

MasterWorks 5: Reflections of Romanticism Program Notes

Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 1

Ottorino Respighi (1879 - 1936)

Written: 1917

Movements: Four

Style: Contemporary casting of Renaissance and Baroque styles

Duration: 16 minutes

In spite of all the crazy things that were happening in the musical world in the early part of the twentieth century, some composers were actually doing very nicely writing beautiful and “unobjectionable” music. Ottorino Respighi was one of ten composers who signed a manifesto advocating the idea that music is communication. “We are against art which cannot and does not have any human content and desires to be merely a mechanical demonstration and a cerebral puzzle,” they wrote. “A logical chain binds the past and the future - the romanticism of yesterday will again be the romanticism of tomorrow.”

Respighi made his first big splash in 1916 with his orchestral tone poem, *The Fountains of Rome*. Over the next twelve years, more blockbuster showpieces followed: *The Pines of Rome*, *Church Windows*, and *Roman Festivals*. In each of these, Respighi demonstrated his absolute mastery of writing for the orchestra, a skill he learned from his most influential teacher, Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov (who wrote *Scheherazade*).

Baroque and Renaissance music fascinated Respighi. He arranged a number of lute and keyboard pieces from these periods for orchestra. Keeping the melodies and harmonies intact, he dressed them up in modern orchestral clothing. His *Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 1* is his first attempt at this sort of thing. Eventually he wrote three sets of *Ancient Airs* and a couple of other sets with different titles, such as *Gli uccelli (The Birds)*. As you listen to the four dances in this suite, you will agree with the Italian musicologist Guido Gatti: “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 this is a desire to be agreeable, well mannered, and respectable at all costs.”

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Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Written: 1939-40

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 26 minutes

The movie *Platoon* – using the *Adagio for Strings* – re-introduced the music of Samuel Barber to the general public. He is one of the most important American composers from the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike his peers, he did not consider himself a modernist. His early music combined a Romantic lyricism with a sure handling of Classical forms, much as Brahms had done several generations earlier. His later works, though more dissonant, still retained a sense of rhythmic and tonal direction.

Barber's Violin Concerto, completed in 1940, is a pivotal work, looking nostalgically to the past, but with an eye toward the future. The first two movements of the piece are conservatively "Neo-romantic," while the finale is more dissonant, aggressive, and irregular. The history of the concerto itself probably sheds light on why there is this sudden change of style mid-piece.

Samuel Fels, famous for Fels Naptha Soap and a member of the board of trustees of the Curtis Institute of Music, offered Barber \$1,000—with \$500 paid in advance—to write a violin concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli. Barber worked on the concerto while he was in Switzerland and sent the first two movements to Briselli. The young violinist complained that they were "too simple and not brilliant enough for a concerto." Still in Europe, Barber continued to work on the concerto but was interrupted when the Nazis invaded Poland and all Americans were advised to leave. Back in the states, he showed the third movement to the soloist. This time it was "too difficult," and Nels demanded his money back. But Barber had already spent it! He recruited another violinist, Herbert Baumel, to demonstrate the third movement. Having proved that it was, indeed, playable, Barber received the rest of the commission. However, Briselli gave up his right to premiere

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the concert. Instead, Albert Spalding gave the first performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra in February 1941. (Years later, Briselli insisted that the third movement was not too difficult. Rather it was “too lightweight” compared to the other two movements.)

The first movement consists of two main themes developed in traditional concerto form. The soloist begins quietly with a long uninterrupted phrase that leads into a perky, jazzy second theme introduced by the clarinet. The second movement is even more hushed and song-like than the first. It begins with a beautiful oboe solo. Eventually the movement rises to a terrific climax, but returns immediately to the melancholy mood of the opening. The finale opens with a brief rhythmic timpani solo, which is taken up in turn by the solo violin and orchestra. A sense of perpetual motion drives the entire movement with the violinist playing almost nonstop. A sudden change of pace leads to a brilliant conclusion.

Symphony No. 3 in E-Flat Major, Op. 97 “Rhenish”

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Written: 1850

Movements: Five

Style: Romantic

Duration: 29 minutes

At a time when there is such limited government support for the arts, it might seem strange to have the music director of an orchestra be an important municipally funded position, similar to a police chief. Imagine if the Lansing City Council approved and fully funded Maestro Muffitt’s position with the Lansing Symphony! That was the case in Düsseldorf, Germany, when Robert Schumann arrived in September 1850.

Robert Schumann was a prolific composer who wrote obsessively in one genre before he would turn to the next. When he was in his twenties, he wrote almost exclusively for the piano. He

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was thirty when he married Clara Wieck. He wrote nearly 150 songs in that year. A year later, he turned to orchestral music, writing symphonies and the beginnings of a piano concerto. Then he focused on chamber music. By 1843, he was writing choral music. Schumann was also an (ineffective) music teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory, and a conductor – of rather limited ability! However, it was as founder and editor of the music journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Music* that he made his mark as the leading representative of German Romanticism. His writings championed “new” music. He promoted young composers such as Johannes Brahms and performers such as his wife.

The citizens of Düsseldorf celebrated the arrival of their new music director with “speeches, serenades, concerts, banquets and balls.” The new location and enthusiastic support of Düsseldorf inspired another creative outburst from Schumann. Barely one month after arriving in Düsseldorf, Robert began work on his Cello Concerto. He finished it in just two weeks and then set to work on a symphony that, as he described to his publisher, “perhaps mirrors here and there something of Rhenish life.” (Düsseldorf sits along the Rhine River).

While he was writing his symphony, Robert and his wife went thirty miles upriver to Cologne to witness the installation of the new Cardinal. Robert was awe-struck by the cathedral in Cologne – at the time the tallest building in the world. The ceremony and the cathedral both served as inspiration for the symphony’s fourth movement, which he initially called an “Accompaniment to a Solemn Ceremony.” It took Schumann five weeks to write the entire symphony. He conducted its premiere in February 1851.

The design of the Symphony No. 3 in E-Flat is somewhat unusual. It has five movements instead of the normal four. Usually, the second movement of a symphony is slow. Here, it is fast. The next movement has a sort of in-between tempo. The fourth movement is really the only one that is slow.

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The symphony begins with an ebullient outburst – a spirit that lasts throughout the whole first movement. A peculiar rhythm that intentionally confuses two and three beats—called a *hemiola*—is another characteristic of this movement. The second movement has a light-hearted quality to it. Some say that its theme resembles a jovial Rhine-wine drinking song. The next movement serves as lyrical interlude. Schumann brings in the trombones—known for their use in ecclesiastical music—for the solemn fourth movement. Here he intertwines independent melodies into a complex music fabric, a hallmark of church music. The fifth movement quickly dispels the foregoing seriousness. The solemn theme of the fourth movement reappears in a more spirited form before a joyous ending.

Schumann's happy time in Düsseldorf was short-lived. The city council asked him to resign only two years after he arrived. In a fit of depression, he threw himself into the Rhine in 1854. He survived, but Schumann's mental illness was such that he asked to be confined in an asylum where he died in 1856.

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