Ottorino Respighi was schooled in his native Bologna, where his professors included the eminent Giuseppe Martucci, but he started his career in earnest with a faraway appointment as a viola player at the Imperial Opera in St. Petersburg, where he had the opportunity to study with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Further work ensued in Berlin, with Max Bruch, before Respighi returned to Italy. Although he was not a radical at heart, he became briefly associated in 1910 with the anti-establishmentarian Lega dei Cinque, an Italian “League of Five” to balance the “Russian Five” of the preceding century. The League advocated, as a fellow member put it, “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.”

In 1932 Respighi joined nine other conservative composers to sign a declaration condemning the deleterious effect of such figures as Schoenberg and Stravinsky and encouraging a return to Italian tradition. By then he was rich and famous; success had arrived through his hugely popular tone poem Fountains of Rome, composed in 1915–16, and he had ridden its wave with the ensuing Pines of Rome (1923–24) and Roman Festivals (1928).

One of the traits that set Respighi apart as an individual voice was his fascination with the music of the distant past, both from Italy and elsewhere. His orchestral elaborations on early repertoire are among his most heard works today, including his three installments of Ancient Airs and Dances — essentially symphonic transcriptions of 16th- and 17th-century lute pieces — and The Birds, based on keyboard movements from the Baroque era. He produced numerous stand-alone orchestral transcriptions of pieces by such Baroque and Classical composers as Vitali, Benedetto Marcello, Boccherini, Pergolesi, and Cimarosa. The symphonic transcriptions he made around 1930 of several of Bach’s organ works (including the towering C-minor Passacaglia) occasionally surface, to the delight of audiences who relish flamboyant orchestral color and the outrage of listeners of a more puristic disposition. The revival of music by Claudio Monteverdi owes much to Respighi, whose large-orchestra realizations of that composer’s Lamento d’Arianna (1908, championed by Arthur Nikisch and the Berlin Philharmonic) and Orfeo (produced at La Scala in 1935) provided an emphatic nudge to essential repertoire that at that time was just beginning to emerge from general oblivion.

The creation of his Trittico botticelliano (Botticelli Triptych) was connected to the great doyenne of musical patronage Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, to whom it is dedicated. It appears that she had quietly underwritten the composer’s first visit to the United States, at the end of 1925 and beginning of 1926, during which he presented the world premiere of his Concerto in the

In Short

**Born:** July 9, 1879, in Bologna, Italy

**Died:** April 18, 1936, in Rome

**Work composed:** 1927; dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge

**World premiere:** September 28, 1927, at the Vienna Konzerthaus, with the composer conducting

**New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performances:** March 16–20, 1932, with the composer conducting

**Estimated duration:** ca. 18 minutes
Mixolydian Mode, performing as piano soloist with the New York Philharmonic. Respighi and his wife, Elsa, returned a year later, and during that second visit they attended a chamber concert at the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Elsa wrote,

During our visit Respighi spoke of a new idea—a work for small orchestra inspired by three Botticelli pictures to be called Trittico botticelliano and dedicated to Mrs. Coolidge.

He completed the piece in time for it to be premiered that September in Vienna, in one of a series of concerts Mrs. Coolidge was sponsoring into Central and Eastern Europe. “A good performance and quite well received,” Elsa reported.

The work’s three movements are miniature tone poems relating to famous paintings of the Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445–1510), all residing in the Uffizi Galleries in Florence: La primavera (Spring), L’adorazione dei Magi (The Adoration of the Magi), and La nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus). True to form, Respighi endows a “period” flavor by quoting from earlier music. In the first movement one hears the 15th-century Canto di maggio and the medieval troubadour song A l’entrada del tens clar; and the second movement includes the Christmas songs Veni, veni Emmanuel and Tu scendi dalle stelle (a late piece in this context, apparently dating only to the mid-18th century).

**Instrumentation:** flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, triangle, orchestra bells, celesta, harp, piano, and strings.

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**Sources and Inspirations**

Trittico botticelliano was first performed by the New York Philharmonic in March 1932, on an all-Respighi concert that was conducted by the composer, who was replacing an indisposed Arturo Toscanini. The program book reprinted a commentary that Elsa Respighi had penned for a Cleveland Orchestra performance of her husband’s Trittico botticelliano three years earlier:

1. **Spring.** Spring is personified by the figure of a woman. She comes forward scattering flowers, while all Nature round about her awakes. Young women, wreathed with flowers, weave dances, the birds sing. Trills, songs, and dances follow each other in the orchestra with rhythms of joy.

2. **The Adoration of the Magi.** Around the hovel of Bethlehem the kings who have come from the East are in adoration. The caravans arrive with the precious gifts. Pastoral instruments play shepherds’ songs.

3. **The Birth of Venus.** From the sea, blown along by the wind, comes Venus, in a shell of mother-of-pearl. On a rhythmical design which recalls the small waves of the picture, there is developed, freeing itself little by little from every harmony, a melody which rises like a hymn to eternal beauty.