

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
April 28, 2018
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This closing concert of our season has a distinctly Italian flavor. Mendelssohn's vivacious "Italian" symphony is a musical souvenir of the happy times he spent in Italy while touring Europe as a young man. Mezzo-soprano Naomi O'Connell joins the Peoria Symphony Orchestra for a song cycle by Giuseppe Martucci - a passionate remembrance of love found and then lost. Rounding off the program is the evocative *Pines of Rome* by Respighi: the composer's colorful musical portrait of his home town, closing with the stirring sound of an ancient Roman army on the march.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Symphony No.4 in A Major, p.90 ("Italian")

Mendelssohn composed the Symphony No.4 in 1830-33, and conducted the first performance in London on May 13, 1833. He later revised the score extensively.

Like many young men of wealthy nineteenth-century families, Felix Mendelssohn was able to indulge in the tradition of the "grand tour"—indeed, Mendelssohn seems to have spent most of his early adulthood as a tourist. Mendelssohn's letters from this period show him to be a keen and enthusiastic observer of the lands and cultures he visited. During 1830-31, Mendelssohn was in Italy, touring and socializing with other artistic-minded travelers (including Hector Berlioz). Italy seems to have been one of Mendelssohn's favorite stopovers. In a letter of 1830, he wrote: "This is Italy! What I have been looking forward to all my life as the greatest happiness is now begun, and I am basking in it."

That Mendelssohn would write a symphony inspired by festive Italian culture comes as no surprise. His traveling experiences provided inspiration for some of his finest musical works—his "Scotch" symphony (No.3) and the *Hebrides Overture*, are two of the very best musical observations of Scotland ever written. Most of the *Symphony No.4* was sketched out during his Italian tour. In February of 1831, he wrote from Rome to his sister Fanny: "The 'Italian' symphony is making great progress. It will be the jolliest piece I have ever done, especially the last movement. I have not found anything for the slow movement yet, and I think that I will save that for Naples."

Like Mozart, Mendelssohn has the historical reputation of effortless talent, but the "Italian" symphony was actually the product of many revisions. In another letter of 1831, Mendelssohn complained to Fanny that the piece was not falling together as well as he had originally thought, and was costing him an undue amount of effort. He completed the score in Berlin in March 1833, and conducted the first performance a few months later in London. However, Mendelssohn revised the score extensively in 1837, and at the time of his death he was planning to revise the *Saltarello* yet again. The 1837 version of the symphony (the version known today) was probably never performed during Mendelssohn's lifetime, and was only published after his death.

None of the creative pains that the “Italian” symphony cost the composer are evident in this, the “jolliest” of Mendelssohn's symphonies. The exuberant opening movement (*Allegro vivace*) is in 6/8 and is set in a thoroughly Classical sonata form. The opening theme is stated by the strings over a background of repeated chords in the winds. The second theme, announced by the woodwinds, is no less festive. Mendelssohn introduces a new, rather martial theme at the beginning of the fugal development section. A lengthy and dramatic crescendo leads into the recapitulation, which includes a brief reworking of the martial theme from the development.

In his letter to Fanny, Mendelssohn wrote that he intended to “save” the slow movement until he arrived in Naples, and the *Andante con moto* seems in fact to have been inspired by a religious procession that the composer witnessed in that city. The clarinet's opening figure sounds much like the chant intonation of a priest, and the plodding *pizzicato* bass line sets up a rather doleful mood for the main theme of the movement. This main theme is not in itself Italian, but may have been based upon a melody by Mendelssohn's composition teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter.

The third movement, marked *Con moto moderato*, is in the spirit of a courtly Classical minuet. At the center of this movement is a lovely, pastoral trio with sonorous horns and delicate woodwind lines, that sounds much like Mendelssohn's later incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The finale, titled *Saltarello*, is actually a combination of two Italian dances: the *Saltarello*, a jumping dance of ancient origin, and the *Tarantella*, a frantically fast and whirling couple dance. According to Italian tradition, the *Tarantella* is danced by the victim of a spider bite—the victim dances until he or she is cured (or dead). There is no stopping for breath in this energetic *finale*, which is not without a few dark moments. We hear directly from the composer's heart in this last movement — as Mendelssohn wrote to Zelter from Rome: “...I am enjoying the most wonderful combination of gaiety and seriousness, such as can only be found in Italy.”

Giuseppe Martucci (1856-1909) **La Canzone dei Ricordi (The Song of Memories)**

Martucci completed this song cycle in a version for piano and voice in 1886-1888, and he orchestrated it in 1898. The first performance was in Düsseldorf, on November 1, 1900. Duration 33:00.

Late 19th-century Italy was dominated by opera, and Giuseppe Martucci was overshadowed—then and now—by operatic composers like Verdi and Puccini. But Martucci, who focused most of his attention on instrumental works, was nevertheless an important figure in Italian musical life. Born near Naples, he studied first with his father, a military band director, and by the time he was 11 years old, he was studying piano and composition at the Naples Conservatory. While still in his teens Martucci made a name

for himself as a piano virtuoso, touring Italy, England, and Ireland, and earning admiration from none other than an aging Franz Liszt. In his twenties, he turned his attention more and more to composition and conducting—a wealthy Neapolitan patron funded an orchestra for Martucci to conduct, and he led a series of successful concerts in Naples throughout the early 1880s. In 1886, when he was just 30 years old, he accepted an invitation to Bologna to take prestigious posts as director of the conservatory, and as conductor of the most important Bolognese concert series. During his 16 years in Bologna, Martucci had a strong impact on Italian musical life, in particular introducing Italian audiences to contemporary works by non-Italians: Brahms, Wagner, Franck, D'Indy, Stanford and many others. This was also the period that saw the composition of most of his significant works. In 1902, he returned to Naples to direct the conservatory where he had studied as a teenager.

As a composer, Martucci was notable among the Italians in his day in that he wrote primarily instrumental pieces: several large orchestral works—including two symphonies and two piano concertos—over a dozen chamber works, and well over 100 works for solo piano. The orchestral song cycle heard here is one of relatively few works he wrote for the voice. He was also remarkable in the extent to which he was interested in music from outside of Italy, particularly Brahms and Wagner. While in Bologna, Martucci conducted the first Italian performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in 1888, and repeatedly programmed the symphonies of Brahms. (He and Brahms became friends, and Martucci later befriended Gustav Mahler as well.) Martucci also adapted many of these German influences into his own works, and the influence of Wagner is clearly heard in his song cycle *La Canzone dei Ricordi*. This song dates from early in his time in Bologna—a setting of seven highly emotional poems by the Neapolitan poet, critic, and librarian Rocco Pagliara (1855-1914).

Pagliara's poems trace the arc of a love affair played out in the poet's memory: from hopeful springtime beginnings to a weeping end. The opening poem, *No... svaniti non sono i sogni, e cedo* ("No... the dreams haven't vanished, and I yield"), serves as a kind of wistful introduction, as the poet summons memories of lost love. The delicate string accompaniment to this song is the perfect background to the nostalgic text. *Cantava'l ruscello la gaia canzone* ("The brook sang its cheerful song") is much lighter, with the orchestra providing the forest backdrop—a murmuring brook, birdcalls, and gentle breezes—to the poet wandering through the woods savoring a new found love. There is one short twinge of regret at the end, as the singer recalls that this is but a memory. *Fior di ginestra* ("Broom flower") is a lovely serenade, interrupted by more serious thoughts, and ending on a brief note of tragedy. In the fourth song, *Su'l mar la navicella* ("Over the sea, the little boat"), the orchestra provides a gentle, undulating background to the singer's memories of happier times spent by the sea. In *Un vago mormorio mi giunge* ("A faint murmuring reaches me"), the love affair has ended, and the orchestra provides a sensitive background to this tragic text. In the sixth poem, *A'l folto bosco, placida ombria* ("To the dense woods, to the placid shade"), the poet returns alone to the same forest where the love affair began—a kind of dark mirror image of the second song. The final poem is a shortened version of the first, now serving as a sentimental epilogue.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) The Pines of Rome

The Pines of Rome was composed in 1923-24. The first performance was on December 14, 1924, in Rome.

The “Roman trilogy” of Respighi—the most successful Italian composer of his generation—includes three large symphonic poems that are easily his most famous works: *The Fountains of Rome* (1916), *The Pines of Rome* (1924), and *Roman Festivals* (1928). In these works, the composer creates a sonic portrait of his city—from *Fountains*, celebrating the great Bernini monuments, to the wild revelry of *Festivals*, Respighi paints a colorful, programmatic picture of the Eternal City. For the central work, *The Pines of Rome*, Respighi uses images of the ancient trees that line Rome’s parks and promenades to inspire four programmatic episodes. The four movements are played without pauses.

In the score, Respighi provides the following description of the first section, *Pines of the Villa Borghese*: “Children are at play in the pine grove of the Villa Borghese, dancing ‘Ring around the Rosy’; they mimic marching soldiers and battles; they chirp with excitement like swallows at evening, and they swarm away.” The music is appropriately light and high-spirited, with quick woodwind and horn lines beneath trumpet fanfares.

For *Pines near a Catacomb*, he turns to a much darker, “quasi-Medieval” texture. Respighi was fond of using Gregorian chant or chant like themes in his orchestral works, and the *Lento* second movement begins with a quiet chant that builds gradually towards a tremendous orchestral statement near the end of the movement. Here, we see “the shadows of the pines that crown the entrance to a catacomb. From the depths rises a dolorous chant which spreads solemnly, like a hymn, and then mysteriously dies away.”

In his description of *Pines of the Janiculum*, the composer notes: “There is a tremor in the air. The pines of the Janiculum hill are profiled in the full moon. A nightingale sings.” This is profoundly calm and quiet night-music, carried by the softer voices of the orchestra throughout. At the very conclusion, a recording of a nightingale’s singing is added to the orchestral texture—probably the very earliest instance of a composer using prerecorded sounds in a concert piece.

The final section is titled *Pines of the Appian Way*. Respighi gives the following colorful description of an ancient Roman army on the march: “Misty Dawn on the Appian Way. Solitary pines stand guard over the tragic countryside. The faint unceasing rhythm of numberless steps. A vision of ancient glories appears to the poet; trumpets blare and a consular army erupts in the brilliance of the newly risen sun—towards the Sacred Way, mounting to a triumph on the Capitoline Hill.” The movement opens quietly, with a slow and inexorable march, but builds gradually towards an enormous brassy peak (with several brassy knolls along the way). To create this picture of Roman military might,

Respighi's score calls for six *bucinae*—Roman war trumpets. [**Note:** He also provides the helpful suggestion that modern trumpets may be used if *bucinae* are not available!]

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