

2018 Winter Festival

America, Inspiring: Respighi & Prokofiev

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Chen Yi: *Ge Xu (Antiphony)*. Chen Yi's music fuses Chinese traditions with Western forms and instruments. *Ge Xu* is based on the antiphonal singing with which the Southern Chinese celebrate the Lunar New Year. The piece is about high spirits and hope.

PROKOFIEV: Piano Concerto No. 3. Romanticism, classicism and modernism are finely balanced in Prokofiev's dazzling Third Concerto. The second-movement variations, based on the Baroque gavotte, reveal his quirky melodic gift, while his biting humor surfaces in the finale.

RESPIGHI: *Pines of Rome* and *Fountains of Rome*. Respighi's famous tone poems are brilliant orchestral evocations of the Eternal City. *Fountains* evokes the interplay of water and light at various times of day. The more landscape-oriented *Pines* delves into imagined recollections of Rome's glory days. The brass in the finale will raise the hairs on the back of your neck!

CHEN YI: *Ge Xu (Antiphony)*

CHEN YI

Born: April 4, 1953 in Guangzhou, China. Currently resides in Kansas City, Missouri.

Composed: 1993–94

World Premiere: January 28, 1995, in San Francisco

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 8 minutes

As with other Chinese-American composers, Chen Yi's life and philosophy were formed by China's Cultural Revolution. Her parents were both well-to-do physicians with a keen interest in music. Chen studied both violin and piano from age 3. In the late 1960s, she was sent to the Chinese countryside to do forced labor. The experience was pivotal in connecting her to her homeland, its people, and particularly its music. She has said that without the Cultural Revolution, she might never have discovered the power and potential that lay buried in her musical roots. She has written:

Classical music was forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, but I tried to continue playing. Even when I worked for 12 hours a day as a laborer, carrying hundred-pound loads of rocks and mud for irrigation walls, I would play both simple songs to farmers along with excerpts from the standard western classical repertory. It was during that period that I started thinking about the value of individual lives and the importance of education in society. As an artist living in the United States, I feel strongly that I can improve the understanding between people by sharing my music.

When the Beijing Central Conservatory reopened in 1977, Chen Yi became the first Chinese woman to earn a master's in composition. In 1986, she came to the United States. Working with Mario Davidovsky and Chou Wen-Chung at Columbia University, she earned her doctorate in 1993. She was soon named composer-in-residence of the Women's Philharmonic and two other San Francisco ensembles. Since 1998, she has taught at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. In 2001, Chen was awarded the Charles Ives Living, a \$225,000 prize awarded every three years by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The Women's Philharmonic commissioned *Ge Xu* during her residency. The composer's note explains the work's Chinese connection:

For celebrating the Chinese lunar New Year or mid-autumn festival, Zhuang minority people in Southern China often gather in the field and sing mountain songs in solo, choral or antiphonal forms. In the antiphonal singing, distinct groups or individuals make up the texts in the style of

antithetical couplets, like a competition between the two. This vivid scene inspired me to write music for keeping high spirits and ideal hope alive.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, harp, timpani (doubling clappers), vibraphone, two congas, sustained cymbal, crash cymbals, wood block, tam tam, tom toms, bass drum and strings.

PROKOFIEV: Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontzovka, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, Russia, USSR

Composed: 1921

World Premiere: December 16, 1921, in Chicago. Prokofiev was the soloist; Friedrich Stock conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1967–68 season. Nicolai Petrov was the soloist; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 27 minutes

Beethoven, Prokofiev and the piano concerto

Prokofiev's five piano concertos hold a place of importance in his compositions similar those of Beethoven. Like Beethoven, Prokofiev, who first made a name for himself as a pianist, wrote most of his early keyboard works as a vehicle to display his own brilliant technique. Both Beethoven's and Prokofiev's first two piano concertos are works of comparative youth, representing the earliest flowering of a genius that clearly foretold far greater potential. Neither composer returned to the solo piano concerto late in life. Beethoven's Fifth Concerto, the "Emperor," was completed in 1811 and embodies his middle-period "heroic" style. Prokofiev wrote his Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos in 1931 and 1932, before the great ballets which have become a cornerstone of his reputation.

Prokofiev's first two concertos for piano and orchestra are heavy on youthful exuberance and dazzling technique, while somewhat lighter on formal discipline and effective use of orchestral resources.

Whether by design or by coincidence, however, Prokofiev emulated Beethoven's turning point in his Third Piano Concerto by striking a far more satisfying balance in his own Third Concerto, Op. 26. This piece succeeds both as an orchestral composition and as a solo work. Contemporary with his "Classical" Symphony, the Third Concerto sprang from the same rich vein of musical thought. Like that miniature masterpiece, it required virtually no revision, for in both works Prokofiev struck gold on the first try.

Dedication to a poet

Prokofiev dedicated the Third Concerto to the poet Konstantin Balmont, five of whose texts he had set the same year. Balmont heard portions of the concerto's score as it was nearing completion and reacted by writing a sonnet. Theirs was one of the richest friendships of this period in Prokofiev's life. The composer's biographer Harlow Robinson has described the concerto in comparison to the songs: "Like the Balmont Songs (Op. 36), it balances flashiness and introspection, irony and romanticism, yielding a felicitous synthesis of Prokofiev's harmonic experiments, his rhythmic genius and his instinctive understanding of the possibilities of the piano. Mature and confident, the Third Concerto does not strive to shock, like much of his early piano music."

Russian roots, American gestation, French harvest

Prokofiev finished the Third Concerto two years following his arrival in New York, but it is far more Russian than it is a reflection of his new life in America. Many of the sketches date from his Russian years, and some evidence indicates that certain of its ideas date back as far as 1913. The work was actually completed in France, while Prokofiev sojourned in the coastal Breton village of St. Brevin-les-Pins. In some respects, the concerto is a curious and startling precursor of his later Soviet works; at the same time, it shares the irrepressible energy and dazzling keyboard bravura of the first two concertos, always reminding us what a splendid pianist Prokofiev was.

The composer played the premiere of the Third Concerto with the Chicago Symphony under the direction of Friedrich Stock in 1921. In a letter to Mme. Serge Koussevitzky written shortly beforehand, Prokofiev commented: "My Third Concerto has turned out to be devilishly difficult. I'm

nervous and I'm practicing hard three hours a day."

According to the composer's widow, this initial performance and a subsequent one in New York were baffling to audiences. Within a few years, however, the concerto was enthusiastically received and had become one of Prokofiev's major vehicles for his concert tours. A highly personal work, it lacks the sardonic, mocking qualities of the "Classical" Symphony, to which it is often compared. While it shares with that work a compact structure reflecting more discipline than the two earlier concertos, it achieves a more rewarding balance of drama, whimsy and introspection. The slow-movement Andante with variations highlights Prokofiev's extraordinary gift for melody, and the dazzling finale reveals an odd and delightful kinship with the young, caustic Dmitri Shostakovich.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, castanets, tambourine, strings and solo piano.

RESPIGHI: *Fountains of Rome*

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Born: July 9, 1879, in Bologna, Italy

Died: April 18, 1936, in Rome, Italy

Composed: 1915–16

World Premiere: March 11, 1917, in Rome. Antonio Guarnieri conducted

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 15 minutes

Mention the name Respighi to music-lovers and the immediate, almost Pavlovian, response is likely to be *The Fountains of Rome* or *The Pines of Rome*. These two magnificent tone poems are by far Respighi's most frequently performed works. They identify him rightfully as a programmatic composer whose finest music drew inspiration from landscape, nature and works of art.

Fountains came first, in 1916. Anyone who has visited Rome knows that fountains abound: beautiful sculptural jewels that seem to adorn each public square, street corner and private courtyard. The composer included the following note in the published score: “In this symphonic poem the composer has endeavored to give expression to the sentiments and visions suggested to him by four of Rome’s fountains, contemplated at the hour in which their character is most in harmony with the surrounding landscape, or in which their beauty appears most impressive to the observer.”

He spaces his observations throughout the day, describing in music the Fountain of Valle Giulia at dawn, the Triton Fountain at morning, the Trevi Fountain at midday and the Villa Medici Fountain at sunset. Thus we glimpse not only four different locations but also four ways the sunlight can play upon the spray of water in the fountains and the surrounding cityscape. Always a master at impression, Respighi paints vividly colored pictures: the languid calm of water splashing gently as the sun breaks, followed by the brilliant, flirtatious spray of the Triton. Each musical image prompts thoughts of another facet of Roman life. These fountains are a practical source of water, as well as tourist attractions and works of sculpture. Only Rome boasts so many that are so beautiful; only Rome has inspired such glorious music for her fountains.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta, piano, organ and strings.

RESPIGHI: *The Pines of Rome*

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Composed: 1924

World Premiere: December 14, 1924, at Rome’s Teatro Augusteo. Bernardo Molinari conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1959–60 season; Mathys Abas conducted.

Duration: 23 minutes

Respighi and the Italian operatic tradition

Respighi is deservedly famous for the three tone poems known as his Roman Trilogy: *Fountains of Rome*, *Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*. But he is also part of a great Italian opera tradition. Though his operas *Belfagor* (1923), *La fiamma* (1934) and *Lucrezia* (1937) have never known the success of the tone poems, they link Respighi more directly to the operatic heritage of Verdi, Leoncavallo, Giordano, Mascagni and particularly Puccini. His rich orchestral palette, the ease and plenitude of the melodies and the forthright text-painting all relate *Pines of Rome* to the great theatrical masterpieces of the Italian operatic stage. Respighi's opening section, "The Pines of the Villa Borghese," shares the insouciance of Act II in Puccini's *La bohème*; the magnificent, hair-raising crescendo of "The Pines of the Appian Way" calls to mind, at least momentarily, the great Te Deum scene at the close of *Tosca*'s first act.

Four snapshots of Rome, then and now

Respighi opens *Pines of Rome* at the Villa Borghese, a 17th-century palace with elegant pleasure gardens. Today the building houses masterpieces of Italian painting and sculpture, and the Villa's expansive grounds are one of Rome's most popular public parks. We hear children playing, running this way and that, singing children's ditties. (Respighi asked his wife, who was 15 years his junior, to sing him the nursery songs with which she had grown up; he incorporated some of these Italian tunes into the movement.)

The inner movements of *Pines of Rome* have their own magic, drawing on the timelessness and variety of Rome itself. "Pine Trees near a Catacomb" evokes the somber atmosphere of the underground Christian burial chambers in the second and third centuries. It is a brilliant dramatic stroke: total contrast after the exuberant young life depicted in the opening movement. Respighi's music proceeds in a long, slow crescendo—sedate, serious and march-like, as if we were auditing the prayers of those early Christians.

From this sober section, Respighi moves to the serenity of the great outdoors. The Janiculum is one of

Rome's seven hills. A rhapsodic piano introduction and a clarinet theme establish the scene, far from the hubbub of the central city on a moonlit night. At the end of the movement, we hear the song of a nightingale. In Respighi's day, this interpolation of birdsong was wildly controversial.

The steady build of "Pines of the Appian Way" is one of music's great crescendos, suggesting the approach of Roman legions that tramped those stones two millennia earlier. Respighi's triumphant closing chords, dominated by brass, affirm the might of the Roman Empire.

Pines of Rome is a stunning example of Respighi's expertise in orchestration. He had secured an early foundation in Bologna under the tutelage of Giuseppe Martucci (1856–1909), a disciple of Wagner. Respighi's experience as an orchestral violinist and violist served him especially well in his handling of the strings. For two winters (1901–02 and 1902–03) he worked in St. Petersburg as a violist in the opera orchestra. He took advantage of those sojourns to seek out lessons with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The legendary Russian composer honed Respighi's instinctive sense of orchestral color, and the young Italian started to come into his own.

A momentous premiere

Elsa Respighi, the composer's widow, attended the premiere on December 14, 1924, at Rome's Teatro Augusteo, with Bernardo Molinari on the podium. In her biography of her husband, she recalled: "The hall was packed, the atmosphere electric. At the end of the first part there were protests in the form of booing and hissing which subsided with the sudden *pianissimo* of the second section. The audience was gripped by the second and third parts, while frantic applause such as had never before been heard in the Augusteo drowned the last bars of the poem."

According to Elsa Respighi, *Pines of Rome* was one of the compositions in which her husband was most emotionally involved. His success in immersing us in the beauty of his beloved city is compelling testimony to that involvement.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass

clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, four trombones, timpani, triangle, finger cymbals, Basque tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, glockenspiel, ratchet, celesta, piano, organ, six buccine (Roman trumpets) and strings.

IN THE COMPOSER'S WORDS

The score to *Pines of Rome* includes Respighi's descriptive program for the four sections of his tone poem.

"Pine Trees of the Villa Borghese." Children are at play in the pine groves of Villa Borghese; they dance round in circles, they play at soldiers, marching and fighting, they are wrought up by their own cries like swallows at evening, they come and go in swarms. Suddenly the scene changes to

"Pine Trees Near a Catacomb." We see the shades of the pine trees fringing the entrance to a catacomb. From the depth rises the sound of mournful psalm-singing, floating through the air like a solemn hymn, gradually and mysteriously dispersing.

"Pine Trees of the Janiculum." A quiver runs through the air: the pine trees of the Janiculum stand distinctly outlined in the clear light of a full moon. A nightingale is singing.

"Pines of the Appian Way." Misty dawn on the Appian Way; solitary pine trees guarding the magic landscape; the muffled, ceaseless rhythm of unending footsteps. The poet has a fantastic vision of bygone glories. Trumpets sound and, in the brilliance of the newly risen sun, a consular army bursts forth toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitol.