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RESPIGHI
BALLAD OF
THE GNOMES
THREE BOTTICELLI PICTURES

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA

Geoffrey Simon

**BALLAD OF THE GNOMES
THREE BOTTICELLI PICTURES**
OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)

1	Ballad of the Gnomes	[15.02]
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2	I. Spring	[5.20]
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5	I. Preludio	[3.26]
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	Leslie Person <i>organ</i>	
9	Adagio with Variations for Cello and Orchestra	[13.08]
	Alexander Baillie <i>cello</i>	
	Total timings:	[69.04]

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA
GEOFFREY SIMON CONDUCTOR

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

(Bologna, 1879–Rome, 1936)

Ottorino Respighi's position in twentieth-century music is fully secure, due to the continuing popularity of an assortment of colourful and expertly crafted compositions which particularly reflect his mastery of the orchestra. Unlike Puccini and others, whose fame rests on their operatic output, Respighi is the only major Italian composer of his time to have made his name with music written solely for the concert hall, such as the well-known triptych of works celebrating the Eternal City—*The Fountains of Rome*, *The Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*.

Born in Bologna in 1879, Respighi's early musical studies took him at the age of 23 to Russia for lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov. These were to have a vital influence on his technical development, whilst a sojourn in Berlin a few years later, where he attended lectures given by Max Bruch, found Respighi coming under the considerable musical spell of Richard Strauss.

Respighi then returned to Bologna, but in 1913 settled in Rome for the rest of his life and it was here that he was to produce a large amount of highly varied music—some of it well-known, much of it less so. Geoffrey Simon's championship of the little-known works of celebrated composers has proved highly successful both on record and in the concert hall, and his exploration of Respighi's

catalogue has yielded a number of colourful compositions whose neglect hitherto remains something of a mystery. The works recorded here cover a wide range of moods, from the opulence and excitement for which Respighi was noted in his famous Roman Trilogy, to more reflective pieces inspired by a nostalgia for the music of the past.

1 **Ballad of the Gnomes** (*Ballata delle gnomidi*)

This extraordinary symphonic tone-poem was composed between *The Fountains of Rome* (1918) and *The Pines of Rome* (1925) and was inspired by verses written by the lawyer-cum-poet Carlo Clausetti (1869-1943). Clausetti's father was a music printer who had opened a shop in Naples opposite the San Carlo Theatre, and it was here that the Naples branch of Ricordi was eventually established. This was the publishing firm which was to put out most of Respighi's music, and in time Carlo Clausetti became director of both the Naples and Milan offices of Ricordi, making a considerable name for himself as music editor, composer and stage director. He befriended Respighi, Puccini and many other Italian composers and musicians and was, in the words of his offspring, Eugenio, "a typical son of the golden age of the Neapolitan nobility at the turn of the century."

His poem, *Ballata delle gnomidi*, first appeared in print in the Naples journal *Il Mattino* on 13 August 1899 and was a clever experiment in Italian verse. It attempted to explore a vein of literature which was common in ancient Greek, Roman and Nordic mythology, whereby innocent males come to decidedly sticky ends at the hands of unscrupulous females. One thinks of the Sirens luring sailors to their doom with voluptuous singing, or of the hydra-headed Medusa turning to stone any hero who gazes upon her.

Perhaps Clausetti even got his idea from a poem by the Russian romantic Mikhail Lermontov which told of an evil seductress who enticed unwary travellers into her tower and in the morning tossed their lifeless corpses into the river below. (Balakirev's celebrated tone-poem *Tamara*, based on this legend, was composed in 1882 and was a particular favourite of Sir Thomas Beecham).

Clausetti's original poem ran to nine stanzas but was much expanded when it appeared in the preface to Respighi's score in 1920. The Italian title indicates that the gnomes (or gnomides) are of the female variety and Clausetti's ballad describes a hair-raising ceremony in which two tiny harridans snatch an equally diminutive male from among their number and drag him unwillingly to bed in the middle of the night.

It would be indelicate in the extreme to speculate just what goes on during this nocturnal *menage-a-trois* and in any case the poet merely leaves things to the

reader's imagination. Suffice to say that whatever it is they subject him to, the two wives conclude the proceedings in grisly fashion by putting the poor gnome to death with drastic suddenness and his scream of horror resounds through the inky darkness.

As day breaks, the two women haul the misshapen corpse, still warm and blood-stained, to a conveniently handy cliff-top and without further ado throw it into the sea. This ritual, for that is what it appears to be, is the signal for a wild dance, and the assembled gnomes join the two under-sized hags in their horrendous cavortings high above the watery grave of their erstwhile mutual husband.

To say that Respighi rose to the occasion would be an understatement: his wildly dramatic, sometimes sensuous, sometimes hypnotically rhythmic music reaches a peak of excitement which fully captures the mood of Clausetti's poem and prompts reminiscences of *The Dance of the Seven Veils* in Richard Strauss's *Salome*.

Notwithstanding this first-class musical influence, however, the work had a poor reception in Rome at its first performance on 11 April 1920 under Bernadino Molinari's direction, though it achieved much greater success over the next decade when both Arturo Toscanini and Fritz Reiner played it in Europe and America.

Geoffrey Simon has found that it makes a most effective opener to a public concert; after a performance in which

he revived the work with the Sacramento Orchestra in January 1992, the critic Holly Johnson commented that “the orchestra revelled in Respighi’s colouration... rapid violin glissandos, suddenly slicing through the score, created whooping noises, gnome laughter in this case, and when the murder occurs, the fiddles screech as in Bernard Herrmann’s *Psycho* soundtrack.”

This spectacular work now appears for the first time on record, and is accompanied by a new translation of Clausetti’s verses made especially for this recording.

Ballad of the Gnomes

*Their flimsy skirts are fluttering in the wind,
as the women drag the gibbering gnome along.*

*The tiny man kicks wildly as he hangs
between two females,*

*both soon to be his, whom a single
marriage bed is now awaiting.*

*O she-gnomes, may this race with him be brief,
lest he falls exhausted as the Great
Bear fades from heaven.*

*No torches lit that monstrous consummation,
but outside, hordes of gnomes were
waiting, eager for their prey.*

*And then a ghastly scream pierced through the night,
so painful as to chase away the darkness.*

*Then—silence. The dawn was slowly breaking
as the mad wives dragged their lifeless
trophy from the bed-chamber.*

*And they carried him away, followed
by a teeming mass of cunning
little demons muttering prayers which
sound like dreadful curses,
in a blasphemous tongue heard only
in the depths of blackest hell.*

*A rough pathway brought them to a cliff-top,
whose sharp ridge towered above a sea of cobalt blue.
In a trice, the defiled bridegroom was hurled over,
and the ritual was at an end.*

*Now, at the summit of the hill, after their sleepless night,
the two women sway in the morning breeze,
and as daylight breaks, the tiny folk
join the bloodthirsty widows
in their dancing.*

*They shriek, they bite, they mock and cackle loudly,
an insane frenzy seizes each and every gnome,
as in a Witches Sabbath!*

Freely translated into English (with acknowledgements to
Michael Aspinall and Philip Rham)

Three Botticelli Pictures

(*Trittico Botticelliano*)

2 I. Spring

3 II. The Adoration of the Magi

4 III. The Birth of Venus

In *Ballad of the Gnomes* Respighi took poetry as his inspiration, whereas the music for *Three Botticelli Pictures* was, naturally enough, provided by the visual splendours of paintings by the great fifteenth-century master, Sandro Botticelli. The work was dedicated to the American patroness of the arts, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and was first performed in 1927 under the composer's direction at a festival which she organised in Vienna. The scoring throughout is particularly luminous and transparent (Respighi eschews a large orchestra for these little self-contained tone poems) and the fantasy and atmosphere are evocatively in-built.

Spring, the first piece, is a call to action, with trills in winds and strings: the pastoral world of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is not far away, nor is music for hunting and dancing.

The Adoration of the Magi looks back to medieval church music (the ancient hymn O Come, O Come, Emmanuel is a familiar theme here) and its quasi-religious mood is combined with an orientalism in the middle section where piano, celeste and harp join together in a rhythmic passage to suggest the arrival of the Three Kings.

The Birth of Venus depicts the goddess in her sea-shell as the waters gently undulate to a romantic melody which surges through the strings. This arch-shaped movement reaches a sonorous Respighian climax, and then gradually fades away in the distance as the aquatic beauty is carried gently out to sea.

Suite in G Major for Strings and Organ

5 I. Preludio

6 II. Aria

7 III. Pastorale

8 IV. Canto

Here we find Respighi in baroque mood, inspired by composers of the seventeenth century to produce a four-movement suite which has its basis in the old-style concerto grosso. Respighi was a noted transcriber of the old Italian masters—Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Frescobaldi and others—so naturally enough this *Suite for Strings and Organ* incorporates archaic features within the sumptuous colouring which Respighi conjures from his unusual resources.

The lively opening *Preludio* inhabits the same sound-world as a toccata of Bach, whose influence extends throughout the entire work. The succeeding *Aria* was actually the first movement to be composed, and was heard in a concert in 1902 before being incorporated into the whole suite some three years later. Its yearning melody is one of Respighi's most heartfelt creations—indeed, it might be said to be his own *Air on the G string*.

A lilting and celestial *Pastorale* comes next, bringing to the memory the *Pastoral Symphony* in Handel's *The Messiah*. A solemn *Cantico*, sturdy and masculine in its outer sections, tranquil and reflective at its centre, brings the work to a resonant and imposing conclusion.

9 Adagio with Variations for Cello and Orchestra

This music began life in the early 1900s in what has been described as Respighi's "juvenilia" period. Originally a piece for cello and piano, it was revised and expanded into a concert work for cello and orchestra in 1921 at the suggestion of Antonio Certani, a cellist friend of Respighi who became the work's dedicatee. Although quite short, its warm melodic line, lack of bravura, melancholic mood and rhapsodic nature capture perfectly the expressive singing qualities of the soloist with classic serenity.

The beauty of this piece makes it all the more regrettable that Respighi didn't go on to write a full-scale cello concerto. Had he done so, the repertoire might well have been enhanced by a work which could have taken its place alongside the cello concertos of Dvorak and Elgar, and the *Rococo Variations* of Tchaikovsky.

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GEOFFREY SIMON

Australian conductor Geoffrey Simon is resident in London and has appeared there with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, London Chamber Orchestra, London Mozart Players and English Chamber Orchestra.

Internationally, he has appeared with the Adelaide, Atlanta, Bournemouth, Canberra, City of Birmingham, Fort Worth, Melbourne, Milwaukee, Queensland, Sapporo, Shanghai, St Louis, Sydney, Tasmanian, Vermont and West Australian Symphony Orchestras, the Israel, Moscow, Munich and New Japan Philharmonic Orchestras, the American Symphony, the Residentie Orchestra of The Hague, the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony and the Australian Opera.

His music directorships have included the Albany Symphony Orchestra (New York), the Australian Sinfonia (London), the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra (Indiana), the Orquestra Simfònica de Balears "Ciutat de Palma" (Majorca) and the Sacramento Symphony (California). With the Palma Orchestra he conducted Paul Patterson's *Te Deum* for the King and Queen of Spain, and with the Sacramento Symphony he created the *World View* series of concerts, attracting audiences from twenty non-European cultures.

Geoffrey Simon is Music Director Emeritus of the Northwest Mahler Orchestra in Seattle, with which he has conducted the Mahler symphonic cycle and Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*. He has served as a jury member for Young Concert Artists, PianoTexas, Australian Cello Awards and Royal Over-Seas League.

Geoffrey Simon was a student of Herbert von Karajan, Rudolf Kempe, Hans Swarowsky and Igor Markevich, and a major prize-winner at the first John Player International Conductors' Award. He has made forty six recordings for a number of labels, combining discoveries with familiar works by Tchaikovsky, Respighi, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Smetana, Bloch, Grainger, Debussy, Ravel, Saint-Saëns and Les Six. Amongst the contemporary composers he has recorded are Barry Cunningham, John Downey, Paul Patterson and Zhou Long. For Cala Signum, Geoffrey Simon has brought together large ensembles of single instruments—violins, violas, cellos, double basses, horns, trumpets, trombones and harps—drawn from London's leading solo, orchestral and chamber musicians. Known as *The London Sound Series*, the recordings have attracted interest amongst instrumentalists worldwide. Geoffrey Simon's virtuoso 20-cello ensemble, The London Cello Orchestra, has performed for H.M. The Queen and H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, and appeared in New York, Switzerland and South Korea.

LESLIE PEARSON

Leslie Pearson has enjoyed one of the most distinguished and varied careers of all keyboard players. His performances both on the concert platform and in commercial studios have entertained millions. He has performed in the televised *The Three Tenors Spectacular* in London, in Munich and Florida; throughout the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* as well as in the long running television series *Dr Who* (14 years), *Poirot* and *Lovejoy*. He has also performed in the more intimate setting of Buckingham Palace and in private concerts for H.M. The Queen Mother and H.R.H. Prince Charles. In April 2005, he played the harpsichord at the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla at St Georges Chapel, Windsor.

Leslie has been the official keyboard player (organ, harpsichord, piano and celeste) of the Philharmonia Orchestra for nearly 40 years, working under conductors such as Sir Thomas Beecham, Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Ricardo Muti and Christoph von Dohnányi.

His sensitive and imaginative continuo playing has received great critical acclaim. Particularly well-received were a recording of Handel's *Water Music* with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Muti, as well as three recordings of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*: with Henryk Szeryng and the ECO (Philips), Gidon Kremer and the LSO (Deutsche Grammophon) and Itzhak Perlman and the Israel Philharmonic/EMI. He has taken part in two recordings of *The Messiah*, with the LSO under Colin Davis and the ECO under Raymond Leppard.

Leslie has written music for schools programming on television, for the London Brass and for a recording of arrangements of folk-songs for the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields under Sir Neville Marriner (Argo). He appears as soloist in *Organ in Close Up* (Decca) and as Harpsichordist in *A Bach Recital* (Classics For Pleasure).

ALEXANDER BAILLIE

Alexander Baillie is internationally recognised as one of the finest cellists of his generation. He began playing the cello at the comparatively late age of twelve, having been directly inspired by the late Jacqueline du Pré. He went on to study at London's Royal College of Music with Joan Dickson and Anna Shuttleworth and with André Navarra in Vienna.

Alexander Baillie has appeared with many British orchestras as well as appearing regularly as cello soloist in concertos, recitals and festivals throughout the world. Appearances with British orchestras have included the Elgar *Cello Concerto* with the London Symphony Orchestra under Andrew Litton, the Schumann *Cello Concerto* with the BBC Symphony under Marek Janowski at the Proms, the Walton *Cello Concerto* under the late Sir Alexander Gibson with the Royal Philharmonic and the Dvořák *Cello Concerto* with the City of Birmingham Symphony under Sir Simon Rattle. He has also directed and performed the Haydn and Boccherini concertos with the English Chamber Orchestra. Alexander Baillie has given notable first performances of works by Penderecki, Hans Werner Henze, Takemitsu, Colin Matthews and H. K. Gruber.

Recordings include the Tippett *Triple Concerto* with the composer conducting and the Shostakovich First Concerto with Benjamin Zander and the Boston Philharmonic. Alexander Baillie's version of the Britten *Cello Suites* achieved the highest acclaim in the New York press.

He is Professor of Cello in Bremen, founder member of "Gathering of the Clans" Cello School as well as Guest Visiting Professor at the Australian National Academy of Music in Melbourne.

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA

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Publishers

**Ballad of the Gnomes, Three Botticelli Pictures – G. Ricordi & Co.
Adagio with Variations and Suite in G Major – Edizioni Bongiovanni**

Recorded at Goldsmiths College, London, from 19-22 December 1990

Producer: Tim Handley

Recording Engineers: Nicholas Parker, Brian Hillson

Editor: AudioEdit Ltd, London

Remastering: Phil Rowlands (philrowlands.com)

Repertoire Consultant: Edward Johnson

Programme Notes: © 2023 Edward Johnson

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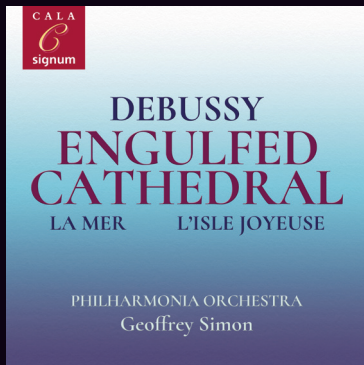
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