

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

# Beethoven's Symphony No. 5

Sept 28 - 30

**Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)**

***Pines of Rome***

Duration: ca. 23 minutes

Trees have adorned the canvases of countless painters over the centuries, from Leonardo da Vinci to Asher Durand, artists who found inspiration in the majesty of an ancient oak or the grace of a willow. But the wonder of tree and forest also has been crystallized by artists who paint with sound, and one of the more evocative creations is Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, part of a musical triptych that includes the *Fountains of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*. These works unfold like prisms in the late afternoon sun. An evocative, multicolored portrayal of four Italian landscapes, *Pines* bustles with people, animals, and nature in repose.

Respighi often is not regarded as one of the more important 20th century composers, and broke a long-standing Italian tradition by not writing a successful opera. He was part of a group of Italian musicians who sought to revive their country's music through Renaissance and Baroque forms, as he so eloquently did in his *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

As a composer, Respighi emphasized clarity in his orchestration, the interplay of light and shade, and melodic invention. His music in general is immensely likable – lavish, melodious and buttressed by arching harmonies. Yes, he would have made a good painter, as his eye for detail and penchant for sweeping gesture are indelible, even if he wears on his sleeve the obvious influence of Rimsky-Korsakov and Richard Strauss.

Some critics regard *Pines* as a lightweight musical postcard, more sonic impact than substance. Even the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* notes that while imaginative, the music lets “picturesque colorfulness spill over into a flamboyant garishness that seems aimed at lovers of orchestral showpieces.” But Respighi was more interested in honoring the past than making a progress statement, one reason why he signed a petition in 1932 condemning modernistic trends in Italian music.

So be it. *Pines* is entertaining stuff, not cerebral, and is part of every orchestra's canon. Cast as a four-part tone poem, the music opens with *Pines of the Villa Borghese*, a depiction of an elegant estate surrounded by trees where adults relax and children play in the background. The mood suddenly shifts at *Pines Near a Catacomb*, and the orchestra takes on a dirge-like quality as a hymn played by a solo trumpet rises from below.

Again, the music changes course, this time to the *Pines of the Janiculum*, a nocturne bathed in moonlight. Audiences unfamiliar with this music may be surprised to hear, following a soft clarinet solo, the recorded sound of a nightingale. In the score, Respighi mentions the use of an American-made Brunswick record player, which was set up with a microphone backstage.

Finally, we come to the ground-trembling *Pines of the Appian Way*, depicting the ghosts of an ancient Roman army marching through the fields, returning from battle, the sound of footsteps and trumpets growing louder as they draw near. Pushed forward by an insistent rhythm, the musical legion reaches its destination and the orchestra pulls out all the stops in a triumphal close. The film composer John

Williams was so impressed with this last movement that he borrowed it for the score of the movie *Superman*.

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**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

***Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18***

Duration: ca. 37 minutes

Few musicians struggled with public criticism as much as Rachmaninoff. After the disastrous 1897 premiere of his *First Symphony*, of which a poor performance by the orchestra was partly to blame, he sunk into despair. A fellow Russian composer and critic, Cesar Cui, called the new work a “symphony from Hell,” a review that left the sensitive Rachmaninoff close to unhinged. He stopped writing music for nearly three years, and eventually sought medical help, immersing himself in therapeutic hypnosis.

"Something within me snapped," the composer wrote. "All my self-confidence broke down. A paralyzing apathy possessed me." He sought treatment from Nicholas Dahl, a doctor familiar with auto-suggestion techniques. Dahl convinced his patient to address his struggle through a creative outlet: compose a concerto for piano "with the greatest of ease."

Rachmaninoff rested, meditated, and began writing with a renewed energy, combining music of palpable mood with seamless and soaring melody. With confidence restored, he produced a masterpiece, the *Piano Concerto No. 2*, the single-most performed work of its genre, according to data bases of American orchestras. The ominous eight chords that open the work are unforgettable, acting as a hypnotic prelude to the contrasting themes of the first movement.

The concerto encapsulates many of Rachmaninoff's trademarks: melancholy, soaring melodies that touch on pathos, and brilliant instrumental writing. This is Rachmaninoff reaching full maturity, showing a confidence with large-scale forms, concise and balanced. It also can test performers with small hands: Rachmaninoff was a powerful pianist with who could span an octave and a half from thumb to pinky finger, and he used his formidable reach to harness the instrument.

The composer poured some of his most affectionate melody into the work, one tune popularized in Eric Carmen's 1976 pop hit *All By Myself*. In his 2005 book, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*, Max Harrison describes the concerto's "immediate emotional power and yearning insistence." But he also cites what he believes are weaknesses: the lingering key of E flat major in first movement, the similar themes of the outer movements, and the relatively neutral piano chords of the climax. The work ends with a turn from the dark key of C minor to the sunny key of C major – not unlike how Beethoven finishes a famous work also performed on tonight's program.

Many pianists have built careers around performing the work, and audiences never seem to tire of its lush, bravura score. Years ago, when the pianist Garrick Ohlsson appeared with TFO, he shared his insight and enthusiasm: "In the world of art and music, there are certain works that are perfect, and the Rachmaninoff *Second* is perfect," he said in an interview. "It has a flawless, heavenly quality to it. It's a romantic journey from despair to triumph, full of brooding tragedy and some of the most gorgeous tunes ever written. It sounds as if this piece dropped out of heaven fully formed."

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## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

### *Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67*

Duration: ca. 31 minutes

Beethoven's *Fifth* very well may be the most famous piece of symphonic music ever written. If the iconic opening notes – *da da da dum!* – suffer under the weight of countless cultural reinventions, the work as a whole, in four economical and interrelated movements, has aged without wrinkles since its premiere 210 years ago.

The *Fifth* is ubiquitous, siphoned through television commercials, the era of disco, video games, and too many movies to mention. TFO has programmed it nearly 15 times since the 1990s, and the nation's oldest orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, holds the record with more than 500 performances over the years.

It would be fair to say, however, that the symphony exists in two forms: the famed burst of three Gs and an E flat, and all the rest that comes after. Everybody knows the opening, but listening to Beethoven's entire argument is one of music's most rewarding experiences. Why? Because of what the composer does with those four simple notes over roughly 30 minutes.

No, they don't go away after the first movement. During tonight's concert, listen carefully and you'll hear them in the following three movements, in different guises, recycled over and over. This gives the symphony its drive, its concision, and its power.

Famous as they are, what do these notes *mean*? Endless discussions on the topic will remain just that – endless – because the *Fifth* is a piece of absolute music without reference to a story or program. It is music for music's sake. It rebels against labels and descriptions, and most explanations fail to capture its essence. Some have come close, such as the poet E.T.A. Hoffman, a contemporary of Beethoven who said the composer's music, including the *Fifth*, "sets in motion the lever of fear, awe, of horror, of suffering, and wakens just that infinite longing which is the essence of Romanticism."

Beethoven's first biographer, the less-than dependable Anton Schindler, called it "fate knocking at the door," a moniker he attributed, falsely, to Beethoven himself. Veterans of World War II knew it as three dots and a dash: Morse code for the letter V – the symbol of the Allied victory in Europe and the triumph over Nazi tyranny. Maybe the best description of all came from the conductor Arturo Toscanini, who called the opening of the symphony simply *allegro con brio* and nothing more. Regardless of its meaning, or lack of meaning, the pulse and daring simplicity of the music led Tolstoy – a master of literary pontification – to say the *Fifth* fulfilled the demand for "an art comprehensible by all men."

The world heard the *Fifth* for the first time on Dec. 22, 1808, in Vienna. The concert stretched four hours and included Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6*; the concert aria *Ah! Perfido*; two sections from the *Mass in C*; the *Piano Concerto No. 4* with the composer at the keyboard; the *Symphony No. 5*; a piano improvisation by Beethoven; and the *Choral Fantasy for Piano, Orchestra, and Chorus*.

The audience had heard nothing like the *Fifth*. The opening notes launched an arching design in which form takes precedence over melody. After the electrifying opening in the dark key of C minor – which left the Viennese flabbergasted – the second movement introduced a series of double variations, as solace after the storm.

The third movement, a scherzo, is the symphony's pivot point. It echoes the opening four-note theme in hushed strings and muted timpani before unleashing a blast of horns, bringing on the fourth movement without a break. Darkness gives way to light with a radiant explosion that turns C minor to C major – one of the most memorable climaxes in all music.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***