landscape become witness for the most important dealings in everyday Roman life. The *Pines of Rome* consists of four connected sections, whose description is printed as a preface to the score:

1. *The Pines of the Villa Borghese*. Children are at play in the pine grove of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of “Ring around a Rosy”; mimicking marching soldiers and battles; twittering and shrieking like swallows at evening; and they disappear. Suddenly the scene changes to—

2. *The Pines near a Catacomb*. We see the shadows of the pines, which overhang the entrance of a catacomb. From the depths rises a chant which reechoes solemnly, like a hymn, and is then mysteriously silenced.

3. *The Pines of the Janiculum*. There is a thrill in the air. The full moon reveals the profile of the pines of Gianicolo’s Hill. A nightingale sing (represented by a gramophone record of a nightingale song, heard from the orchestra).

4. *The Pines of the Appian Way*. Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of innumerable steps. To the poet’s phantasy [sic] appears a vision of past glories; trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul advances brilliantly in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph the Capitoline Hill.

Concerto for Violin in D major, Op. 6 (1820).....Niccolò Paganini

*His melody is the great Italian melody, but alive with an ardor generally more passionate than that which one finds in the most beautiful pages of the dramatic composers of this country. His harmony is always clear, simple, and of an extraordinary sonority.*

~~Hector Berlioz

*I am not handsome, but when women hear me play, they come crawling to my feet.*

~~ Niccolò Paganini

The quotes above are but two accounts of how Paganini was viewed. Some loved him, as did Berlioz; yet, nobody loved Paganini as much as Paganini. Many consider him as the greatest violinist who ever lived. He was also scorned in his lifetime by such prominent musicians as Ludwig Spohr, who found his playing and compositions shallow and vulgar, yet even Spohr had to admit that he had raised violin technique to a new level. With Paganini began the myth of the virtuoso soloist as some sort of superman. In his day, this manifested itself as a rumor that he had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for boundless virtuosity; a rumor that Paganini did little to quell.

Paganini, first and foremost a consummate showman, specialized in pleasing crowds. A favorite trick was to outfit his violin with an old and frayed string, so that it would break in the middle of a performance. He would then finish the piece on the remaining three strings, to thunderous applause.

Always careful to maintain his status for unrivaled technical ability, Paganini composed several works designed to prove himself to unsurpassed advantage, but allowed only a few to be published, fearing that to do so would divulge his most important secrets. Although it was composed sometime between 1811 and 1815, the First Concerto was not published until after his death in 1840.

In form, the *Concerto* recalls those of composers of the Classical Period, notably Mozart, rather than the more contemporary works of Beethoven. The orchestral introduction is so long that it leaves the audience wondering if perhaps the soloist is there merely for decoration. Once the violin enters, however, there is immediately no question about his/her true purpose. The *Concerto* may not be the most musically imaginative ever written, but there is no question about the opportunities it affords a gifted soloist to exhibit technical prowess.

The first movement, in the usual sonata form gives the soloist every opportunity to play the dazzling virtuoso. The second movement owes its existence to an especially moving dramatic performance by the Italian actor Demarini, according to Stephen Stratton, a Paganini biographer. Sometimes billed as the *Prison Scene*, it was apparently composed after Paganini witnessed the dramatic scene in which Demarini portrays a man unfairly imprisoned and prays to God for freedom through death. It is this tragic portrayal that caused composer and historian William Gardiner (1770-1883) to exclaim that he heard “tones more than human, which seemed to be wrung from the deepest anguish of a broken heart.” The third movement, a Rondo, is lengthy, as originally written, teeming with technical pitfalls.

Capriccio Italien, Op. 45 (1880)..... Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

*How can one express the indefinable sensations that one experiences while writing an instrumental composition that has no definite subject? It is a purely lyrical process. It is a musical confession of the soul, which unburdens itself through sounds just as a lyric poet expresses himself through poetry... As the poet Heine said, 'Where words leave off, music begins.*

~~Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky's immense popularity belies the fact that his instrumental compositions are ad hoc in a number of ways. Respected now for his Slavic soulfulness (and described by an admiring Igor Stravinsky as “the most Russian of us all”), he was thought by many of his fellow Russian composers as too Westernized.

Russian composers loved southern Europe. The “Father of Russian Music,” Mikhail Glinka, wrote two colorful overtures on Spanish themes in 1845 and ever since his followers felt free to indulge their love for the Mediterranean. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote a *Capriccio Espagnol* in 1887, Borodin and Glazunov wrote *alla Spagnuola* and overtures on Greek themes, and Tchaikovsky found release from his worries under the blue skies of Italy. Two of his most colorful works show him relaxing in Italian

warmth— the vibrant string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* and the tuneful, perennially popular *Capriccio Italien*.

Tchaikovsky and his brother Modest arrived in Rome in December 1879. The previous months had been stressful but as Tchaikovsky relaxed and absorbed the Roman atmosphere his thoughts returned to composition. By late January 1880 he was writing to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck about an *Italian Fantasia* he was planning, based on Glinka's second Spanish Overture. By the next month it had become an *Italian Suite* and soon after that it was fully sketched out. For once, Tchaikovsky was happy with one of his own works. "I predict a good future for my *Capriccio*, he wrote, with unusual optimism. It will be effective thanks to the delightful Italian themes which I managed to collect, partly from anthologies and partly with my own ears in the streets." It was orchestrated in May, receiving its final title of *Capriccio Italien* at the same time, and was premiered to great acclaim in Moscow that December.

After the introduction section, the strings sing a lyrical, yet melancholy tune, which the orchestra then develops. Later the oboes announce, in thirds, a somewhat happier and simple folk melody. This, too, is elaborately developed, before the tempo changes and violins and flutes bring in yet another tune. This promptly subsides as a march section begins, followed by a return of the opening theme. There is a transition to a lively tarantella, then another bright theme, and finally the Presto section, with a second tarantella motive leading to a brilliant close.

Tchaikovsky's prediction was correct; the *Capriccio* is wonderfully effective and highly tuneful. There is no reason to doubt that the melodies are genuinely Italian, although only two have been positively identified— the opening fanfare, which, according to Modest, could be heard by the brothers each morning from a barrack adjacent to their hotel, and the closing tarantella, known in Italy as *Cicuzza*. Tchaikovsky simply fits them together and scores them in his own distinctively flamboyant way, with just a few splashes of folk-color such as the brief bagpipe-like oboe passage in the final tarantella. It is not "authentic," it is not deep, and neither was it meant to be. *Capriccio Italien* is simply Tchaikovsky's way of saying "come relax and enjoy some wonderful music in the Italian sunshine."

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