

**Pictures at an Exhibition**  
**Program Notes**  
**January 13 – 15, 2012**

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.

Respighi had an abiding interest in the music and art of earlier times, absorbing not just the style of the works of his Italian and European forebears, but also something of their ethos. In 1932 he was one of ten Italian musicians who issued a document renewing the hallowed traditions of the art: "We are against art

which cannot and does not have any human content and desires to be merely a mechanical demonstration and a cerebral puzzle.... A logical chain binds the past and the future — the romanticism of yesterday will again be the romanticism of tomorrow.” In his *Three Botticelli Pictures* (“*Trittico Botticelliano*”), Respighi’s interest in the great traditions of Italian art led him to create musical depictions of three of that Renaissance painter’s most masterful canvases. The *Triptych* was apparently conceived early in 1927. In her biography of her husband, Elsa Respighi recounted that he first mentioned the work in February, when the couple was on their second tour of the United States. Respighi was so taken with the generous patronage of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and with the beautiful chamber music hall that she had donated to the Library of Congress (site of Respighi’s Washington concert), that he promised to dedicate his next piece to her — the *Botticelli Pictures*. He began the score as soon as he arrived home in Rome the following month, and gave the premiere, at a concert in Vienna sponsored by Mrs. Coolidge, later that year.

Each movement of the *Triptych* is a miniature tone poem that seeks to capture the subject and spirit of a Botticelli painting. *Spring* (“*La Primavera*”) is a fantasia on several thematic fragments: ecstatic trills and lusty horn calls with rich sylvan associations; a jolly little tune initiated by the bassoon; a bounding ditty in 6/8 meter shared by the assembled ensemble; and an antique-sounding trio for woodwinds. *The Adoration of the Magi* (“*L’Adorazione dei Magi*”) is pastoral and quietly joyful, with a touch of modality that lends it a slightly Oriental flavor. Much of the movement’s thematic material is derived from the haunting Christmas song *O Come, O Come, Emanuel*, which was based, in turn, on an ancient Church chant for Advent. The closing *Picture, The Birth of Venus* (“*La Nascita di Venere*”), is, like Botticelli’s incomparable painting, rapt, undulant, and full of exquisite light.

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Hindemith’s first thoughts for an opera about Matthias Grünewald date from 1932, when his friend and publisher, Willy Strecker of Schott, suggested the 16th-century German painter as a possible subject. In view of the ominous growth of the Nazi Party at that time, Strecker felt that such a work, set in an earlier era of political and social turmoil, “would be a chance to draw parallels between the peasants’ wars and the Renaissance and the present times.” Hindemith, busy with his teaching at the Berlin Hochschule, was not immediately attracted to the idea. Despite some criticism of his music from Party officials and the dismissal of several Jewish teachers from the school’s faculty, he was able to write to Strecker on April 15, 1933, “To judge by what is happening here I don’t think we need worry too much about the musical future. One must just be patient for the next few weeks.” It must have been soon after this letter that the seriousness of the situation under the Nazis became apparent to Hindemith, however, and he took up Strecker’s challenge to compose an opera based on the life of an artist tossed and bruised by the swirl of contemporary events. On July 26, he wrote to Strecker, “I am making very good progress. True, at the moment I am still ploughing through books, but quite a lot of the action is already fixed, and musically also I have plenty in mind.” With the exception of only the String Trio No. 2, all of Hindemith’s compositional energies for the next two years were poured into this new opera — *Mathis der Maler* (“*Mathis the Painter*”).

The situation in Germany deteriorated alarmingly during 1933, and it was evident that those who could

would soon have to choose sides in the struggle. Hindemith, feeling that justice and decency would eventually be restored, tried to remain aloof from events, despite the disquieting fact that his wife and many of the musicians with whom he continued to perform and record were Jewish. The conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, shaken by the banning of music not only of Jewish composers but even of Stravinsky, took a strong stand for artistic freedom. He defended the Jewish players in his orchestra — the Berlin Philharmonic — and supported the performance of modern music. He approached Hindemith with a request for a new work that would prove good music was still being written, and asked if the new opera might provide some excerpts that could be used in the concert hall. On August 4, 1933, Strecker wrote Hindemith encouraging him to back up the conductor: “Furtwängler wants to have these pieces in the form of a suite, thereby demonstrating that a composer can write in a decent modern way and still remain popular. He intends to make great propaganda with this work, which at the same time will provide good advertisement for the opera.” Plans to produce the opera in Berlin under Furtwängler’s direction during the following season were already in operation, and the instrumental piece drawn from it would be a preview of the work still in progress.

By early in 1934, Hindemith was able to extract from the score three excerpts which he assembled into an independent concert work titled “Symphony, *Mathis der Maler*.” The Symphony had a stunning success at Furtwängler’s premiere on March 12. It quickly made the rounds of the world’s concert halls (Otto Klemperer, forced out of Germany by Nazi persecution, introduced it to American audiences with the New York Philharmonic on October 6), and the composer recorded it with the Berlin Philharmonic immediately after its premiere. Despite the acclaim piled on the new Symphony, Hindemith’s position became increasingly difficult. Plans for production of the opera were clouded when a performance of the Symphony was refused in April on the grounds that the composer had made defamatory remarks about Hitler. Furtwängler wrote an article supporting Hindemith and the staging of his new opera, which appeared on the front page of the Berlin *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* on November 25, 1934. The article was a disaster. A passing reference to “political denunciation” of art works turned previously supportive segments of the government bureaucracy against Hindemith and Furtwängler. The results of this debacle were that the opera *Mathis der Maler* was not heard in Germany until after the War and that Furtwängler had to resign his posts with the Berlin Philharmonic and the Berlin Opera. From that time, Hindemith’s position in Germany deteriorated steadily. He was allowed to make concert tours abroad and to fulfill a contract with the Turkish government to reorganize its system of music education, but by 1938 he was forced to emigrate to Switzerland, and in 1940 moved to the United States, where he lived, taught and composed for the next decade.

The opera *Mathis der Maler* is set in Germany during the time of the Peasants’ Revolt in 1524-1525. The Revolt, partly fueled by the strong sectarian allegiances of the early years of the Reformation, has brought bloodshed and turmoil to Germany. Against this background of political and social strife, Mathis reflects on the ease and pleasure of his painting, questioning the value of his art during a time of upheaval. Feeling he might find an answer as a man of action, he joins the peasants in their struggle against oppression by the nobility. His idealism, however, is shattered by the peasants’ acts of atrocity. Having failed to better the world as a militant, the artist flees to the Odenwald Forest, where he experiences visions that inspire him to return to painting and undertake the work that became his masterpiece — the altarpiece for the monastery church of St. Anthony in Isenheim, Alsace. Mathis, convinced that the

obligation imposed by his God-given talent can best be fulfilled in the studio rather than in the political arena, resumes work with a frantic zeal to fix his visions on canvas. Exhausted by his labor but satisfied that he has completed his mission, he bids a quiet farewell to his friends, and, as the curtain falls, packs away his painter's tools for the last time.

*Mathis der Maler* was a pivotal work in Hindemith's development as a composer. In technique, historical outlook and philosophy it brings to maturity the strains of his earlier music to create a powerful, individual style that marks this work as one of the masterpieces of 20th-century art. Of Hindemith's attitude toward his music at the time of *Mathis*, Ian Kemp wrote, "The programmatic element in the Symphony and the new harmonic language confirm that, like so many other composers in the early 1930s, he was seeking a warmer and more humanistic manner." Hindemith's quest to present his listeners with an easily accessible piece was reflected in the harmonic structure of the opera, which codified Hindemith's theory of an extended but clear tonality that absorbed both traditional and modern resources. (His book on the subject, *The Craft of Musical Composition*, followed the completion of the opera by only a year.) As a testament to Hindemith's devotion to the art of his homeland, *Mathis der Maler* is a veritable compendium of the grand sweep of German musical culture. The intricate, contrapuntal textures are a brilliant 20th-century evocation of Bach's complex art. The forms of the Symphony's movements derive from the procedures of the Classical masters. The work's glowing instrumental colors build on the orchestral discoveries of the 19th century. And woven skillfully through the opera and Symphony are, said the composer, "old folk songs, war songs of the Reformation period, and Gregorian chant [that] were the nourishing foundation of the *Mathis* music." It is hard to imagine a work that is a greater celebration of German art, one that speaks more directly to the German people and to all who treasure the European heritage. Indeed, after the War, when its performance was no longer banned, the Symphony was performed in Germany fifty times during the first five months of 1946, and Hindemith's publishers negotiated for four simultaneous stagings of the opera by German theaters.

The Symphony, *Mathis der Maler* comprises three excerpts from the opera that, in the words of the German critic Heinrich Strobel, "endeavor to approximate by musical means that emotional state which is aroused in the onlooker by Grünewald's famous altarpiece" rather than to depict specific events. Each of the movements was inspired by a single panel of the Isenheim polyptych. The opening movement, *Engelkonzert* ("Angelic Concert"), is the prelude to the opera. It is based on the richly detailed Nativity scene in which a gathering of seraphic beings serenade the Madonna and Child with music of heavenly sweetness. The movement, in traditional sonata-allegro form, opens with an introduction utilizing a 16th-century folk song, *Es sungen drei Engel* ("Three Angels Sang"), chanted in the burnished sonorities of the trombones. The flutes and violins present the main theme of the movement, a gently dancing strain with several piquant harmonic inflections. A solitary note on the horn serves as the bridge to the second theme, a legato melody given by violins with a simple accompaniment in the lower strings. The closing theme is a sparkling refrain tossed off by the solo flute. Hindemith's awesome mastery of thematic manipulation and contrapuntal ingenuity are displayed less in the brief development section than in the recapitulation of the themes that follows. As the trombones intone *Es sungen drei Engel*, the high woodwinds simultaneously recall the second theme and the clarinets the main theme. Further enriching the texture of this virtuoso display of musical craftsmanship is an obbligato in the upper strings and a steady, descending line in the basses. Quiet reminiscences of the main theme in the woodwinds, another traversal

of the bustling closing theme by the flute, and various thematic fragments followed by stentorian chords from the full orchestra bring this superb “Concert of the Angels” to a stirring close.

The second movement, *Grablegung* (“*Entombment*”), is the music from near the end of the opera with which Mathis takes leave of his friends. The music is associated with Grünewald’s moving portrayal of Christ’s piteous burial. The sobbing main theme of this haunting elegy, given immediately by the string choir, is complemented by a stark melody presented by the solo oboe. The mood of intense, introverted grief is broken only by a long crescendo rising to a single, sunlit chord spread across the full orchestra. With all emotion spent, the coda paints a resigned, bitter acceptance of the awesome tragedy in music of ethereal simplicity.

The finale is based on Grünewald’s painting inspired by the most fearsome of his visions in the forest — *Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius* (“*Temptation of St. Anthony*”). The artist showed the saint being cruelly tortured by horrific creatures of the most hideous visages. An introductory theme initiated by the unison strings summons the weird beasts. They assemble, slithering about with grotesque movements to music of no fixed meter. The snapping chords in the brass imitate their chilling barks. The temptation scene unfolds with a fury and terror driven as if by the very hounds of Hell. In the Symphony’s closing pages the woodwinds sing the melody of an ancient chant, *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*, above an ostinato derived from the unison melody of the introduction. The holy song dispels the terrors of the night, and a magnificent, closing brass chorale on the “Alleluia” heralds the glorious rising sun.

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Though the history of the Russian nation extends far back into the mists of time, the country’s cultural life is of relatively recent origin. Russian interest in art, music and theater dates only from the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725), the powerful monarch who coaxed his country into the modern world by importing ideas, technology and skilled practitioners from western Europe. To fuel the nation’s musical life, Peter, Catherine and their successors depended on a steady stream of well-compensated German, French and Italian artists who brought their latest tonal wares to the magnificent capital city of St. Petersburg. This tradition of imported music continued well into the 19th century: Berlioz, for example, enjoyed greater success in Russia than he did in his native France; Verdi composed *La Forza del Destino* on a commission from St. Petersburg, where it was first performed.

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping across Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive nationalist character for their works. Leading this movement was a group of composers known as “The Five,” whose members included Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev. Among the allies that The Five found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann’s premature death at 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. Vladimir Stassov, a noted critic and the journalistic champion of the Russian arts movement, organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann’s work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

At the time of the exhibit, Mussorgsky was engaged in preparations for the first public performance of his opera *Boris Godunov*, and he was unable to devote any time to his *Pictures* until early summer. When he took up the piece in June, he worked with unaccustomed speed. “‘Hartmann’ is bubbling over, just as *Boris* did,” he wrote to a friend. “Ideas, melodies come to me of their own accord, like a banquet of music — I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put them down on paper fast enough.” The movements mostly depict sketches, watercolors and architectural designs shown publicly at the Hartmann exhibit, though Mussorgsky based two or three sections on canvases that he had been shown privately by the artist before his death. The composer linked his sketches together with a musical “*Promenade*” in which he depicted his own rotund self shuffling — in an uneven meter — from one picture to the next. Though Mussorgsky was not given to much excitement over his own creations, he took special delight in this one. Especially in the masterful transcription for orchestra that Maurice Ravel did in 1922 for the Parisian concerts of conductor Sergei Koussevitzky, it is a work of vivid impact to which listeners and performers alike can return with undiminished pleasure.

*Promenade*. According to Stassov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky “roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and, at times sadly, thinking of his friend.”

*The Gnome*. Hartmann’s drawing is for a fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about on short, bandy legs.

*Promenade — The Old Castle*. A troubadour (represented by the saxophone) sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

*Promenade — Tuileries*. Mussorgsky’s subtitle is “Dispute of the Children after Play.” Hartmann’s picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

*Bydlo*. Hartmann’s picture depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody (solo tuba) heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance.

*Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells*. Hartmann’s costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous egg shells, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

*Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*. The title was given to the music by Stassov. Mussorgsky originally called this movement “Two Jews: one rich, the other poor.” It was inspired by a pair of pictures which Hartmann presented to the composer showing two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous (a weighty unison for strings and winds), the other poor and complaining (muted trumpet). Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues.

*The Marketplace at Limoges*. A lively sketch of a bustling market, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

*Catacombs, Roman Tombs. Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua*. Hartmann’s drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement’s second section, bearing

the title “With the Dead in a Dead Language,” is a mysterious transformation of the *Promenade* theme.

*The Hut on Fowl’s Legs.* Hartmann’s sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore who eats human bones she has ground into paste with her mortar and pestle. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic mortar, and Mussorgsky’s music suggests a wild, midnight ride.

*The Great Gate of Kiev.* Mussorgsky’s grand conclusion to his suite was inspired by Hartmann’s plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior’s helmet. The majestic music suggests both the imposing bulk of the edifice (never built, incidentally) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches. The work ends with a heroic statement of the *Promenade* theme and a jubilant pealing of the great bells of the city.

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