

Opening Night: Pines of Rome Program Notes

Toccatà for Orchestra

JAMES BECKEL (born in 1948)

Composed in 2006.

Premiered on March 16, 2007 in Indianapolis, conducted by Mario Venzago.

James Beckel was born in Marion, Ohio in 1948 and attended the Indiana University School of Music. He has been Principal Trombonist of the Indianapolis Symphony since 1969 and also teaches at DePauw University and the University of Indianapolis. Beckel's original compositions, many written on commission, have been performed by leading orchestras across the country. Among his distinctions as a composer are nomination for a Pulitzer Prize (for *The Glass Bead Game*), fellowships from the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, and selection of as one of fifty composers chosen nationwide for the "Continental Harmony Project."

Beckel wrote that his *Toccatà for Orchestra*, composed in 2006 for a consortium of the orchestras of Evansville, Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, Omaha and Virginia, "is meant to be a miniature concerto for orchestra. From the string quartet to the lyrical flute and clarinet solos in the middle of the work, to the fugue section, every instrument in the orchestra has a solo moment somewhere in the piece.

"A composition colleague of mine once mentioned a discussion he had about toccatas with the organist at the cathedral in Siena, Italy. He learned that in the 17th century, toccatas were typically improvisational preludes for church services often involving music that would sequence keys in fourths or fifths to see which notes on the organ might be malfunctioning, as they were unpredictable instruments at that time. This practice would inform the organist which notes to avoid for the rest of the service. I decided to incorporate this musical idea into my *Toccatà*. The melodic pattern of fifths states all the notes in the chromatic scale by the sixth measure, and is the basis for the 'B' theme. The use of fifths is also dominant in the rhythmic accompaniment to the 'A' theme.

"Structurally this work can be divided into five major sections. The first section includes the introduction, the 'A' and 'B' themes, and a miniature development of those themes. The second section is meant to contrast totally with the loud and rhythmic opening. The more intimate music features the clarinet solo, which leads into a string quartet. The third section is a quasi-fugue that begins quietly with the bassoons and culminates in a very loud, multi-metered passage for the percussion section. The fourth section abruptly returns to the quiet music of the second section, now heard in the solo flute with an ostinato accompaniment derived from the fugue theme. The fifth section is a recapitulation and coda.

"There are many definitions for toccata, including 'a piece of music that shows the technical prowess of a soloist.' In this case the 'soloist' is the entire symphony orchestra. Another definition of toccata is 'to touch.' While this meaning refers to touching a keyboard, I hope that the lyrical moments in this work

will touch the listener and show off the beauty as well as the dazzling technical abilities of the orchestra.”

**Suite from the Incidental Music to Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Op. 80
GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845-1924)**

Composed in 1898.

Premiered June 21, 1898 in London, conducted by the composer.

Gabriel Fauré was one of the great figures of French music at the turn of the twentieth century. A student of Saint-Saëns, a master organist, the teacher of Ravel, Enesco, Koechlin and Nadia Boulanger, director of the Paris Conservatoire, and a composer of immense skill and refinement, Fauré was best suited to composing in the small forms of song and chamber music. Among the most successful of his handful of works for orchestra is the beautiful Suite that he drew from his incidental music to Maeterlinck’s symbolist play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which he created for a production of the drama at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London in 1898. (Fauré generally disliked writing for large ensembles, and often entrusted his most talented students with the orchestration of his pieces. Charles Koechlin was assigned the original theatrical version of *Pelléas*; Fauré based his 1901 suite upon the orchestration of his pupil.) This haunting and haunted drama, which premiered in Paris in 1893, embodied the Symbolists’ philosophy that mood is more important than plot. Such dramatic incidents as occur often defy logical continuity, seeming rather to be isolated events intended to suggest associations and feelings to the audience through the use of language and setting. Robert Layton summarized the drama’s plot: “*Pelléas* is set in mythical Allemonde, the protagonists in the drama remain shadowy and we are left knowing little or nothing of their background. Prince Golaud out riding one day discovers Mélisande, weeping and lost in the forest, and takes her under his protection. Maeterlinck’s play charts her growing infatuation for his younger half-brother, Pelléas, and Golaud’s ensuing jealousy.” The play inspired incidental music from Jean Sibelius for a 1905 production in Helsinki (in Finnish!), a concert overture from Cyril Scott in 1912, and a vast symphonic poem from Arnold Schoenberg in 1903. It also proved to be the perfect subject for the wispy, Impressionistic idiom of Debussy, and was equally well suited to the art of Fauré, whose incidental music preceded Debussy’s opera by four years.

Fauré’s musical style, though looking forward in some of its techniques to Impressionism, is more refined, classical and understated than that of Debussy, concerning itself with purity of line and precise formal balance rather than with mood-painting through unconventional harmonies and indistinct structures. Julien Teirsot described the elegant essence of Fauré’s music in these words: “It is the spirit of Hellenism that is reborn in him.... He thrusts himself beyond the spheres to bring back pure beauty.” Such terms as “taste,” “unerring judgment,” “delicacy,” “impeccable workmanship” and “sensibility” attach themselves easily and appropriately to the music of Fauré, and they certainly apply to this lovely Suite from *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The *Prélude* was intended to be played before the curtain rises on *Pelléas* to evoke the play’s aura of melancholy and mystery. There is a meditative quality about this music, a deep stillness that rises only briefly to peaks of tension before again subsiding. The horn-calls near the end invest the music with a suggestion of the antique, sylvan setting of the drama. The second movement (*Fileuse*) depicts Mélisande at her spinning wheel. The whirring of the wheel is portrayed by the steady rhythmic filigree in the strings, which serves as background for the heroine’s plaintive song, intoned by

the oboe. The third movement, *Sicilienne*, is one of Fauré's most famous inspirations, though it was not originally composed for the incidental music for the play. Pressed for time during his preparations for the opening night of the London *Pelléas*, the composer borrowed this work from a chamber piece first written for cello and piano. In the London production, its quality of bittersweet nostalgia was used to underline the touching love scene between Pelléas and Mélisande. The finale, *The Death of Mélisande*, is a mournful elegy of quiet intensity.

Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor
ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

Composed in 1874-1875.

Premiered on February 27, 1879 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Among Borodin's correspondence is one of the most unusual sentiments ever expressed by a composer: "In winter, I can only compose when I am too unwell to give lectures. So my friends, revising the usual custom, never say to me, 'I hope you are well,' but 'I do hope you are ill.' At Christmas I had influenza, so I stayed home and wrote the *Chorus of Thanks* in the last act of *Prince Igor*." Borodin was a sometime composer whose principal occupation was as a researcher and teacher in chemistry and medicine. He gained international fame as the author of *The Solidification of Aldehydes* and other learned treatises, and when the Soviet government erected a monument to him, it was for his contributions to science rather than to music. He composed as much as time allowed, in sickness or in health, but, despite over seventeen years of trying, he was not able to complete his *magnum opus*, the opera *Prince Igor*.

Vladimir Stassov, the influential critic and philosophical mentor of the Russian nationalist composers, first brought the idea for *Prince Igor* to Borodin in 1869. Stassov sketched out a scenario based on *The Epic of Igor's Army*, a poem, later shown to be an 18th-century fraud, that Stassov thought to be a 12th-century description of the conflict between the Russians and the Tartars. Borodin was enthusiastic about the topic as the basis of an opera, and he set to work devising his own libretto. He devoted significant time to the project in 1869-1870, but then was unable to return to it for several years, though he did use many of the sketches in the Second Symphony of 1871-1874. When Borodin resumed work on *Prince Igor* in 1874, the *Polovtsian Dances* were among the first numbers written. He orchestrated this excerpt, and it was first heard at a concert conducted by Rimsky-Korsakov in 1879 with great success. He pecked away at the opera for the remaining eight years of his life, but the score was left incomplete when he died suddenly at a party from a burst aneurysm. Rimsky-Korsakov and his student Alexander Glazunov finished *Prince Igor* from Borodin's sketches, reconstructed from memory the overture that the composer had played many times on the piano but never transcribed, orchestrated the whole, and prepared the opera for its premiere, in 1890 in St. Petersburg.

In the opera, Igor is captured while trying to rid Russia of the Polovtsi, an invading Tartar race from Central Asia. The leader of the Polovtsi, Khan Kontchak, treats Igor as a guest rather than a prisoner, and entertains him lavishly. Khan offers him his freedom if he will promise to leave the Polovtsi in peace, but Igor refuses. Igor nevertheless effects his escape and returns triumphantly to his people. Borodin wrote that *Prince Igor* is "essentially a national opera, interesting only to us Russians, who love to steep our patriotism in the sources of our history, and to see the origins of our nationality again on the stage." To

make his opera as authentic as possible, he studied the music, history and lore of Central Asia, where the opera is set, and sought out travelers with first-hand knowledge of the region. His colorful, “Oriental” writing for the Polovtsi was influenced not only by authentic Caucasian melodies, but also by music from the Middle East and North Africa.

The *Polovtsian Dances* are the centerpiece of the Khan’s entertainment for Igor in Act II. A brief introduction opens the scene in the Polovtsian camp with an arch-shaped theme played quietly by flute and clarinet. The first dance, whose beguiling melody was transformed into the song *Stranger in Paradise* in the 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet*, accompanies the procession of captives. The women of the chorus sing its text, a tender song extolling the high mountains and blue skies of their Polovtsian homeland. Next comes the entry of the Polovtsian warriors to solid, rough music led by the Oriental wailings of the woodwinds and a sturdy version of the arched theme from the introduction. A timpani solo introduces a ferocious general dance in which the chorus, accompanied by full orchestra, sings the praises of the mighty Khan. The next dance, with its galloping rhythm, its persistent descending four-note motive and its continuing adulation of the Polovtsian ruler, accompanies the war games of the savage young men. The swaying melody of the first dance returns in a richer setting and is soon combined with the energetic theme of the savage warriors. The rough music and Oriental wailings that introduced the warriors return with a ferocious vehemence to bring close the brilliant *Polovtsian Dances*.

***Les Préludes*, Symphonic Poem No. 3**

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Composed in 1844-1854.

Premiered on February 23, 1854 in Weimar, conducted by the composer.

Les Préludes, the most popular of Liszt’s thirteen symphonic poems, had its beginning in 1844, when the composer met the French poet Joseph Autran in Marseilles at a banquet in Liszt’s honor. Within days, Liszt set one of Autran’s poems, *Les Aquilons* (“*The Winds*”), for mixed chorus and piano; this work was performed by a local chorus almost before the ink had dried. Liszt set three further of Autran’s poems — *Les Flots* (“*The Oceans*”), *Les Astres* (“*The Stars*”) and *La Terre* (“*The Earth*”) while on tour in Spain the following year. In 1848, Liszt, having made a study of orchestration during the intervening years, tried his new-found skill in an overture called *The Four Elements* to preface the quartet of vocal compositions set to Autran’s verses. Three years later (by which time the overture had been rechristened *Symphonic Meditations*), Autran sent Liszt his *Poèmes de la Mer*. Reading these verses recalled to Liszt his earlier pieces inspired by the poet and, referring to the overture and four choruses, he replied, “We will do something with it one fine day.” Between 1852 and 1854, Liszt, indeed, did something with it — he completely recomposed the overture as a symphonic poem, and presented it in 1854 under the title *Les Préludes*.

During the revision process, Liszt discovered that a long, meditative poem by the French writer and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine evoked emotions similar to those he envisioned in his music. It was from the title of Lamartine’s poem — *Les Préludes* from the collection entitled *Nouvelles méditations poétiques* — that Liszt derived the name for his new work. Though the words have little more in common with the music than a general sharing of contrasting sentiments (love—war), Liszt chose to preface the

published score with his prose interpretation of the original poem:

“What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, issuing from one of these tempests, does not endeavor to solace its memories in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent warmth which he first enjoyed in Nature’s bosom, and when the ‘trumpet sounds the alarm’ he takes up his perilous post, no matter what struggle calls him to its ranks, that he may recover in combat the full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers.”

Liszt was the originator of the “symphonic poem,” a one-movement orchestral composition whose music bears a relationship to a literary work, painting, historical event, legend, topographical feature or some other extra-musical stimulation. The symphonic poem, a genre later enthusiastically adopted by many other composers, is sectional in design, with frequent borrowing from such traditional forms as the sonata and rondo. *Les Préludes* loosely resembles a sonata form. It opens with a slow introduction which presents the work’s principal theme. Much of the music that follows grows from transformations of this germinal melody. The theme is presented in a bold, vigorous version by trombones to begin the sonata form proper, and is soon joined by a swaying, complementary melody sung by the horns. The “development” section contains sentiments first martial, then loving, and finally pastoral. The “recapitulation” is devoted mostly to the lyrical complementary theme. The brilliant coda, a grand, heroic transformation of the main theme again led by the trombones and tuba, brings *Les Préludes* to a stirring conclusion.

The Pines of Rome, Symphonic Poem
OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879-1936)

Composed in 1923-1924.

Premiered on December 14, 1924 in Rome, conducted by Bernardino Molinari.

Ottorino Respighi, born on July 9, 1879 into the family of a piano teacher in Bologna, was introduced to music by his father and progressed so rapidly that he began his professional training in violin, piano and composition at age thirteen at the city’s respected Liceo Musicale; his principal teacher was the school’s director, Giuseppe Martucci, then Italy’s leading composer of orchestral music. Respighi was granted a leave from the Liceo in 1900 to play as a violist with the orchestra of the St. Petersburg Opera, and he took advantage of his time in Russia to arrange what he called “a few, but for me very important” lessons with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, whose brilliant orchestral technique would prove to be a lasting influence. Respighi returned to Bologna the following year to complete his degree and then went to Berlin to study violin and composition with Max Bruch. After spending another season in St. Petersburg, he settled in Bologna in 1903, earning his living as a free-lance violinist and receiving his earliest notice as a composer — some of his violin and piano pieces were published in 1904; his first opera, *Re Enzo* (“*King Enzo*”), was given a student production at the Liceo in 1905; Rodolfo Ferrari conducted the *Notturmo* on an orchestral concert at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 1908 — and becoming active as an

editor and arranger of music from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Respighi was back in Berlin in 1908, teaching piano at a private school there, befriending such musical luminaries as Busoni, Kreisler, Caruso, Paderewski and Bruno Walter, and promoting his work so effectively that the renowned conductor Arthur Nikisch included his transcription of Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* on a Philharmonic concert. Deeply impressed by a performance of Richard Strauss' three-year old *Salome* that he attended in Berlin, Respighi went home to Bologna in 1909 and wrote his own operatic "tragic poem in three acts," *Semirâma*, set in ancient Babylon; it was premiered in Bologna in 1910. Performances of the *Notturmo* and excerpts from *Semirâma* in Rome in 1912 (and frustration at being unable to land a regular teaching appointment at Bologna's Liceo Musicale) led him to accept a post on the faculty of Rome's Santa Cecilia Academy in 1913. He found his first great success, and his musical voice, with the opulent tone poem *The Fountains of Rome* and the first set of *Ancient Airs and Dances* in 1917. He was appointed director of the Conservatory of the Santa Cecilia Academy in 1923, but found the administrative duties too intrusive on his creative work and resigned from the position three years later, though he did continue teaching privately for several years. Respighi began touring internationally with a visit to Prague in 1921 and he thereafter traveled extensively throughout Europe and North and South America to conduct and occasionally appear as piano soloist in his works; he made four trips to the United States between 1925 and 1932. His burgeoning career began to take a toll on his health, however, and a heart murmur was diagnosed in 1931. Like Gustav Mahler after a similar diagnosis of heart disease, Respighi nevertheless carried on with his demanding schedule and by 1935 he had pretty well worn himself out. He died of a heart attack in Rome on April 18, 1936; he was 56.

The Pines of Rome is the second work of Respighi's trilogy on Roman subjects. The first was *The Fountains of Rome* of 1916; the last, *Roman Festivals*, dates from 1928. These compositions depict various aspects of the city through Respighi's musical impressions. He wrote (in the third person) of his intentions in a note for his performance of *The Pines of Rome* with the Philadelphia Orchestra: "While in his preceding work, *The Fountains of Rome*, the composer sought to reproduce by means of tone an impression of nature, in *The Pines of Rome* he uses nature as a point of departure, in order to recall memories and visions. The centuries-old trees which dominate so characteristically the Roman landscape become testimony for the principal events in Roman life." Respighi collected material for this work for some time. His wife, Elsa, recalled in the short biography of her husband that he had asked her in 1920 to sing some songs from her days of childhood play in the Villa Borghese. She was wonderfully surprised when they emerged four years later in the first section of *The Pines of Rome*.

Respighi supplied the following synopsis of the four continuous sections of *The Pines of Rome* as a preface to the score:

"1. *The Pines of the Villa Borghese*. Children are at play in the pine grove of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of *Ring around the Rosy*; mimicking marching soldiers and battles; twittering and shrieking like swallows at evening; and they disappear. Suddenly the scene changes to ...

"2. *The Pines near a Catacomb*. We see the shadows of the pines, which overhang the entrance of a catacomb. From the depths rises a chant which re-echoes solemnly, like a hymn, and is then mysteriously

silenced.

“3. *The Pines of the Janiculum*. There is a thrill in the air. The full moon reveals the profile of the pines of Gianicolo’s Hill. A nightingale sings.

“4. *The Pines of the Appian Way*. Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of innumerable steps. To the poet’s fantasy appears a vision of past glories; trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul advances brilliantly in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph the Capitoline Hill.”

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