

## THE FOUR SEASONS – Program notes

### Ancient Airs and Dances (*Antiche arie e danze per liuto*), Suite no. 3 Ottorino Respighi

Italiana

Arie di Corte

Siciliana

Passacaglia

Ottorino Respighi was born in Bologna, Italy, in 1879, and died in Rome in 1936. He composed his *Antiche arie e danze per liuto, Suite no. 3* in 1931. The work was first performed at the Conservatory in Milan, January, 1932.

Ottorino Respighi is one of relatively few Italian composers of the twentieth century whose orchestral works are well known in the United States. He is most famous for tone poems with dazzling orchestral effects such as the *Pines of Rome* and the *Fountains of Rome*. Tonight we hear another side of Respighi: his love for the music of earlier centuries. Throughout his life Respighi made arrangements of music from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. He was not a purist in terms of performance practice; in fact, his scores are really modern interpretations of these earlier works. One way he preserves the archaic charm of this music is by paying attention to its modality (the type of harmony used in Europe before major and minor keys became commonplace).

This lifelong interest was first ignited when Respighi was a student at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna. One of his teachers there, Luigi Torchi, was a musicologist who made important contributions to the study of early music. Upon graduation Respighi went to St. Petersburg, Russia, to play principal viola in the Imperial Opera orchestra. While there he studied composition and orchestration briefly with Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, from whom he must have learned a thing or two about instrumental color. After a stint in Germany he returned to Italy, continuing to work as a violinist and violist. In 1913, he took a teaching job at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome, where he remained until his death. After a few years of teaching he decided to devote himself mainly to composition.

He had already produced two suites of "*Antiche arie e danze per liuto*" in 1917 and 1923; the present suite is from 1931. These "Ancient airs and dances for lute" are pieces originally written for the lute (a pear-shaped guitar-like plucked string instrument with a delicate sound), transcribed for orchestra. Some of these lute pieces are by known composers, others are anonymous. Unlike the previous two suites, the Suite no. 3 is arranged for string orchestra; the resulting subdued tone color adds to the "ancient" atmosphere. Respighi used part of a piece by Santino Garsi da Parma (1542-1604) in the first movement, "Italiana," a graceful Andantino in 3/4 time. The second movement, "Arie de Corte" ("Courtly songs") is a medley of tunes by a 16<sup>th</sup>-century French composer, Jean Baptiste Besard, each song in a different tempo; the first tune returns at the end. A "siciliana" is a moderately slow dance in compound meter (such as 6/8, 6/4, 12/8, etc.) with a pastoral character. The last movement is based on a composition by Ludovico Roncalli (1654-1713) for Baroque guitar (which was smaller and lighter than the

modern instrument, and had up to 10 strings). In a “passacaglia,” an ostinato pattern in the bass is repeated while melodic variations are played over it. In Respighi’s arrangement of Roncalli’s “Passacaglia,” the variations become increasingly intense.

### **The Four Seasons” (Il quattro stagioni)**

**Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

#### **Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’invenzione, Op. 8, nos. 1-4**

Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice, Italy, in 1678 and died in Vienna, Austria in 1741. His collection, *Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’invenzione*, containing *Le Quattro stagioni* (*Four Seasons*), was first published in Amsterdam in 1725. It is possible that “*The Four Seasons*” was composed earlier.

*The Four Seasons* is living proof that “classical” music can be very popular. Excerpts from this work are heard in everything from restaurants to movies and television commercials. It is a group of four violin concertos, the first four of a set of twelve entitled, “*Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’invenzione*,” or “Trial (or test) of harmony and of invention.” Vivaldi played and conducted them himself, as he was a virtuoso violinist as well as a skillful and imaginative composer. Each concerto depicts a season in musical terms, and is prefaced by a sonnet written in the Venetian dialect of Italian, perhaps by Vivaldi himself, or by a collaborator. The score also contains notes relating to the sonnets and describing what was happening in the music. “Program music” such as this was not unknown in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was less common then than in later periods. While listeners can enjoy *The Four Seasons* without any extra-musical imagery, such imagery makes it more fun. The following paragraphs summarize the program.

#### **Spring (La Primavera)**

After the cheerful opening ritornello, solo violins imitate bird songs with trills and repeated notes, and undulating sixteenth notes emulate the murmur of a brook with a breeze blowing upon it. There is a thunderstorm but it is brief, and the birds return with their songs. In the second movement a shepherd sleeps with his faithful dog by his side; the continuo players also rest. The viola, played “loudly and rasping,” represents the dog with a “woof-woof” rhythm. The third movement is a “danza pastorale” (pastoral dance) of the sort that would have been played on bagpipes.

#### **Summer (L’Estate)**

Italy’s hot summers can bring on severe thunderstorms and hail that damage crops and vines. In the first movement, Vivaldi captures the languor of “the dog days” with a rather slow tempo, and a sense of dread with the sound of the cuckoo, here considered a bad omen. The turtledove and goldfinch also sing. A gentle breeze (“Zephyr”) blows, but “Borea,” the north wind, suddenly appears, and a battle of winds ensues, causing the shepherd to fear an impending squall. In the second movement lightning and thunder

(rapid repeating notes) and gnats and flies (dotted rhythms) torment the shepherd. The storm finally unleashes its destructive fury in the third movement.

### **Autumn (L'Autunno)**

Merriment returns with the celebration of the harvest in “Autumn,” whose first movement is subtitled, “Dance and song of villagers.” Drunkards interrupt with their erratic behavior, but the sober peasants continue dancing in spite of them. During the second movement the drunks sleep off the effects of their partying. The strings are muted and the solo is given to the harpsichord; the score only tells the harpsichordist to play arpeggios (broken chords). The third movement depicts a hunt, with the solo violin and cello imitating hunting horns. The animals try to escape, but guns are fired and the dogs bay. There is a momentary twinge of sadness when the hunted animals die, just before the final ritornello.

### **Winter (L'Inverno)**

Dissonant, staccato notes set the stage for a horrid, icy wind that causes people to breathe heavily, stamp their feet, and their teeth to chatter. In the second movement, pizzicato (plucked) notes in the second and third violins depict rain pouring in sheets. By the third movement, water has turned to ice and people try to walk on it—carefully, for fear of falling. Eventually the ice breaks. The hot Sirocco wind comes and meets Borea, the north wind, for another “war of the winds.” This time, however, people are indoors and their joy continues unabated. It is interesting to note that Venice experienced an unusual cold spell in the winter of 1708-1709--during Vivaldi's lifetime--in which its lagoon froze.

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