

Program Notes

Rossini - LA GAZZA LADRA OVERTURE

Giaochino Rossini penned the overture to *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie) at the young age of 25. Famous for the use of antiphonal snare drums, it was immediately hailed as a masterpiece at its premiere. One account of this performance reported five minutes of uninterrupted applause at the conclusion, with the audience exclaiming, "Bravo, Maestro!" As with many of Rossini's overtures, it is not truly programmatic, but follows a formula of three varied themes that are subsequently presented in a Sonata-Allegro form. The opera itself contains a bizarre plot which is based on an actual event with a more tragic ending. A young girl, Nanetta, is falsely accused of stealing silverware, but meanwhile the true culprit, a magpie (and a thieving one at that), scurries away with one of Nanetta's patrons' silver forks. At the end of the opera, the magpie is finally caught in the act, and Nanetta is free to go and to marry her love, Giannetto.

The beginning of the overture features the famous snare drum rolls which come from different sides of the stage. This military introduction may allude to Nanetta's father and husband, who are soldiers. The secondary theme is typically Rossinian, with a fast, catchy melody in the winds, lightly accompanied by *battute* strings (lightly "beating" their bows on the strings). The secondary lyrical theme, presented by the oboe, is a witty tune later echoed by the clarinet. The piece also features trademark Rossini crescendos in which instruments are added little by little in order to create a more powerful increase in volume. It wasn't until his overture to *William Tell*, the last of his great operas, that we hear an operatic introduction that is truly programmatic and foreshadowing. Despite its formulaic quality, the overture to *La Gazza Ladra* is certainly one of the most entertaining and charming in the repertoire.

Felix Mendelssohn - Symphony No. 4, "Italian"

Felix Mendelssohn set out for Italy in 1830 on a tour that was both entertaining and inspiring, and brought forth the original idea and primary sketches for the "Italian" Symphony. In this work, he hoped to capture impressions of both the landscape and spirit of the Italian people. When he returned home, he temporarily abandoned the project, but in 1832, thanks to a substantial commission from the Philharmonic Society of London, Mendelssohn moved quickly toward the completion of the symphony. Despite a successful premiere, Mendelssohn was unhappy with the work and for the next fifteen years wrote new sketches, promising an eventual revised version. What we hear today is actually very close to the original, because he passed away before completing a final version. Mendelssohn's dissatisfaction remains an enigma to this day, since this is perhaps his most popular and respected symphony.

The first movement begins with vigor: woodwinds tonguing away at a repeated note pattern that guides the pulse of the moment, answered by the primary theme in the violins. The secondary theme appears as a duet of sorts, first in the winds and then repeated gently in the violas and cellos in the recapitulation. The movement is in Sonata-Allegro form and showcases the composer's incredible ease with form as well as complex counterpoint.

The lyrical and mournful second movement was supposedly inspired by a pilgrim's song. The melody alternates between the middle and upper strings, accompanied by a running bass line played by cellos and basses. A militaristic secondary theme serves as a contrasting figure.

The third movement is a traditional minuet and trio. Again, the militaristic component serves as a contrast in the trio to the gentle and lyrical primary theme.

The fourth movement, which is in a minor key, is the most Italian of them all. Subtitled *Saltarello*, it also evokes the Italian *tarentella*, or jumping dance, playing with triple and duple meters in a perpetually rhythmic showcase. The piece appears to draw to a quiet end, only to surprise us with a resurgent crescendo and forceful ending.

Pietro Mascagni - INTERMEZZO FROM CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA

In 1888 a competition was announced for young Italian composers, and Pietro Mascagni had less than two months to compose his *Cavalleria rusticana*. Of the 73 operas submitted to the competition, Mascagni's made it to the final three. It has remained one of the most beloved and most frequently performed shorter operas in the repertoire and has been included in numerous movies, perhaps most famously in the third installation of *The Godfather* series.

In the opera, Santuzza is jealous because she suspects her lover Turiddu is still in love with his former lover Lola, who is now married to Alfio. Santuzza is suspicious and asks Turiddu's mother where he's been. She says that he has been away buying wine in another village. Santuzza, however, has heard that he is still in town. In her despair, after begging Turiddu to come back to her and having been scorned by Lola, Santuzza reveals Turiddu and Lola's affair to Alfio, who promises revenge. All of the villagers enter the church for Mass except for Santuzza. As she is alone in the town square, the famous *Intermezzo* is played, reflecting both the religious activities occurring in the church and simultaneously, her inner struggle and passionate love.

Ottorino Respighi - PINES OF ROME

Pines of Rome was composed in 1923-24 and is one of Respighi's most popular pieces. Like many of his compositions, it is inspired by a Roman setting and contains contrasting, vibrant, and colorful orchestration, in which one hears the influence of his studies with the famous Russian composer Rimski-Korsakov. The piece features an ethereal offstage trumpet solo, six offstage *Buccine* (an ancient Roman brass instrument, but performed today on modern instruments), as well as a recording of bird calls. The composer offered the following descriptions of the movements in the piece:

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 the Capitoline Hill.

By Roberto Kalb