

DECEMBER 12, 2009
MENDELSSOHN AND MOZART
RESPIGHI: THREE BOTTICELLI PICTURES

Ottorino Respighi: Born in Bologna, July 9, 1879; died in Rome, April 18, 1936

Most concertgoers tend to think of Ottorino Respighi first and foremost as the creator of a trilogy of popular orchestral spectacles depicting aspects of the Eternal City: *The Fountains of Rome*, *The Pines of Rome*, and *Roman Festivals*. But there is much more to Respighi than this. Tonight's concert presents another side of this versatile composer, as the creator of orchestral music on a smaller, almost chamber music scale.

Each piece of the Botticellian Triptych is inspired by a painting of the great Florentine Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1444-1510). The beauty, lyricism and grace of his paintings found their counterpart in Respighi's exquisite musical interpretations of 1927.

In *Spring*, we hear the joyous sounds of reawakened nature. All nature rejoices in brilliant, resplendent sound from Respighi's modest but superbly deployed orchestra. A more subdued air, one of quiet reverence, hovers over the *Adoration of the Magi*. Intimations of Gregorian chant adding an ecclesiastical touch. The final illustration invokes one of the most famous paintings in the world, *The Birth of Venus*. The image of gently lapping waves bearing the naked goddess to shore on a seashell is perfectly captured in translucent sound.

MOZART: PIANO CONCERTO NO. 20 IN D MINOR, K. 466

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Born in Salzburg, January 27, 1756; died in Vienna, December 5, 1791

Mozart's D-minor Concerto is a work remarkable not only for its intrinsic emotional range and expressive depth, but for its world of stark contrasts, dramatic power and even its key. The nineteenth-century Romanticists took this concerto to their hearts as a harbinger of the stormy, tragic world for which they felt so much empathy. The work dates from 1785, and like most of Mozart's piano concertos, was written for the composer himself to perform at a subscription concert.

The concerto's opening bars are some of the strangest Mozart ever wrote: no foot-tapping tune as the principal theme; in fact, no tune at all - only darkly menacing, throbbing syncopations in the violins and violas with intermittent upward slides from the cellos and basses. A violent, almost explosive, outburst from the full orchestra hurls forth the "subject" in thunderous tones and flashes of lightning. The second subject, this one a true theme, is announced in the woodwinds - a sweetly lyrical idea that is separated from the angry world of the opening by no more than a brief pause - no transition, just a pause and a fresh start. Similarly, the soloist's entry breaks new ground; indeed, the orchestra never takes up the soloist's initial

idea. The element of contrast pervades the movement, not only in thematic ideas but in the heightened dualism between soloist and orchestra, a dualism that reveals itself far more in the nature of real struggle than in the friendly rivalry that the Italian term *concertare* normally suggests.

The second movement (most unusually, a rondo), gives the impression of a new start, a breath of fresh air and sunshine after the storm. Some of Mozart's most divinely beautiful melodies, themes of classic simplicity, are found here. Yet into this serene, placid world erupts, without warning, an extended episode in G-minor, full of stormy impulses and breathless figurations that characterized the first movement. The third movement too is a rondo, and like the previous movements, has its share of surprises. We expect to hear the soloist launch the principal theme, but not with a rocket-like explosion breathing fire and such immense energy. Mozart reserves his biggest surprise for the end: following the cadenza comes a massive emotional gearshift that thrusts us into a cheery, good-natured coda in D-major.

MENDELSSOHN: SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN A MAJOR, OP. 90 (ITALIAN)

Felix Mendelssohn: Born in Hamburg, February 3, 1809; died in Leipzig, November 4, 1847

Unlike many other composers, Mendelssohn was born to wealth and creature comforts. One of the advantages this brought to him was the opportunity to travel widely. His thorough education in the liberal arts and fine arts prepared him for keen observation of the sights, people, culture and spirit of any place he visited. In Italy he was particularly impressed by the art of the old masters like Michelangelo, Titian and Giorgione; by the magnificent buildings of Rome; and by the natural beauty of the countryside. He began working on a new symphony in December of 1832, and within a few weeks was referring to it in letters as his "Italian" symphony. It was first performed by the Philharmonic Society of London on March 13, 1833.

Italy's sunny vitality and Mendelssohn's enthusiasm for the land are immediately apparent in the opening bars of the symphony. An exuberant theme in the violins is accompanied by a continuous fusillade of notes from the wind section. The second theme (clarinet and bassoon) is more lyrical, but still imbued with restless animation. The development section features a new theme in the minor mode, appearing first in a delicately tripping manner, but growing to fearsome intensity.

Then, as if with a touch of magic, Mendelssohn dispels the mood of anxiety with a sustained note for the oboe. Much has been made of the penitential character of the *Andante* movement. The possibility exists that Mendelssohn borrowed the plaintive tune from a pilgrim chant he heard in a procession in Naples. The second theme (clarinets) is somewhat more cheerful, less severe. The chant then returns and eventually fades away in the distance "like a procession quietly turning the corner" in the words of Klaus G. Roy. The graciously flowing third movement returns to a mood of warmth and sunshine. The central section evokes a gentle sylvan setting and features a solo unit of two horns and two bassoons, which are cleverly combined to sound like a horn quartet.

The finale is a fiery, whirling dance movement which unites two different Italian dances. The *saltarello*, which opens the movement, is a jumping dance from Rome, while the Neapolitan *tarantella* is characterized by smooth, even triplets. The movement is in A minor, a most unusual key to end a symphony that began in the bright and breezy key of A major. Yet hardly one listener in a thousand stops is to worry about such an irregularity, so thrilling is Mendelssohn's rush to the finish.