

## Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Sun. May 15 The 880th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Mon. May 16 The 881s Suntory Hal Subscription Concert

### Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) "Nabucco" Overture

Giuseppe Verdi is known as one of the primary figures contributing to the development of Italian opera during the time when Italian nationalism was on the rise. By the time *La Traviata* was staged in 1853, Verdi had already composed sixteen operas since his first (*Oberto*) had opened in 1839. However, his third opera *Nabucco* would be his first major operatic success following a very traumatic personal time in his life when he and his wife lost their two children within a very short amount of time. The following year, Verdi's wife became ill and died in the summer of 1840. In this state of mind, it's no wonder that the composer's second opera *Un giorno di regno* was not well-received, consequently closing after only one performance. In fact, Verdi was so despondent he nearly gave up on the idea of being a composer.

Bartolomeo Merelli had commissioned Verdi to compose three operas for the Milan opera house, La Scala, and was not ready to give up on the composer yet. He gave Verdi a libretto by Temistocle Solera that was based on the biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar (in the original Italian 'Nabucodonosor') who had conquered the Jews and exiled them from their homeland. Initially Verdi

was unable to focus his attention on another composition, but eventually with encouragement from Merelli he began to compose again little by little. Apparently in a fit of frustration, the composer threw the libretto on the table where it is said that the book opened to a page with one particular line catching Verdi's attention: '*Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate*' (*Fly, thought, on golden wings*). This would be used to compose the most well-known chorale from this opera.

Verdi himself considered this work to be the true start to his career as an operatic composer. The Overture opens with the brass in a solemn hymn-like theme, which is interrupted by a sudden and loud statement by the full orchestra, before returning to the opening theme. This is alternated with a more militaristic marching theme before the clarinet and oboe present the melody (over pizzicato strings) for *Va pensiero*, representing the Hebrews' longing for their home. Later the trumpet reprises the tune before the march theme returns to close the work, setting the stage for the main conflict in the opera that would follow.

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba (cimbasso), timpani, percussion (cymbals, snare drum, bass drum), strings

### Nino Rota (1911-1979) "La Strada" Ballet Suite

Nino Rota began composing as a child, having composed an oratorio before his teen years, based on the theme of John the Baptist. At that point he began studying composition formally first at Milan Conservatory and then in Rome at the Academia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. Later the conductor Arturo Toscanini referred Rota to Rosario Scalero at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he studied composition, as well as conducting with Fritz Reiner. Returning to Italy in 1932, Rota would produce many works including three symphonies, numerous concertos and ballet scores, as well as operas and works for chamber ensembles. However, it is for his film scores that he is most well-known having composed some 150 works in the genre.

The collaboration between Italian film director Federico Fellini and Rota is one that lasted nearly three decades, beginning in 1951 with the film *Losceicco bianco* (The White Shark), and continuing with such films as *La Strada* (1954), *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and *Amarcord* (1973), among others. In addition, Rota would collaborate with other Italian directors, (including Luchino Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli), as well as directors from France, Germany and Russia. The American director Francis Ford Coppola collaborated with Rota in the 1970's when producing the first two "Godfather" films, with the composer winning the Oscar for best score for the second film.

The score for *La Strada* had won an Oscar in 1954 as well, and on the tails of this success, Rota would arrange a suite of pieces for ballet from the score in 1966. The seven movements of this suite highlighted the composer's flair for producing an amazing range of dramatic musical emotions while incorporating

a variety of styles. The story presents Gelsomina, a naive girl who is sold by her mother to Zampano, a street performer who entertains people with his feats of strength. Working as a servant, Gelsomina joins his act as a sidekick clown, playing the drums and cornet to draw the crowds even more. Eventually the two join a circus where they meet Il Matto, a tight rope walker who becomes an antagonist causing Zampano's anger to reach the ultimate climax when he murders him. Zampano's guilt ultimately causes him to leave Gelsomina, which in turn leads to her feeling abandoned, and in her despair, she wastes away and dies. When Zampano learns of her death, he breaks down in his own grief.

Rota's award-winning score presents the contrasts in these characters to an amazing extent. From the light, syncopated brass, as well as the drums and cymbals, as an expression of the circus life, compared with the bittersweet violin solo reflecting Il Matto's concern for Gelsomina. The murder scene brings out dissonant passages in the orchestra, while Gelsomina's tragic ending stirs surreal harmonies in the strings with the brass echoing, along with intonations from the celesta. The extreme contrast in these various motives highlight the deepest emotions in each character as they live their life on 'the road.'

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, bass drum, sleighbells, cymbals, suspended cymbals, tamtam, woodblock, xylophone, drum set), harp, celesta, piano, strings

**Ottorino Respighi** (1879-1936)**Impressioni sinfonico "Vetrata di chiesa"**

- I. The Flight into Egypt (ca. 6 min)
- II. St. Michael the Archangel (ca. 6 min)
- III. The Matins of St. Clare (ca. 5 min)
- IV. St. Gregory the Great (ca. 10 min)

Born in Bologna, Italy in the late 19th century, Respighi found himself in the shadow of many great composers of his country, including the likes of Puccini, Rossini and Verdi. He was not only a scholar, but also an admirer as well of early Italian music, and is perhaps most well known for combining the "old with the new." After building his reputation composing in a variety of genres, including opera, songs, quintets, a piano concerto, sonatas and a tribute to Bach (*Suite in G major for Strings and Organ*); and arranging numerous orchestral transcriptions of works by Bach, Monteverdi, Tartini, Vivaldi, and Rossini, as well as editing many early chamber works, Respighi turned his attention to symphonic poems.

The most popular of these tone poems are considered by many to be the three that belong to what have been called 'The Roman Trilogy.' All three are enhanced by the evocative orchestral colourings he developed after studying in Russia with Rimsky-Korsakov, and being influenced by other 20<sup>th</sup> century composers of similar romantic tendencies, including Ravel and Strauss. Following on the success of the first two of these works, Respighi returned to a work he had composed for piano, *Three Piano Preludes on Gregorian Themes* (1921), with the idea of orchestrating the pieces, incorporating some of the techniques he had used in the symphonic poems.

When Respighi had originally composed the Piano Preludes, it was only a short time after his marriage to Elsa Olivieri-Sangiaco in 1919. She had been a student of his in Rome, but she had specialized in Gregorian Chant. She described in her memoirs how her husband began his explorations of the genre:

"We had been married for some weeks when one day I asked Ottorino if he had ever studied Gregorian Chant. He replied that it was something he had long wanted to do but never found the opportunity. For my part, I had studied the subject with particular enthusiasm and been given a first-class diploma a few months previously. I offered to teach him.... Not a day passed but he asked me to intone a passage from the Roman Gradual while he listened spellbound. The Maestro was considerably influenced by this music, for there are echoes of Gregorian Chant in almost everything he wrote after 1920. The *Three Piano Preludes on Gregorian Melodies* were completed a few months later at Capri in the summer of 1919 and brightly reflect Respighi's state of mind at that time — delighted wonder at a revelation and the mystic exaltation of the profound religious feeling which matched the harmony of our life together. The Maestro told me how wonderful it would be to recast those magnificent melodies in a new language of sounds, free them from the rigidly formal Catholic liturgy of the Roman Gradual and revive the indestructible germ of real human values contained therein."

When the preludes were initially composed there were no subtitles included. However when orchestrating the works, Respighi enlisted the assistance of one of his colleagues, Claudio Guastalla, a professor of literature, who described the discussion that followed:

"What were these four symphonic impressions to be called? Respighi thought of four church doorways.... I objected that it was too colorless. Why not 'church windows', I suggested? The name remained..." However, they now had to determine the focus of each of the movements, the first three having come directly from the preludes, and the fourth composed separately to complete the set. They eventually settled on four quotes from various religious sources to illuminate the 'Four Impressions for Orchestra':

**I. The Flight into Egypt**

"...the little caravan proceeded through the desert, in the starry night, carrying the Treasure of the world." (*Matthew 2:14*)

**II. St. Michael the Archangel**

"And a great battle was made in the heavens: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and fought the dragon and his angels. But these did not prevail, and there was no more place for them in Heaven." (*Homily*)

*XII of St. Gregory with reference to Revelation 12:7-8*)

**III. The Matins of St. Clare**

"But Jesus Christ her bridegroom, not wishing to leave her thus disconsolate, had her miraculously carried by the angels to the church of St. Francis, and to be at the service of Matins." (*Little Flowers of St. Francis, XXXIV*)

**IV. St. Gregory the Great**

"Behold the Pontiff!... Bless the Lord ... Sing the hymn to God. Alleluia!"

The first movement features the Phrygian mode and 5/4 meter to set the scene in Egypt, while the second movement highlights the brass with an off-stage trumpet solo. The third movement presents a repeated intonation on strings that continues throughout, reminding Guastalla of the 'nuns in holy orders'. The final movement honors the namesake for Gregorian Chant, St. Gregory himself, and is based on the Gloria from the *Missa de Angelis*. Opening with tolling bells and muted horns, this fantasia leads into a magnificent organ solo, building to a grandiose close.

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbal, chimes [c-sharp], bass drum, tamtam), harp, celesta, piano, organ, strings

**Banda:** trumpet

April L. Racana / Music Specialist at Nishimachi International School where she has taught since 1992. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music), as well as a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University, and the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University.