

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS
Orpheus Chamber Orchestra with Alessio Bax, piano
21 February 2023 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022

Ancient Airs and Dances, Set III (1932)
Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

Respighi holds a special place among Italian composers because of his rich orchestral legacy. Most of the great names in Italian music during the past two centuries are associated with opera: Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini are the brightest stars in a vast constellation. Respighi stands virtually alone as Italy's representative in instrumental and orchestral scores. A student of both Rimsky-Korsakov and Max Bruch, Respighi developed a superior sense of orchestration under their tutelage. Intensive study of the works of Richard Strauss, whom he greatly admired, also influenced his development as an orchestral composer.

Supplementing Respighi's active career in composition and teaching was a strong interest in antiquarian studies. Beginning in 1908 he edited publication of works by early Italian composers such as Monteverdi and Vitali. This activity continued to within a year of his death. He was fascinated by the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1917 he arranged some movements from lute tablature into the first of what was to be three sets of pieces entitled "Ancient Airs and Dances." After the success of the first suite, Respighi arranged two further groups in 1924 and 1932. A fourth suite, *Gli Uccelli* (1927), is also based on lute music.

Each set of "Ancient Airs" consists of four late Renaissance dances. In Suite No.3, the opening *Italiana* could refer to any popular Italian song form of the sixteenth century. This one is in relaxed triple time. The second part, *Arie di Corte*, was originally a ballet by the Burgundian lutenist and composer Jean-Baptiste Besard (born c. 1567, d. after 1617). His six dances, which alternate in tempo, are a miniature suite unto themselves. The original songs from which they are derived all have themes of courtly love: "It is sad to be in love with you," "Farewell forever, shepherdess," "Lovely eyes that see clearly," "The Skiff of Love," "What divinity touches my soul," and "If it is for my innocence that you love me."

Respighi's *Siciliana* is anonymous, with the familiar lilting 6/8 tempo that characterizes this 17th- and 18th-century dance of Sicilian origin. The third set of *Ancient Airs* concludes with a *Passacaglia* by Lodovico Roncalli, an Italian guitarist and composer active at the end of the seventeenth century. The collection form which Respighi borrowed was published in 1692. The *Passacaglia* is a slow dance in triple time, generally consisting of a series of continuous variations built on a recurring ground bass. Throughout, Respighi's settings are respectful of the originals, yet perhaps revealing just the slightest wink in his eye.

Piano Concerto No.2 in F minor, Op.21
Frédéric François Chopin (1810-1849)

Some composers undergo marked changes in their style and approach to their art in the course of a long career: Beethoven and Stravinsky are obvious examples. Others, like Brahms, seem to have burst forth fully formed, with a unique and personal musical language that is instantly identifiable as their own and remains consistent in early, middle and late works.

Frédéric Chopin falls into the latter category. Hallmarks of his style appear in all his compositions. We are exceedingly unlikely to mistake Chopin's music for that of any of his contemporaries. His two piano concertos are the finest of his so-called "apprentice" works. Both demonstrate his incomparable flair for solo display.

Chopin began work on the F minor concerto in autumn 1829. It was actually his first concerto, but was not published until 1836, three years after the publication of his Piano Concerto in E minor, Op.11. Consequently the F minor concerto bears a later opus number.

The relationship between orchestra and piano is different in Chopin from, for example, the conversational balance in a Mozart concerto. Chopin took Johann Nepomuk Hummel as his model, rather than Mozart. The F minor Concerto is more an accompanied solo than a concerted discussion. Everything is geared to highlight technical virtuosity, beautiful tone, and the expressive capability of the pianist. The mood of the music changes rapidly, showing every face that the composer has, from warrior to poet. But these transformations are never at the expense of continuity, and Chopin sustains a convincing forward drive in spite of his unconventional approach to sonata form. As Peter Gould has observed:

The development section of the F minor concerto is not a true development as understood by Beethoven. Chopin seldom argued. He was not naturally an intellectual, his greatest attribute being that of sensitivity, and in his development he wrote what could be better described as a commentary on what had gone before.

Chopin had a lifelong love of opera that exercised a powerful influence on his sense of melodic line and inimitable ornamentation. That influence is most readily perceived in his lyrical slow movements. The F minor concerto's central *Andante* (originally *Adagio*) was an expression of Chopin's love for a singer, Konstancja Gładkowska, during the last year he spent in Warsaw. He wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski in October 1829:

To my misfortune, perhaps, I have found my ideal. I venerate her with all my soul. For six months now I have been dreaming of her every night and still I have not addressed a single word to her. It is thinking of her that I have composed the *Adagio* of my Concerto.

Chopin remained very fond of performing this slow movement long after other women (notably Countess Delphine Potocka of Paris, the eventual dedicatee of the concerto) had replaced Konstancja in his affections. It is easy to understand why. With its lavish ornamentation and delicate embroidery, this movement blurs the distinction between melody and decoration,

weaving a magical seductive spell.

Polish nationalism finds its way into the finale as a mazurka. This colorful movement incorporates a number of unexpectedly deft orchestral touches, such as *col legno* strings [striking the strings with the wood of the bow, rather than the horsehair] and a horn signal, that contribute to its energy. A virtuoso coda reminds us that the concerto, ultimately, belongs to the soloist.

Serenade for strings in E major, Op. 22 Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Dvořák's smaller orchestral works cover all the usual forms, his biographer Alec Robertson tells us.

There are suites, serenades, variations, overtures, dances and symphonic poems. Not much of this music goes deep, but a surprising quantity of it is fresh and charming, and very little of it dull. For sheer charm the Serenades in E major, Op.22 and D minor, Op.44, and the *Czech Suite* in D major, Op.39 take a high place. They fulfil their tasks simply, unpretentiously and delightfully.

Not that we need Mr. Robertson's *imprimatur* to convince us, for this is music that is well nigh impossible to resist. Dvořák was a fine violinist and violist, and wrote beautifully for strings. Everything about this Serenade is graceful and melodious.

Dvořák composed it during the first two weeks of May, 1875. The entire year proved remarkably productive for the young Bohemian composer. Having received a grant from the government to support his composing and ease his financial circumstances, he found a burst of compositional energy. In rapid succession he produced his Fifth Symphony, a piano trio, a string quintet, the Moravian Duets for soprano and tenor, and this Serenade. All these works showed that he would be able to work comfortably in large forms. By 1877 the Serenade had become so popular that a Czech publisher issued it in the composer's arrangement for one piano, four-hands. Within two years, the Berlin firm of Bote and Bock had purchased the publishing rights to this and several other new compositions by Dvořák; they issued the Serenade in 1879.

Each of the Serenade's five movements has its own charm. The opening *Moderato* is reverent and lyrical. A gentle waltz in E minor follows, with a fine trio section. The middle movement, a lively *Scherzo* in G major, has the most overt Czech folk flavor of the Serenade, alternating exuberance with plaintive moments.

Dvořák's *Larghetto* is a popular favorite, adding more depth and sentiment to the reverence of the first movement, while subtly echoing some melodic ideas from the *Scherzo*. He concludes with a mischievous romp among the various string sections, again punctuated with allusions to themes from earlier in the Serenade. A substantial quotation from the gentle strains of the *Moderato* precedes the brisk coda, neatly summarizing the two polar aspects of Dvořák's delightful music.

