

Pines of Rome – March 13 – 15, 2026

When you think of the multi-textured sound of a large symphony orchestra, with big brass, powerful percussion and heart-wrenching strings, a few “big-name” composers immediately come to mind. German-born Gustav Mahler and Russian-born Sergei Rachmaninoff would certainly be on the list, but a place must also be reserved for Italian-born Ottorino Respighi, who proved that Italian composers could be known for far more than opera.

Ottorino Respighi was born in Bologna, Italy on July 9, 1879, to a family with a strong musical background. His father, a respected piano teacher, introduced Respighi to music at an early age, and by age eight, young Respighi was taking lessons on both piano and violin. He went on to study both violin and piano at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, and by the age of 13 had also begun to study composition.



Ottorino Respighi

By the time he was 20, Respighi was also an accomplished violist of such high skill that in the same year he was playing both viola and violin with the orchestra of the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, he won the position of first violist with the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg. During his time in Russia he also played at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. In all, Respighi spent two years in Russia (1900 to 1902), and as he quickly became fluent in Russian (as he would become in many other languages), he studied orchestration with one of his heroes, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and attended lectures by Max Bruch in Berlin.

Upon his return to Italy, Respighi earned his diploma in composition and soon became known as a brilliant orchestral arranger. He composed two operas, *Re Enzo* and *Semirama*, along with impressive instrumental pieces such as *Prelude, Choral and Fugue for Orchestra*, a piano concerto (performed in Bologna in 1902), and the *Suite in G Major for Strings and Organ*, a musical homage to Bach, whom Respighi greatly admired. His music was bringing him rapid recognition and acclaim, and in 1913, Respighi received an appointment to the St. Cecilia Academy in Roma as a professor of composition. He ultimately became director of the conservatory in 1924 but resigned the position in 1926.



Ottorino Respighi and
Elsa Oliveri-Sangiaco

In Rome, Respighi fell in love with a gifted 18-year-old pianist, Elsa Oliveri-Sangiaco, one of his students. They were married in 1917; Elsa was then 23 years old and Respighi was 38. It was a marriage as well as an artistic collaboration. Elsa was his lifelong companion and became a tireless advocate for his music after his death.

While he was gaining recognition as a composer within Italy, Respighi was largely unknown outside of Italy until he composed *Fountains of Rome* in 1916, a tone poem that vividly depicts different fountains in the city at various times in the day. Respighi had fallen in love with Rome, and Rome's history and landscape held a deep fascination for him. *Fountains of Rome* was the first of what would become his "Roman Trilogy" which included two additional tone poems that celebrated different aspects of Rome, using evocative musical imagery. *Pines of Rome*, which was to become his most famous work, was composed in 1924, and the final piece of the trilogy, *Roman Festivals*, was composed in 1928. All three works remain staples of the orchestral repertoire to this day and are hugely popular with all audiences.

The three largescale orchestral works became widely known in Europe and the United States, thanks in no small measure to key conductors who championed his music: Arturo Toscanini, Serge Koussevitsky and Bernardino Molinari. Toscanini, a great Italian conductor, was an early proponent, and conducted the world premiere of *Fountains of Rome* in 1917. Toscanini recorded the music twice for RCA Victor, first with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1942 and

then with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in 1949. He also helped to popularize Respighi's works in the U.S. and beyond. Russian conductor Koussevitzky, then music conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was also a key promoter of Respighi's music, and conducted the premieres of several of his compositions. The Italian conductor Bernardino Molinari frequently conducted Respighi's works and was one of the first to record his music, helping to secure Respighi's place in the standard orchestral repertoire. It is fair to say that Respighi became the most lionized Italian composer of his generation.

It is worth noting that the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was a great admirer of Respighi's music and some musicologists have theorized that the musical reference to a marching army uncomfortably recalls the brutal militarism of Mussolini's dictatorship. But this would be speculation, as all indications show that Respighi was not overtly political and used his music to capture Rome's grandeur, Italian folk traditions and historical elements, without necessarily celebrating the encroaching political climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Respighi emphatically insisted that he focused on music – not nationalism.

Respighi also played an important role in the rediscovery and modernization of Renaissance and Baroque music. Shortly after the success of *Fountains of Rome*, Respighi produced the first of what would become three suites for a smaller orchestra, *Ancient Airs and Dances*, a four-part suite based on lute music of the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1927, he composed *Gli Uccelli* (or The Birds), five short movements

based on lute and harpsichord pieces of Pasquini, Gallot and Rameau. He also created a tuneful ballet score based on rarely heard piano pieces by the well-known opera composer, Gioachino Rossini, *La Boutique fantasque* (or The Magic Toy Shop). The score by Respighi is likely the most recorded work by Respighi outside of the Roman Trilogy. Diaghilev's famed Ballets Russes performed the premiere of the ballet in London in 1919, and six years later, Respighi returned to the piano music of Gioachino Rossini to produce a four-movement suite for orchestra, *Rossiniana*. In his final years, Respighi's interest in early music led him to extensive research into Gregorian chants, which he then incorporated in his piece *Concerto gregoriano* as well as *Vetrata di Chiesa* (Church Windows.)

Respighi died in Rome at the age of 56, on April 18, 1936, with his wife Elsa by his side. In January of that year, he had been diagnosed with endocarditis, a bacterial infection of the heart which, at that time, was incurable. It is to his credit that he struggled for four months after diagnosis. The disease caused him to suffer distorted hearing, making it impossible for him to complete his final work, the opera *Lucrezia*. Ultimately it was Elsa who completed the work in 1937. Elsa, a gifted pianist and composer, remained a constant champion of her husband's music until her death in 1996 at the age of 102.

Although he died in Rome, Respighi's remains were thereafter reinterred with honors in his native Bologna, at the Cimitero Monumentale della Certosa. His grave is located next to his wife. The tomb reflects their shared musical legacy and is a testament to Respighi's enduring influence in the world of music.

Respighi's powerful orchestrations were groundbreaking in their cinematic approach to music and have had profound influence on modern day film composers including John Williams and Hans Zimmer, among countless others. *Pines of Rome* was famously featured in Disney's *Fantasia 2000*, demonstrating his ongoing influence on visual storytelling.



Ottorino Respighi and
Elsa Oliveri-Sangiaco

JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on March 13 - 15, 2026, to enjoy an exciting performance of Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, as well as the *Bartered Bride Overture* by Bedřich Smetana, the electrifying and engaging *Apu*, composed by Gabriela Lena Frank (2017), and Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 3*, featuring guest artist Solomiya Ivakhiv, on violin, all under the direction of Maestro Kalena Bovell, our guest conductor for the performance.

Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org. We'll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

Interested in hearing other works by Respighi? Here are some links to music we think you will enjoy!

Enjoy *Fountains of Rome* performed by the Auckland Philharmonia, with musicians from the Australian National Academy of Music, conducted by Giordano Bellincampi:

[Respighi - Fountains of Rome - Auckland Philharmonia](#)

Here's a delightful version of *Ancient Airs and Dances* performed by the Chamber Orchestra of New York:

[Respighi, Ancient Airs and Dances No. 3, Chamber Orchestra of New York - Salvatore Di Vittorio](#)

Listen to this 1966 recording of the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy of Respighi's *The Birds*:

[Respighi: The Birds, Ormandy & PhiladelphiaO \(1966\) レスピーギ 組曲「鳥」オーマンディ](#)

Respighi's utterly captivating ballet music, *La Boutique fantasque*, is beautifully performed by Collegium Musicum, the Orchestra from the University of Bologna, Respighi's hometown:

[O. RESPIGHI - LA BOUTIQUE FANTASQUE](#)

Enjoy *Concerto gregoriana* performed by the WDR Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Stanislav Kochanovsky, recorded live on June 28, 2024, featuring violin soloist Frank Peter Zimmermann:

[Respighi - Concerto Gregoriano | Frank Peter Zimmermann | WDR Sinfonieorchester](#)



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Here is HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Delight in this performance of Smetana's *Overture from The Bartered Bride*, performed at an outdoor festival by the Berlin Philharmonic:

[Bedrich Smetana-Overture from "The Bartered Bride"](#)

Enjoy this electrifying performance of Frank's *Apu*, by the National Youth Orchestra, USA, performed at Carnegie Hall under the direction of Maestro Marin Alsop:

[NYO-USA Performs Gabriela Lena Frank's "Apu: Tone Poem for Orchestra" with Marin Alsop](#)

You are guaranteed to smile as you watch this brilliant performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 performed by soloist Hilary Hahn, with the Stuttgart Radio Symphony, conducted by Maestro Gustavo Dudamel:

[Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 3 - Hilary Hahn /Gustavo Dudamel /Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra](#)

Enjoy this performance of *Pines of Rome* by the New World Symphony from 2019:

[Respighi - Pines of Rome with standing ovation!!!](#)



Ottorino Respighi



Ottorino Respighi Grave Site

Ottorino Respighi and
Elsa Oliveri-Sangiaco

Sociedade de Cultura Artística
183.º S A R A U
THEATRO MUNICIPAL
SEGUNDA-FEIRA, 27 de Junho 1927, às 21 horas

RECITAL DE CANTO
DA ILLUSTRE ARTISTA
ELSA O. RESPIGHI
COM A COLLABORAÇÃO DO EMINENTE COMPOSITOR
OTTORINO RESPIGHI



Ottorino Respighi

SOURCE MATERIAL

[Ottorino Respighi | Italian Composer & Orchestral Conductor | Britannica](#)

[Notes on Ottorino Respighi \(1879–1936\) and His Works | Jean-Michel Serres, Composer-pianist \(Apfel Café Music\): Website](#)

[Respighi, Ottorino - Classical Music](#)

[Ottorino Respighi \(1879-1936\)](#)

[Ottorino Respighi - New World Encyclopedia](#)