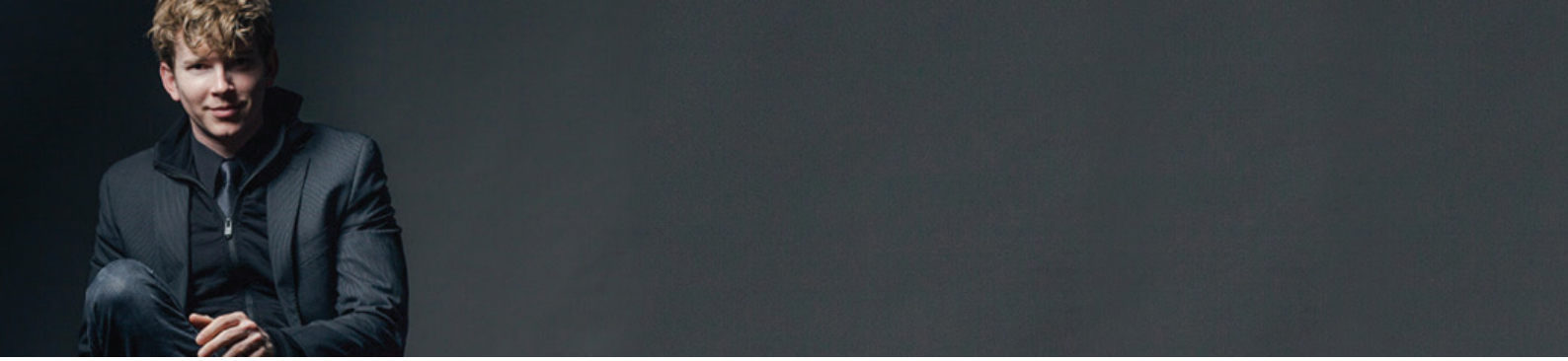

Orchestral Fireworks: Pines of Rome

This weekend's concerts open with that greatest of all cello concertos – Dvořák's! Following intermission, we'll travel to Italy via the music of Tchaikovsky and Respighi.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841; Nelahozeves, Bohemia
Died 1 May 1904; Prague

Concerto in B Minor for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 104

Composed: 1894-95
First performance: 19 March 1896; London, England
Last MSO performance: February 2009; Jakub Hrusa, conductor; Joseph Johnson, cello
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle), strings
Approximate duration: 40 minutes

Dvořák composed his sublime cello concerto in New York, during his final months there as director of the National Conservatory of Music. He had wanted for some time to write a piece for his friend Hanuš Wihan, cellist in the Bohemian Quartet and Dvořák's partner on an 1892 concert tour. Dvořák had been inspired by hearing cellist-composer Victor Herbert, his colleague at the Conservatory, perform his own Cello Concerto No. 2 in March 1894.

At age 24 (1865), Dvořák had penned a cello concerto, but couldn't figure out how to make the orchestration work, since the cello's baritone range is an inherent challenge in allowing it to be heard above a full orchestral texture. Thirty years later, he knew what to do. Rather than simply indicating softer dynamics for the accompaniment, he opted for transparent chamber-music textures, with frequent woodwind solos in a variety of combinations.

In the opening movement, we're introduced to two of Dvořák's most unforgettable themes: The first is dark and somber, the second is one of the most beautiful melodies ever written for solo horn. Throughout the Allegro, the Czech master's orchestral magic operates hand-in-glove with his formal inventiveness. The latter is especially notable in the recapitulation when he bypasses the first theme entirely and heads for a full-orchestra statement of that gorgeous horn solo.

In the Adagio, the composer quotes one of his own songs — "Let me be alone," Op. 82, No. 1 — from the cycle *Cypresses* (1887-88). Certainly this greatest of all cello concertos — which, "for most cellists represents Mecca, the Wailing Wall, and the Vatican all rolled into one" (David Hurwitz) — needs no programmatic underpinning. However, there's a biographical backstory that makes the Adagio all the more poignant. As a young man, Dvořák had fallen in love with Josefina Čermáková. His love was unrequited, and he ended up marrying her sister Anna, but a part of the old sentiments remained. While working on his Op. 104, news of Josefina's illness reached the Dvořáks in New York. "Let me be alone" was one of her favorites, so he included it in the second movement. She died in May 1895,

a month after Dvořák's return from America. In her memory, he added the elegiac coda — which halts the dancelike propulsion of the Finale — at the end of the work. He wrote:

> "The Finale closes gradually diminuendo, like a sigh, with reminiscences of the first and second movements – the solo dies down... then swells again, and the last bars are taken up by the orchestra and the whole concludes in a stormy mood. This is my idea and I cannot depart from it."

Due to scheduling conflicts, Hanuš Wihan, the work's dedicatee, was unable to give the premiere of the concerto. The Philharmonic Society in London chose English cellist Leo Stern for the task. Stern traveled to Prague to study the concerto with the composer and, following the London performance, gave subsequent outings of the piece in Prague, Leipzig, and Berlin — all at Dvořák's request. Wihan essayed the work for the first time in 1899, with Willem Mengelberg and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. He subsequently played it on several occasions under the composer's baton.

Recommended recording: Yo-Yo Ma; Kurt Masur, New York Philharmonic (Sony Classical)

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840; Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia
Died 6 November 1893; St. Petersburg, Russia

Capriccio italien, Opus 45

Composed: 1880
First performance: 18 December 1880; Moscow, Russia
Last MSO performance: November 1993; Zdenek Macal, conductor
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tambourine), harp, strings
Approximate duration: 15 minutes

Following the collapse of his disastrous marriage to Antonina Milyukova, for years Tchaikovsky fell into a creative trough. He was unsociable and restless, retreating to country estates or wandering across Western Europe. In the winter of 1879-80, Piotr and his brother Modeste spent three months in Rome. While there, the composer took in the artistic treasures of the Eternal City — he called Raphael "the Mozart of painting" — played Bach on the piano, and made some revisions to his Symphony No. 2 (1872).

The Russian master also turned his attention to Italian music. In early February, he wrote to his patroness Nadehzda von Meck: "I have already completed the sketches for an Italian fantasia on folk tunes for which I believe a good future may be predicted. It will be effective, thanks to the delightful tunes which I have succeeded in assembling partly from anthologies, partly from my own ears in the streets."

As his model, Tchaikovsky looked to Mikhail Glinka's two Spanish Overtures. Like them, *Capriccio italien* features one independent section after another, each evoking an Italian vista or some aspect of Italian life. The work opens with a bugle call, said to be inspired by the one Tchaikovsky heard daily in his rooms at the Hotel Constanzi, sounded from a nearby military barracks. A stern melody is heard in the strings, the first of a series of evocatively scored themes, some of which recur during the course of the piece. Toward the end there's a vigorous march and, finally, a whirling tarantella.

Recommended recording: Bernard Haitink, Concertgebouw Orchestra (Philips)

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Born 9 July 1879; Bologna, Italy
Died 18 April 1936; Rome, Italy

I pini di Roma [The Pines of Rome]

Composed: 1923-24
First performance: 14 December 1924; Rome Italy
Last MSO performance: March 2005; Gregory Vajda, conductor
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 soprano buccine, 2 tenor buccine, 2 bass buccine, 4 trombones, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, ratchet, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, tam tam), harp, celeste, organ, piano, strings
Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Born into a musical family in Bologna, Ottorino Respighi entered the Lice Musicale there at age 12, studying violin, viola and, later, composition. In 1900, he visited Russia for the first time; in St. Petersburg, he played viola in the opera orchestra and took lessons in composition with Nikolai Rimsky-Kosakov. (The latter experience proved to be a profound influence on the young Italian's approach to orchestration.) He was in Berlin in 1908-09, absorbing much from that city's abundant musical milieu and attending lectures by the composer Max Bruch. By his mid-30s, though, Respighi had settled permanently in Rome.

Respighi is best-known for what we might call "musical photographs." T*he Fountains of Rome, The Pines of Rome, Botticelli Triptych,* and *Church Windows* — among others — are programmatic music in the truest sense of the word, colorfully and lavishly orchestrated, in a harmonic idiom firmly rooted in the 19th century.

The Pines of Rome offers musical depictions of his adopted city. The work is a virtuoso showcase in the art of symphonic instrumentation. The four movements are performed without a pause. Respighi described each in the first edition of the score, published by G. Ricordi:

The Pines of the Villa Borghese (Allegretto vivace) Children are at play in the pine groves of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of "Ring around a rosy." They mimic marching soldiers and battles. They twitter and shriek like swallows at evening, coming and going in swarms. Suddenly the scene changes.

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

The Pines of the Janiculum (Lento) There is a thrill in the air. The full moon reveals the profile of the pines of Gianicolo's Hill. A nightingale sings.

The Pines of the Appian Way (Tempo di Marcia) Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of unending steps. The poet has a fantastic vision of past glories. Trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul bursts forth in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitoline Hill.

Recommended recording: Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA Red Seal)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.