



DI VITTORIO ***Overtura Respighiana***<sup>1</sup>. **Symphony No. 2**, “Lost Innocence.”<sup>1</sup> ***Ave Maria***<sup>2</sup>. **Symphony No. 1**, “Isolation.”<sup>1</sup> **Clarinet Sonata No. 1**<sup>3</sup> • <sup>1,2</sup>Salvatore Di Vittorio, cond; <sup>2</sup>Respighi Choir; <sup>3</sup>Benjamin Baron (cl); <sup>1</sup>New York “Ottorino Respighi” CO • NAXOS 8572333 (56:52)

RESPIGHI **Aria for Strings. Violin Concerto in A. Suite for Strings. *Rossiniana: Suite*** • Salvatore Di Vittorio, cond; Laura Marzadori (vn); New York “Ottorino Respighi” CO • NAXOS 8572332 (77:32)

If Palermo-born Salvatore Di Vittorio (b.1967) is new to you (as he is to me), based on these two Naxos releases you might be justified in thinking he’s a third-generation relation to Italian composer Ottorino Respighi. That’s because as a conductor, Di Vittorio leads an ensemble he founded and named “Ottorino Respighi” Chamber Orchestra of New York in a program of works by Respighi. As an arranger, he revised and/or completed three of the works heard on the second of these two discs. And as a composer, Di Vittorio has been hailed as a “lyrical romantic . . . following in the footsteps of Respighi.” Though a reading of Di Vittorio’s biography on his website ([salvatoredivittorio.com/bio.html](http://salvatoredivittorio.com/bio.html)) discloses no direct link to the former composer, it appears that Respighi is near and dear to Di Vittorio’s heart.

In a sense, you might say that in at least one of his compositions, *Overtura Respighiana*, Di Vittorio has channeled Respighi to write music that the real Respighi might have written himself, for the piece is a devilishly delightful concoction that plays on Respighi’s *Rossiniana* and *Pines of Rome*, fusing them with references to Di Vittorio’s own music, to create a kind of freshly minted *Boutique fantasque*.

The Symphony No. 2, titled “Lost Innocence,” on the other hand, does not, as far I can tell, quote anything by Respighi, but the brilliant swatches of instrumental color Di Vittorio weaves into and through this striking musical tapestry is reminiscent of Respighi’s way with the orchestral palette. Di Vittorio tells us that the work was inspired by the tragedy of the Yugoslav civil wars in the late 1990s. Its four movements—“Requiem for a Child,” “Dance of Tears,” “Childheart,” and “Elegy: Marcia Funebre”—at least up until the finale, reflect a calm that is neither quiet nor peaceful, but one that builds toward a shattering, tragic ending.

The *Ave Maria* for a *cappella* women’s chorus is one of Di Vittorio’s conservatory works, written in 1995 (revised in 1998) after graduating from the Manhattan School of Music. At first it struck my ear as fairly dissonant, sounding almost like it could have been written by Penderecki, Lutosławski, or Vasks, but as the piece unfolded, emerging from the harmonic counterpoint were passages that, with just a few minor adjustments to the voice leading, sounded as if they might have come from a *cappella* moments in Verdi’s Requiem. Di Vittorio confirms that impression in his booklet note, stating that a number of influences run through the piece, from Palestrina and Monteverdi to Verdi, and that “in particular, certain resemblances may be traced to Verdi’s choral *Ave Maria*.” The effects of Di Vittorio’s piece are quite arresting, simultaneously stark and austere yet illuminated from within by a shimmering light that leads to a most meltingly beautiful cadential Amen.

The Symphony No. 1, titled “Isolation,” dates to one year before the *Ave Maria* but was revised in 1999. No borrowings from Respighi appear in this score either, yet his spirit hovers over it in the luminous divided string writing and exquisite chiaroscuro effects. This is a strings-only work, and according to Di Vittorio one of its influences was Vivaldi’s seldom-performed *Sinfonia al Santo Sepolcro*, RV 169, one of Vivaldi’s most harmonically tortured works, written in a highly chromatic idiom intended to represent Christ’s pain and suffering. For Di Vittorio, the “Isolation” Symphony is meant to depict man’s alienation from himself and his fellow man. If you were to listen to the piece without knowing that, I’m not sure you would necessarily pick up specifically on that theme. The music is sad, to be sure, even brooding, but more than once it put me in mind of Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*, a piece that is somehow uplifting in its tragedy.

The Di Vittorio-as-composer CD closes with another work revised in 1998, the Clarinet Sonata No. 1. Not reflected in its title is the fact that it’s a piece for unaccompanied clarinet, which is a bit of challenge for both composer and performer, considering that a solo wind instrument, unlike a violin or cello, can’t make its own harmony by playing double stops or chords. But I suppose if Bach and Debussy could write for unaccompanied flute, there’s no reason the solo capabilities of other wind instruments shouldn’t be explored. Di Vittorio notes that he drew inspiration and advice for the work from his father, Giuseppe, who was a clarinetist. Di Vittorio claims to have been influenced by Verdi, Brahms, Berlioz, and elements of French Baroque dance, though these elements are not easily discerned due to the nature of the music’s syntax and style, which consist largely of loosely connected contrasting phrases that never quite seem to coalesce into an identifiable whole. Nonetheless, Benjamin Baron’s very accomplished clarinet playing invites further listening and offers a promise that there is more to this piece than meets the ear on first hearing.

Critics can be a cruel lot—I know because I’m one of them—and there are those who will say, and already have, that music like this being written today is irrelevant. That’s a strong sentiment, for sure, but nowhere near as judgmental as someone like Pierre Boulez would be. He is quoted as having said that composers who write music like this simply don’t exist, prompting an acquaintance of mine to describe Boulez as “the Dr. Mengele of France.” With one wave of his hand, off you go to the gas chamber. My attitude, as expressed on a number of past occasions, is that beautiful music is beautiful music, regardless of when it’s written, and Di Vittorio proves himself with this CD to be a composer of beautiful music extraordinaire. I strongly recommend this release to you for many hours of listening pleasure.

The second of the two entries consists entirely of music by Respighi, though Di Vittorio has had a hand in the realization of three of the four of the works as heard on the disc. I’m not sure just how seriously Respighi was ever taken by critics and the academic elite, but thanks to a small number of works—primarily his Roman trilogy, the *Ancient Airs and Dances* suites, and *La Boutique fantasque*—he came to enjoy considerable exposure and popularity, especially in the U.S. Toscanini premiered the third number of the Roman trilogy, *Feste Romane*, with the New York Philharmonic in 1929, and then went on to record the piece for RCA twice, once in 1942 with the Philadelphia Orchestra and a second time with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in 1949, adding the *Fountains of Rome* in 1951 and the *Pines of Rome* in 1953. Toscanini wasn’t the only one to climb aboard the Respighi bandwagon. Mengelberg premiered the composer’s Toccata for Piano and Orchestra with the New York Philharmonic in 1928, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned Respighi’s *Metamorphoseon* for its 50th anniversary in 1931.

Yet of Respighi's nearly 200 scores—among which are nine operas, five ballets, several concertos, quite a few chamber works, and a considerable volume of vocal and choral numbers—a good deal of it is unrecorded and rarely, if ever, performed. The reasons seem to be twofold. First, the critics and opinion-makers, while acknowledging the composer's gift for colorful orchestration and pictorial illusionism, regarded the music as “derivative,” “cinematic,” and even “vulgar,” by which I prefer to think they meant lacking in substance and depth rather than tawdry and tasteless. The truth of the matter is that there is nothing any more cinematic or “vulgar,” if you choose to use that word, about Respighi's *The Fountains of Rome*, written in 1916, than there is about Bloch's *Schelomo* written a year earlier. But the second, and perhaps more serious, criticism Respighi faced—though it was largely unjustified—was that he was a supporter of Mussolini's Fascist regime. Evidence seems to suggest that Respighi didn't have a political bone in his body, but it may have been his very passivity and silence that were damning.

The 24-year-old Respighi began work on a violin concerto in 1903. Only the first two movements were completed; the third remained in a piano reduction with just a few measures orchestrated. After analyzing the score, Di Vittorio made enhancements to the orchestration of the first two movements and completed the third using material from the other movements. Di Vittorio's completion was premiered in New York in 2010. I note a 1994 recording of the concerto on a Bongiovani CD, but it is only of Respighi's original first two movements. The current performances of both the concerto and the Aria for Strings, transcribed by Di Vittorio, are world-premiere recordings. The concerto, which owes much to Vivaldi and early Mendelssohn, inhabits a world of lyrical sunshine that plays on the senses like a fresh breeze bearing scents of an Italian vineyard in spring. Thanks to the efforts of Di Vittorio, and the capable hands and sensitive voice of violinist Laura Marzadori, this romantically expressive score is brought to us complete for the first time.

The even earlier 1901 Aria, Respighi's salute to his Italian heritage by way of Frescobaldi, Corelli, and, again, Vivaldi, found its way into the composer's Suite in G Major for Strings and Organ. Di Vittorio makes of it a lovely air for string orchestra. Both the Aria and the Suite were revised or edited to prepare the very first printed editions (score and parts) of each score. Up until now, only manuscript copies of the score and parts existed for both works. Beyond this, Di Vittorio then made slight adjustments to the Aria to make it suitable for not only string orchestra but string quintet, in order to promote Respighi's music in academic settings, such as conservatories and music colleges.

The booklet does not explain to what extent Di Vittorio “revised” Respighi's Suite for Strings, cataloged as P 41. The piece is a six-movement suite in Baroque style that anticipates Respighi's later and very popular *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

Six years after Respighi visited Rossini's collection of piano pieces titled *Les Riens* (“Trifles,” aka “Sins of my Old Age”) for his ballet *La Boutique fantasque* in 1919, he returned to mine the mother lode again in 1925 for his *Rossiniana* Suite. It is given here in unaltered form and in a delightful performance by Di Vittorio's “Ottorino Respighi” Chamber Orchestra of New York. As one of Respighi's more popular works, there is of course serious competition in the suite, not least among which is a classic 1967 recording with Ansermet (one of his last) and the Suisse Romande Orchestra.

The current Naxos release, in addition to excellent performances and recording, offers to the Respighi fan a combination of never-before-heard music and works-in-ever-before-heard transcriptions by Salvatore Di Vittorio. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**