

Program Notes
Reno Chamber Orchestra
The Old Style
February 17 & 18, 2024

Ottorino Respighi

Born: July 9, 1879, Bologna, Italy

Died: April 18, 1936, Rome, Italy

Respighi's vivid and colorful orchestral works, particularly the Roman trilogy (*The Fountains of Rome*, *The Pines of Rome*, and *Roman Festivals*), are among the best loved and most frequently performed of the twentieth century. He received his first musical training in his hometown of Bologna, then moved to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he played viola in the city's Imperial Orchestra and studied with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. He didn't start composing seriously until he was in his twenties. After a few years as a touring violinist and violist, he took a teaching post at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia, where he subsequently became director in 1924. But success as a composer led him to leave the Conservatorio two years later. From that point on Respighi devoted himself to composition, with the occasional foray into conducting and providing piano accompaniment for singers, including two very successful tours of the United States in 1925-26 and 1932.

Ancient Airs and Dances Suite No. 3

Composed: 1932

Duration: 18 minutes

Instrumentation: strings

Along with all his other activities, Respighi was something of a musicologist. Over the last three decades of his life, he prepared modern editions of long-forgotten works by the likes of Monteverdi, Vitali, and Marcello. He also wrote a violin concerto based on Gregorian Chant themes, a piano concerto based on the archaic Mixolydian mode, and three sets of arrangements of *Ancient Airs and Dances* (from 1917, 1924, and 1932 respectively). The originals of these older works were, in Respighi's time, seldom if ever heard, and his efforts brought this rich period of music back to life for many listeners. As Respighi and a group of nine fellow composers stated in a manifesto, countering the claims of the more dissonant sounds then becoming commonplace in the concert hall: "A logical chain binds the past and the future – the romanticism of yesterday will again be the romanticism of tomorrow."

The third of the *Ancient Airs and Dances Suites* is rather more restrained, even melancholy, than the other two. Its first movement *Italiana*, based on a popular Italian melody of the early seventeenth century, is graceful, the shapely melodic lines often propelled forward by *pizzicati* from the lower strings. A somber theme in halting phrases from the violas opens the second movement *Arie de corte*, a mini-suite that draws on several themes from the *Arie di Corte* (Airs of the Court) by the Burgundian lutenist and composer Jean-Baptiste Besard. That opening melody builds, and the textures become more full. Soon the tempo increases

for a new theme with an easy swing. Occasional drones give the music a rustic flavor. Another new idea returns to the somber mood of the movement's opening. In the next, more extroverted section, *pizzicati* and bowed phrases alternate. The opening theme returns with rich sonority to close the movement.

The third movement, featuring an anonymous *Spagnoletta* from the seventeenth century, is a *Siciliana*, with arching phrases. The melody recurs, building to an imposing climax with turbulent figures underneath, before a last statement of the theme closes the movement calmly. A bold theme opens the fourth movement *Passacaglia*, based on a guitar piece by the seventeenth century Italian composer-guitarist Ludovico Roncalli.. As is typical with the *passacaglia* form, the theme recurs several times, with new material layered over it with each repetition. A sonorous final statement of the main theme closes the work.

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Born: October 12, 1872, Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England

Died: August 26, 1958, London, England

One of the most-performed composers of the twentieth century, Ralph Vaughan Williams produced a huge catalog of works over six decades: operas and ballets, choral works and songs, chamber music, and orchestral music including nine symphonies – probably his best-known compositions – and other familiar pieces like the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and *The Lark Ascending*. After studying piano and violin as a youth, in his teens he began studies at the Royal College of Music in London, later also spending three years at Trinity College, Cambridge. At the former, he met composer Gustav Holst, who became a close friend. Together they spent several years collecting folk songs around Great Britain. Those songs, combined with his love of English Renaissance choral music, became large influences on Vaughan Williams's musical style. At age 42, he volunteered for military service in World War I, serving as an ambulance driver. After the war, he became a teacher at the Royal College of Music. By that time and thereafter, he was recognized as one of the major figures in British music.

Oboe Concerto in A minor

Composed: 1943-44

Duration: 19 minutes

Instrumentation: strings, solo oboe

Quite a number of concertos featuring solo oboe were composed during the eighteenth century. But after Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's concerto, K. 314 of 1777, the form more or less disappeared for a century and three-quarters. It was the combination of Vaughan Williams and British oboist Léon Goossens (1897-1988) that brought the oboe concerto back to prominence. Goossens had for two decades already been inspiring British composers like Sir Arnold Bax and Gordon Jacob to compose new works for him when Vaughan Williams decided to write something for him.

Right after completing his lyrical Symphony No. 5 in 1943, Vaughan Williams started work on his Oboe Concerto in A minor, even incorporating some discarded sketches from the Fifth Symphony. The Concerto's premiere had been planned for the 1944 Proms concerts. But the Nazi shelling of London caused the cancellation of those concerts. The premiere was moved to Liverpool, and on September 30, 1944, Goossens (to whom the concerto is dedicated) presented the work for the first time with the Liverpool Philharmonic and conductor Sir Malcolm Sargent.

After a short introductory phrase, based on a pentatonic scale, from the strings, the oboe spins out a wistful, lyrical melody. The music, bucolic and gentle, betrays almost not at all its genesis in the heart of the World War II years – solace from the events of the war, rather than a troubled reflection of them, seems to be the goal. After a time, the tempo quickens and a new melody suggestive of folk song is announced by the oboe. A third idea, sparsely backed by the strings, soon emerges as the music quiets, becoming truly still at movement's end.

The second movement combines a gently playful Minuet, the oboe taking the melodic lead lightly accompanied by strings both bowed and *pizzicato*, and a more richly-harmonized Musette, with extended drone-like notes from both the soloist and the strings..

A scurrying figure from the oboe, propelled forward by the strings, begins the third movement, the work's longest. Trills decorate the oboe's line, which becomes quite virtuosic. There is a moment of turbulence as the music grows more aggressive, leading into a short solo cadenza for the oboe. Rich chords from the strings mark a new, slower Lento tempo and the introduction of a consoling hymn-like theme. The tempo quickens as recollections of earlier melodies are heard. The music slows again, a further lyrical outpouring before another solo cadenza for the oboe and the work's gentle conclusion.

Errollyn Wallen

Born: April 10, 1958, Belize City, Belize

Errollyn Wallen – called a “renaissance woman of contemporary British music” by *The Observer* – is a respected composer as well as singer-songwriter. She has written over twenty operas as well as concertos, songs, and chamber works, with commissions from the BBC, Royal Opera House, London Symphony Orchestra, Leipzig Ballet, and even the pop band Clean Bandit. Wallen initially trained as a dancer, moving from England to New York City to work with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. But then she turned to composition, returning to England to study at Goldsmiths, King's College London, and Cambridge. She has won numerous awards for her music, including the Ivor Novello Award for Classical Music. In 2007 she was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), and in 2020 Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), for her services to music. Her memoir *Becoming a Composer* was published in November 2023.

Concerto Grosso

Composed: 2008

Duration: 15 minutes

Instrumentation: strings, solo violin, double bass, and piano

The *concerto grosso* form was invented, and thrived, during the Baroque era of the early eighteenth century. Typically in three or four movements, its music features exchanges between the orchestra (the *ripieno*) and a group of soloists from within the orchestra (the *concertino*). Arcangelo Corelli was probably the first major composer to employ the *concerto grosso* form, but examples soon multiplied from composers like Francesco Geminiani, Giuseppe Torelli, and George Frideric Handel. The *concerto grosso* more or less disappeared in the later eighteenth century, but made a major comeback in the twentieth century. Examples by Bohuslav Martinů, Alfred Schnittke, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and the masterpiece by Ernest Bloch heard later in this program, have entered the standard repertoire. A more recent example is Wallen's *Concerto Grosso*, which pays homage to composers like Corelli and Johann Sebastian Bach while also bringing her own distinctive sensibility, including jazz and popular elements, into the mix.

After the propulsive, exciting opening to the first movement, the piano, then violin, and finally double bass take solo turns. Furious passages from the string orchestra alternate with virtuoso phrases from the soloists, including syncopated figures, and, toward the end of the movement, jazzy chords from the piano. Something close to a “walking bass” from the double bass opens the slow second movement. The violin then enters with a lyrical line, soon supported by repeating piano chords. A more astringent central section, in which the string orchestra is heard briefly, turns the music in a more dissonant direction. Then the opening music returns, this time with backing from the orchestra, building to a final climax.

A figure evoking the Baroque era from the solo violin opens the very short third movement. The orchestra takes up that same figure, with rippling from the piano. A lazy, almost bluesy melody from the violin, supported by the bass and piano chords, opens the fourth movement. Before long, a chugging rhythm from the bass and assertive chords from the piano, with *pizzicati* from the orchestra, increase the momentum, leading to an exciting, if abrupt, conclusion.

Ernest Bloch

Born: July 24, 1880, Geneva, Switzerland

Died: July 15, 1959, Portland, Oregon

Ernest Bloch began playing the violin at age nine, and composed his first piece not long after. He studied at the Brussels Conservatory, where among his teachers was famed violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. After living in a number of European cities, he moved to the United States in 1916, becoming a citizen in 1924. Aside from the 1930s, which he spent back in Switzerland, Bloch lived in the United States for the rest of his life. He first became known as a composer with a series of Jewish-themed works, including the *Israel Symphony* (1912-16) and *Schelomo* (1915-16), which remains his best-known composition. Other works in his large catalog show an interest in neoclassicism and more contemporary techniques. Bloch was also a renowned teacher and administrator. He taught at Mannes School of Music, was the first

Musical Director of the Cleveland Institute of Music, served as Director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and was named Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

Concerto Grosso No. 1

Composed: 1924-25

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: strings, piano

From 1920 to 1925 Bloch was the director of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Along with his administrative duties, he gave master classes in composition and conducted the student choir and string orchestra. In those musically turbulent times, Bloch often encountered in his students the attitude that traditional musical values like tonality, accessible form and melody had become obsolete. Strongly disagreeing, Bloch decided to take action. "Thus one evening," writes his daughter Suzanne, who was also one of his students at that time, "he wrote a Prelude scored for strings and asked some of us students to write out the parts from this penciled score. On the day of orchestra rehearsal we arrived, waving in the air parts that were still ink-wet, and then sat down to read the piece, Bloch conducting us with a broad smile. It was an exciting moment. The Prelude, with its rhythmic life, was truly stirring, and we all played with gusto. At the end the whole orchestra shouted with glee; so did all the young composers present. Bloch said: 'What do you think now? This is tonal with not a single new noise or harmony. It has just old fashioned notes!' Thus, the First Concerto Grosso was born."

The *Concerto Grosso No. 1* is scored for string orchestra and piano, the latter taking an accompaniment role similar to that of the harpsichord in the Baroque concertos that served as Bloch's model. After the forceful, declamatory *Prelude* mentioned above comes a nostalgic *Dirge*, its gentle central section including string solos and some delicate embroidery from the piano. The following *Pastorale* begins quietly, and out of that music emerges a set of rollicking *Rustic Dances* (employing ideas from some *Swiss Dances* that Bloch had written back in 1899). The concluding *Fugue* features a lively, rhythmic tune that moves in succession through the violas, second violins, cellos and basses, first violins, and piano. Solo strings interact as the melody continues its contrapuntal development, leading into a brief reminiscence of the opening Prelude and a forceful concluding crescendo.