

Feste romane (Roman Festivals)

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Born

July 9, 1879, in Bologna, Italy

Died

April 18, 1936, in Rome

Work composed

1928; its first section draws on material originally written in 1926 for his unfinished symphonic poem *Nerone*

World premiere

February 21, 1929, in New York City, with Arturo Toscanini conducting the New York Philharmonic

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

October 24, 1998, at Long Island University's Tilles Center, Simone Young, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 25 minutes

After being schooled in his native Bologna, Respighi started his career in earnest as an orchestral viola player in Russia, where he had the opportunity to study with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, renowned as a master of orchestral color. Further study ensued in Berlin, with Max Bruch, before Respighi returned to make his mark in Italy. Although not a radical at heart, he became briefly associated in 1910 with the Italian anti-establishmentarian "Lega dei Cinque" ("League of Five") which also comprised Pizzetti, Malipiero, Bastianelli, and Bossi. The league advocated, in Bastianelli's words, "the *risorgimento* of Italian music ... which from the end of the

golden 18th century until today has been, with very few exceptions, depressed and circumscribed by commercialism and philistinism." (That rustling you just heard was Giuseppe Verdi turning over in his grave.)

Within a few years Respighi was appointed composition professor at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and when Alfredo Casella came on board as his colleague in 1915, bringing with him some of the radical ideas that he had picked up during a recent residence in France, Respighi was again swept up in a burst of modernist enthusiasm. He soon retreated to his essentially conservative stance, and in 1932 he joined nine other conservative composers in signing a manifesto that condemned the deleterious effects of music by figures such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky and encouraged a return to established Italian tradition. (Curiously, Mussolini came down in favor of the modernists, although he was personally a fan of Respighi's music.)

By then Respighi was very famous and very rich: success had come his way through his hugely popular tone poem *Fountains of Rome*, composed in 1915–16. He followed that up with two further, vaguely related tone poems; the three are not infrequently presented as a three-movement "Roman Triptych": *Pines of Rome* (1923–24), famous for, among other things, the composer's use of a recording of a nightingale — a radical bit of electronic orchestration at its time; *Roman Festivals* would follow in 1928.

One of Respighi's hallmarks was, to put it bluntly, his willingness to go what many would consider "over the top." *Roman Festivals* is not a work for the timid; the composer proudly averred that it represented his "maximum of orchestral sonority and color." Take a look at the instrumentation list at the end of this note: that's one big orchestra!

Respighi's music speaks for itself because of his acute tone-painting. In the first movement, the ferocious roaring of wild beasts comes across loud and clear, thanks to the bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, horns, trombones, tuba, timpani, cellos, and basses, playing *fortissimo*. In "The Jubilee" we can easily imagine

the procession of weary pilgrims chanting (curiously, a German hymn from the 12th century), and in "The October Festival" we experience a mixture of celebratory stimulation and autumnal languor.

No holds are barred in the concluding "Epiphany," whose episodes the composer

In the Composer's Words

Respighi supplied the following descriptions for each movement of *Roman Festivals* (although we've amended some of the more egregious infelicities of translation that appear in the Ricordi Edition score used for this performance):

Games at the Circus

Maximus — A threatening sky hangs over the Circus Maximus (reconstructed in image on right), but it is the people's holiday: "Ave Nero!" The iron doors are unlocked, the strains of a religious song and the howling of wild beasts float on the air. The crowd rises in agitation: unperturbed, the song of the martyrs develops, conquers, and then is lost in the tumult.



The Jubilee — The pilgrims trail along the highway, praying. Finally, from the summit of Monte Mario, the holy city appears to ardent eyes and gasping souls: "Rome, Rome!" A hymn of praise bursts forth, the churches ring out their reply.

The October Festival — The October festival in the Roman *castelli* covered with vines: hunting echoes, tinkling of bells, songs of love. Then in the tender evenfall arises a romantic serenade.

The Epiphany — The night before Epiphany in the Piazza Navona (right): a characteristic rhythm of trumpets dominates the frantic clamor; above the swelling noise float, from time to time, rustic motives, saltarello cadences,



the strains of a barrel-organ from a booth, the barker's call, the harsh song of the intoxicated, and the lively verse in which is expressed popular sentiments. "Lassâtece passà, semo Romani!" — "We are Romans, let us pass!"

depicts almost as precisely as would photographs. Has a staggering drunkard ever been more unmistakably portrayed than one is here by a solo trombone? By the end, Respighi piles up sonority upon sonority to achieve one of the most tumultuous raisings of the roof you will ever hear.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus high clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tambourine, ratchet, sleigh bells, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, orchestra bells, tubular bells, xylophone, wood blocks, piano (two hands and four hands), organ, mandolin, three buccine (offstage, and in this performance played by three trumpets), and strings.

For More Information ...

Elsa Respighi, the composer's widow, published the indispensable biography *Ottorino Respighi* (1954), which I do not know to be available in English.

For a recording of *Roman Festivals*, an appropriately effusive reading is provided by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic (Sony Classical). Of particular historical interest are recordings by Arturo Toscanini, leading the NBC Symphony Orchestra and The Philadelphia Orchestra (on separate BMG/RCA Victor compilations).

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Listen for ...

Respighi's orchestra for *Feste Romane* calls for more than a couple of "special-effects" instruments, such as **buccine**. You won't find these often in modern orchestras (though Respighi had already used six of them in *Pines of Rome*). The *buccina* (below) was a curved brass instrument of ancient Rome, originally made of animal horn but later covered in brass, whose musical contributions were limited to a few pitches of the overtone series; it was used mostly for herding and for military signals. James McKinnon, writing in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, informs us that "a number of poetic references contrasted its sleep-shattering call to arms with the soporific and erotic associations of instruments such as the kithara." Respighi wants three of them in this work but, in a nod to practicality, allows for substitutions, and so tonight these parts will be played by three trumpets. Picture toga-clad horn-blowers when you hear **their fanfare at the outset**.

