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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

## *RSO Chamber Players*

Although divided by centuries, the composers whose music is presented on this afternoon's program share much in common, not least that all are Italians whose music is fully alive with the Italian lyrical spirit. This lyricism, although best-known in Italian opera, is not at all foreign to these instrumental compositions. And, whereas Vivaldi, Pergolesi, and Respighi all composed operas, their reputations today certainly do not rest on their works in this field alone. In addition to these similarities, Respighi was very much interested in early music, and, although he was a twentieth-century composer, cherished the eighteenth-century realm inhabited by Vivaldi and Pergolesi as well as the musical worlds that would have seemed as ancient in their day as they did in Respighi's own.

### **Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)**

*Three Botticelli Pictures*

*Ancient Airs and Dances Suite No. 3*

For two centuries from 1700 to 1900, opera had seemed the only means of expression for Italian composers. Especially after the dawn of the nineteenth century, a string of talented composers including Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini guided Italian opera through its most fruitful years, often at the sacrifice of instrumental music. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Ottorino Respighi and his generation of composers set out to challenge the assumption that Italians were for some reason incapable of writing instrumental music. While Respighi and his contemporaries did not abandon opera, they expanded their palettes to include instrumental genres like symphonies, tone poems, concerti, ballet, and chamber music. In fact, some of their greatest works can be found in these instrumental genres. As a result of their efforts, there is today a new appreciation for instrumental music by Italian composers – an appreciation which has brought attention to the composers of Respighi's generation as well as those of earlier and later generations.

Ottorino Respighi was born in 1879 in Bologna, a city in northern Italy with a rich history dating back to the Renaissance, Middle Ages, and even into ancient times. It was in Bologna that Respighi first studied composition with Luigi Torchi and Giuseppe Martucci. Whereas the latter had been one of the instigators in the Italian

instrumental movement that had culminated with Respighi's generation, the former was also a scholar of early music and helped to inspire Respighi's love for the musical past. After graduating from the conservatory in Bologna, Respighi travelled to Russia where he continued his composition studies with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, by then the established master of Russian music. From Rimsky-Korsakov, Respighi inherited the brilliant orchestral colors that are so readily identified with his music. Respighi spent further years abroad as a performer before returning to Italy to focus more intensely on composition.

A teaching appointment brought Respighi to Rome in 1913, and it was in the Italian capitol that he spent the remainder of his life and career. In 1917, Respighi made his most important breakthrough with the premiere of his *Fountains of Rome*, the first in a trilogy of tone poems depicting the sights and scenery of Rome. Its sequels *Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals* followed over the next decade, and it is these three orchestral works upon which Respighi's reputation primarily rests today. More characteristic of Respighi's compositional style, however, are the many works in which Respighi approached Renaissance and Baroque devices through a modern lens. Among these works are the three suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances*, the *Botticelli Pictures*, and what must be one of Respighi's finest works – the charming orchestral suite known as *The Birds*. In each of these works, Respighi borrows melodic material from music that is centuries old, and then applies his distinct orchestral sound to create something at once new and old. Respighi was also noted for using medieval church modes – those which predated tonality – to create beautiful works in classical genres like the concerto and string quartet, including his *Concerto Gregoriano* for violin and orchestra and his *Quartetto Dorico*. A musicologist as well as a composer, Respighi also published editions of music by Italian Baroque masters like Claudio Monteverdi and Antonio Vivaldi; he additionally made a series of arrangements for modern ensembles of music by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Respighi distrusted the modern approach that many of his contemporaries were then taking in their compositions. In 1932, he and nine of his fellow Italian composers signed a manifesto pledging themselves to emotional expression and denouncing what they perceived as the cerebral emphasis in modern music. Their manifesto read, "We are against this art which cannot have and does not have any human content... the romanticism of yesterday will again be the romanticism of tomorrow." Although Respighi would die within just a few years in 1936, throughout his life he had already proven his allegiance to these words through the

continuity with the past and the expressive beauty he continually sought in his music.

Ottorino Respighi composed his *Three Botticelli Pictures* (in Italian, *Trittico botticelliano*) in response to a commission from Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a music patron of several noted twentieth-century composers. Under her patronage, he also conducted the work's premiere on September 28, 1927 in Vienna. Each of its three movements sketches in sound a famous painting by the Italian artist Sandro Botticelli (c.1445-1510). Botticelli was a painter of the early Renaissance who worked in Florence under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici. The first painting depicted is *La Primavera* (*Spring*) in which Respighi awes listeners with his splendid orchestration while taking up many of the pastoral images associated with spring. There are sprightly dance rhythms, the horn calls of shepherds, and the songs of birds evoked in this beautiful recreation of the painting by Botticelli. In the second movement, Respighi turns his attention to Botticelli's *L'adorazione dei Magi* (*Adoration of the Magi*), a depiction of the nativity story's Three Wise Men and other wise men from the Medici family worshiping the newborn Jesus at the manger. For his depiction in sound, Respighi quotes the medieval hymn *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* still well-known today as *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. A lesser-known reference is also made to the Italian Christmas tune *Tu scendi dalle stelle* (*You descend from the stars*). The orchestration is delicate and colorful with notable solos by flute and bassoon. The third movement recreates *La nascita di Venere* (*The Birth of Venus*), perhaps Botticelli's most famous painting where the unclothed Venus rises from the sea atop a scallop shell. The orchestration is light and nimble with a touch of familiar seafaring imagery and the breeze of the west wind, previously depicted by Botticelli as the god Zephyr.

Respighi composed his First Suite of *Ancient Airs and Dances* (in Italian, *Antiche arie e danze*) in 1917. The Third Suite from this collection, heard on this afternoon's program, was written in 1931. Respighi based each of the four movements from this Third Suite on music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries originally written for guitar and lute – a plucked string instrument similar to the guitar that was popular with both professional and amateur musicians in those centuries. The first movement is called *Italiana*, and it is a graceful triple meter dance. The melody quoted by Respighi is believed to be anonymous, although some sources argue there are also traces of a second dance composed by the Italian lutenist Santino Garsi da Parma (1542-1604). The second movement is titled *Arie di Corte* (*Courtly Airs*) and it is a miniature suite in itself. This movement is in seven short sections based on lute

songs by the Burgundian lutenist and anthologist Jean-Baptiste Besard (c.1567-c.1625). Song titles include "It is Sad to Be in Love with You," "Farewell Forever, Shepherdess," "The Skiff of Love," and "If It is for My Innocence that You Love Me." Respighi calls his third movement *Siciliana*, and he subjects the initial theme to a series of variations. Like the theme of the first movement, its source is also anonymous. The fourth and final movement is titled *Passacaglia*, and is a transcription of a work by Count Ludovico Roncalli (1654-1713) found in his 1692 publication *Capricci armonici sopra la chitarra spagnola* (*Harmonic Caprices for the Spanish Guitar*). In the typical Baroque passacaglia, the repeated line would be heard exclusively in the bass, but here the repeated line is passed between groups of instruments. The variations superimposed on this repeated theme build in complexity and intensity until a final release brings to a close the Third Suite of *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

**Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

**Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736)**

Three Concerti

The concerto, a well-known genre today, first emerged in Italy around the turn of the eighteenth century. At the outset, two distinct types of concerti predominated as distinguished by the number of soloists featured. One version was known as the concerto grosso which featured multiple soloists backed by strings or occasionally a fuller orchestral accompaniment. Its development was led by the Italian Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713) and codified in his Twelve Concerti Grossi, Op. 6. The other concerto genre to emerge was the solo concerto, championed by another Italian Antonio Vivaldi. Vivaldi wrote more than three hundred solo concerti throughout his career, featuring a wide array of solo instruments including violin, cello, flute, oboe, bassoon, and others. The explorations of Corelli and Vivaldi in these new genres were quickly followed by other composers so that within a few decades the concerto had become a defining genre of orchestral music.

Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice in 1678. Although his father was a barber by profession, he also played violin at St. Mark's Basilica. It was these youthful interactions with St. Mark's that inspired Vivaldi to follow a dual career as a musician and a Catholic priest. St. Mark's had maintained the grand choral tradition of the Gabriellis and Monteverdi, and certainly this music must have been an inspiration to the young Vivaldi; like his father, he too became a violinist. Vivaldi was also ordained a priest in 1703, but his asthma prevented him from saying Mass, and he instead became a music instructor at the *Ospedale della Pietà*, an orphanage and

boarding school for girls. Led by brilliant instructors like Vivaldi, the *Ospedale* boasted one of Europe's finest collections of musicians, and Vivaldi wrote many of his concerti and operas for its student musicians. A virtuoso violinist himself, Vivaldi also spent his time travelling across Europe, publicizing and performing his works abroad. Among his best-known compositions today are the violin concerti known as *The Four Seasons* and published within his Opus 8, and the Opus 3 collection known as *L'estro armonico* which contains both solo concerti and concerti grossi. Vivaldi achieved international success early in his career with these and other pioneering works, but by his later years Vivaldi's music was seen as outmoded particularly in his native Venice. An unsuccessful move to Vienna in 1740 left Vivaldi impoverished upon his death the following year.

The Flute Concerto in D major, RV 428, is known as *Il gardellino* or in English, "The Goldfinch." *Il gardellino* was published in Amsterdam in 1728 as the third concerto in Vivaldi's Opus 10 set of six concerti for flute. All but one of these six concerti existed in previous versions before their publication as flute concerti within Opus 10. In fact, *Il gardellino* was originally scored for a chamber ensemble of flute, oboe, violin, and bassoon. As its descriptive title implies, *Il gardellino* explores a range of birdsong, especially in the flute's florid singing and the cheery atmosphere heard throughout the concerto.

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi was a younger contemporary to Vivaldi. Also an Italian, Pergolesi like many of the Italian composers of his era wrote in the established genres of opera and sacred music while also exploring the newer genre of the concerto. His most famous works include the opera *La serva padrona* (*The Maid Turned Mistress*) which twenty years after Pergolesi's death caused a scandal in Paris, and his setting of the sacred text *Stabat Mater* called by Charles de Brosses "the master work of Latin music." Owing to his young death at age twenty-six, much of his instrumental music was left unpublished. This includes the set of Six Concertini – miniature concerti – from which this afternoon's Concertino in G major is drawn. Only posthumously were these Six Concertini included in the Collected Edition of Pergolesi. These same Concertini have also been attributed to Count Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer (1692-1766), a Dutch nobleman and an accomplished musician. Regardless of their authorship though, the Concertini have been enjoyed for two centuries and, when Stravinsky looked to the music of Pergolesi for his ballet *Pulcinella*, he used the final movement of the Second Concertino as a model.