

## **Trittico Botticelliano for small orchestra**

### **Ottorino Respighi**

Born: July 18, 1879 – Bologna, Italy

Died: April 18, 1936 – Rome, Italy

*Piece Length: Approximately 20 minutes.*

In 1927 Elsa Respighi, an accomplished soprano, went on an American concert tour, accompanied by her husband Ottorino. This tour was sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a great patron of the arts who supported and commissioned many of the leading composers of the time, including Copland's Appalachian Spring which the Omaha Symphony presented last month! After one of Elsa's concerts at the Library of Congress featuring Respighi's works, Ottorino promised Coolidge that his next composition would be dedicated to her. A few weeks later, he visited the Uffizi Gallery in Florence where among the artistic treasures were three paintings by Sandro Botticelli that became the inspiration for the Trittico Botticelliano.

The first movement was inspired by Botticelli's painting "La Primavera" (Spring). The painting depicts nine characters from mythology including Zephyrus, Chloris, Venus, and Cupid in a forest of orange and laurel trees. The painting has been described as a "celebration of love, peace, and prosperity." Respighi's music depicts the brightness and optimism of spring. The work opens with high, energetic trills and flourishes over horn calls that set up a charming, dance-like melody distinctive by its variety of long-short rhythms, first introduced in the bassoon. This bright dance music calms down and leads to the second musical idea in the oboe, clarinet, and bassoon that suggests music from the Renaissance. After a few variations on this theme that showcase Respighi's incredible orchestrational palette, the music from the introductions takes us back to the opening theme briefly before the Renaissance-like music is joyously restated in the entire orchestra. The introduction's music slowly returns before bringing the movement to its somewhat ambiguous conclusion.

The second movement is inspired by the painting "L'adorazione dei Magi" (The Adoration of the Magi). The painting was commissioned for Gespare di Zanodi del Lama's chapel Santa Maria Novella, located in Florence. The painting features many members of the Medici family who surround Mary and her baby Jesus. This movement of the musical composition, which is the longest and can be compared to a large central panel of a triptych - a work of art painted on three panels that can be folded shut or displayed open that was popular in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. This movement opens with a wandering dotted rhythm melody in a solo bassoon. The oboe and horn join in, and after a quasi-improvisatory passage in the flute, the flute and bassoon present the well known hymn Veni, Veni Emmanuel (Oh, Come, Oh Come Emmanuel). A faster section follows that moves forward through a two bar ostinato (a short musical idea that repeats over an extended period of time) in the strings in which bright, bell-like sounds are played by the celesta, harp and piano and juxtaposed by melodic fragments in the winds. The music moves forward before coming to a resolution where the bassoon plays the Italian Christmas song "Tu scendi dalle stelle" (You Descend From the Stars.). The movement ends gently with the bassoon solo that opened the movement accompanied by strings.

The finale is inspired by arguably Botticelli's most famous painting, "La nascita di Venere," (the Birth of Venus), which depicts Venus on a seashell in the water. The movement opens with the strings playing a gentle dotted rhythm that suggests the lapping of water. The movement slowly builds as more of the orchestra joins in, initially playing melodic fragments over the lapping water music before musically

depicting the glorious birth of the goddess of love with the entire orchestra playing the water music. The extended crescendo that is a main feature of this movement may remind listeners of Respighi's depiction of the Roman army's triumphant return home in the Pines of Rome, however, while the Pines of Rome ends with a stunning orchestral tutti, Respighi brings the Trittico Botticelliano to a gentle conclusion with the quiet return of the lapping water idea.