**Program 5**

**Sospiri, Op. 70**

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)


Though the name of Elgar brings to mind the large compositions for which he is most widely known — the two Symphonies, the Concertos for Violin and for Cello, the “Enigma” Variations — he was also recognized by the audiences of his day for his many small orchestral works. More than once accused of writing beneath his abilities in such works as the wildly popular *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, he responded, “I look on the composer’s vocation as the old troubadours and bards did…. I know that there are a lot of people who like to celebrate events with music. To these people I have given tunes. Is that wrong? Why should I write a fugue or something that won’t appeal to anyone, when the people yearn for things which can stir them?” He composed many such short occasional pieces throughout his life. His first professional position after finishing his training was as director of music at the Powick Lunatic Asylum, where he not only conducted the band made up of inmates and attendants, but also composed sheaves of quadrilles for their use at five shillings each. (His belighted superior believed that the quadrille was the only type of music the residents of the establishment could appreciate.) Elgar’s last completed work, *Mina*, was a tonal portrait of his Cairn terrier.

Among these instrumental miniatures the one entitled *Sospiri* (“Sighs”) holds a special place by virtue of its thoughtful intensity. It is a musical tribute to two of Elgar’s dearest friends. The score was dedicated to W.H. Reed, the composer’s close companion (and eventual biographer) and a fine violinist, who was concertmaster of the London Symphony Orchestra during the time when that organization was performing and recording many of Elgar’s works. It was Reed who gave Elgar invaluable advice during the composition of the Violin Concerto in 1910, four years before *Sospiri* was written. The subdued mood of *Sospiri*, however, seems to have been occasioned by the death of Julia Worthington, an American who was an intimate friend of the Elgar family and one of that day’s most prominent hostesses. Of the nature of this expressive composition, Michael Kennedy wrote, “It is, though short, a major work of grave beauty, an epitome of Elgar’s ability to express nostalgic regret.”

In form and expression, *Sospiri* is similar to a slow symphonic movement. It begins with a single preludial chord, after which the violins sing a tender melody over an accompaniment of harp and sustained strings. The music becomes more impassioned, with frequent thematic interchanges among the strings, until it reaches a dynamic climax that is reinforced by the re-entry of the harp. Against a tremulous background, the plaintive theme passes into the middle strings before the violins once again take up the strain to bring *Sospiri* to its quiet, moving close.

**Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85**

Edward Elgar

Composed in 1918-1919. Premiered on October 27, 1919 in London, conducted by the composer with Felix Salmond as soloist.

It seemed that Elgar’s world was crumbling in 1918. The four years of war had left him, as so many others, weary and numb from the crush of events. Many of his friends of German ancestry were put through a bad time in England during those years; others whom he knew were killed or maimed in action. The traditional foundations of the British political system were skewered by the rise of socialism directly after the war, and Elgar saw his beloved Edwardian world drawing to a close. (He resembles that titan among *fin-de-siècle* musicians, Gustav Mahler, in his mourning of a passing age.) His music seemed anachronistic in an era of polychords and dodecaphony, a remnant of stuffy conservatism, and his 70th birthday concert in Queen’s Hall attracted only half a house. The health of his wife, his chief helpmate, inspiration and critic, began to fail, and with her passing in 1920, Elgar virtually stopped composing. The Cello Concerto, written just before his wife’s death, is Elgar’s last major work, and seems both to summarize his disillusion over the calamities of World War I and to presage the unhappiness of his last years.

Large sections of the Concerto are given over to the solitary ruminations of the cello in the form of recitativo-like passages, such as the one that opens the work. The forms of the Concerto’s four movements only suggest traditional models in their epigrammatic concentration. The first movement is a ternary structure (A–B–A), commencing after the opening recitative. A limpid, undulating theme in 9/8 (*Moderato*) is given by the lower strings as the material for the first and third sections of the form, while a related melody (12/8, with dotted rhythms) appears first in the woodwinds in the central portion.

The first movement is linked directly to the second (*Allegro molto*). It takes several tries before the music of the second movement is able to maintain its forward motion, but when it does, it proves to be a skittering, *moto perpetuo* display piece for the soloist. It is music, however, which, for all its hectic activity, seems strangely earth-bound, a sort of wild merriment not quite capable of banishing the dolorous thoughts of the opening movement. The almost-motionless stillness of the following *Ada* returns to the introspection of the opening movement. It, in the words of Herbert Byard, “seems to express the grief that is too deep for tears.” The finale, like the opening, is prefaced by a recitative for the soloist. The movement’s form following this introductory section is based on the Classical rondo, and makes a valiant attempt at the “hail-and-well-met” vigor of Elgar’s earlier march music. Like the *scherzando* second movement,
however, it seems more a nostalgic recollection of past abilities than a display of remaining powers. Toward the end, the stillness of the third movement creeps over the music, and the soloist indulges in an extended soliloquy. Brief bits of earlier movements are remembered before a final recall of the fast rondo music closes this thoughtful Concerto.

**The Fountains of Rome and The Pines of Rome**

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

The Fountains of Rome was composed in 1916, and premiered on March 11, 1917, conducted by Antonio Guarnieri.

The Pines of Rome was composed in 1923-1924, and premiered on December 14, 1924 in Rome, conducted by Bernardino Molinari.

*The Fountains of Rome* is the earliest of the Roman trilogy of symphonic poems by which Respighi is primarily represented in the world’s concert halls. (*The Pines of Rome* followed in 1924, *Roman Festivals* in 1929.) It was also his first great public success, though his notoriety was not achieved without a certain difficulty. Toscanini had agreed to conduct the premiere of the *Fountains*, late in 1916. Germany and Italy were at war then, and there had been recent bombings of Italian towns that resulted in heavy casualties. Despite heated anti-German feelings, however, Toscanini refused to drop from his programs selections by that arch Teuton Richard Wagner. When he began *Siegfried’s Funeral March* on one November concert, grumbling arose in the audience, and finally erupted with a shout from the balcony: “This piece is for the Paduan dead.” The infuriated Toscanini hurled his baton at the unruly audience and stormed off the stage and out of Rome. Plans for the premiere of *The Fountains of Rome* were therefore delayed, and the work had to wait until the following March to be heard, in a concert conducted by Antonio Guarnieri. Respighi’s wife, Elsa, reported that the premiere was not a success. Indeed, the composer, whose music had not yet found much favor, expected as much. Trying to make light of the possibility of failure, he warned one of his friends to “take your umbrella and galoshes” to the premiere of this modern-day “Water Music.” It was with Toscanini’s performances in Milan and Rome of the following year that *The Fountains of Rome* — and Respighi’s reputation — were established.

Respighi prefaced the orchestral score of *The Fountains of Rome* with the following description of the music:

“In this symphonic poem, the composer has endeavored to give expression to the sentiments and visions suggested to him by four of Rome’s fountains contemplated at the hour in which their character is most in harmony with the surrounding landscape, or in which their beauty appears most impressive to the observer.

“The first part of the poem, inspired by the fountain of *Valle Giulia*, depicts a pastoral landscape: droves of cattle pass and disappear in the fresh damp mists of a Roman dawn.

“A sudden loud and insistent blast of horns above the whole orchestra introduces the second part, *The Triton Fountain*. It is like a joyous call, summoning troops of naiads and tritons, who come running up, pursuing each other and mingling in a frenzy dance between the jets of water.

“Next there appears a solemn theme borne on the undulations of the orchestra. It is the fountain of *Trevi* at mid-day. The solemn theme, passing from the woodwind to the brass instruments, assumes a triumphant character. Trumpets peal: across the radiant surface of the water there passes Neptune’s chariot drawn by sea-horses and followed by a train of sirens and tritons. The procession then vanishes while faint trumpet blasts resound in the distance.

“The fourth part, *The Villa Medici Fountain*, is announced by a sad theme which rises above a subdued warbling. It is the nostalgic hour of sunset. The air is full of the sound of tolling bells, birds twittering, leaves rustling. Then all dies peacefully into the silence of the night.”

... Of *The Pines of Rome*, the second work of Respighi’s trilogy on Roman subjects, the composer wrote (in the third person): “While in his preceding work, *The Fountains of Rome*, the composer sought to reproduce by means of tone an impression of nature, in *The Pines of Rome* he uses nature as a point of departure in order to recall memories and visions. The centuries-old trees that dominate so characteristically the Roman landscape become testimony for the principal events in Roman life.” Respighi collected material for this work for some time. His wife, Elsa, recalled in her short biography of her husband that he had asked her in 1920 to sing some songs from her days of childhood play in the garden of the Villa Borghese. She was wonderfully surprised when they emerged four years later in the first section of *The Pines of Rome*.

Respighi supplied the following synopsis of the four continuous sections of *The Pines of Rome* as a preface to the score:

“1. *The Pines of the Villa Borghese*. Children are at play in the pine grove of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of ‘Ring around the Rosy’; mimicking marching soldiers and battles; twittering and shrieking like swallows at evening; and they disappear. Suddenly the scene changes to ...

“2. *The Pines near a Catacomb*. We see the shadows of the pines, which overhang the entrance of a catacomb. From the depths rises a chant which re-echoes solemnly, like a hymn, and is then mysteriously silenced.


“4. *The Pines of the Appian Way*. Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of innumerable steps. There appears a vision of past glories; trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul advances brilliantly in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph the Capitoline Hill.”

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