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Respighi: The Birds - Brazilian Impressions - The Fountains of Rome - The Pines of Rome (1990)

1 Respighi: The Birds (Gli uccelli), P. 154 - 1. Prelude 3:04 2 Respighi: The Birds (Gli uccelli), P. 154 - 2. The Dove (La colomba) 4:22 3 Respighi: The Birds (Gli uccelli), P. 154 - 3. The Hen (La gallina) 3:02 4 Respighi: The Birds (Gli uccelli), P. 154 - 4. The Nightingale (L'usignolo) 4:24 5 Respighi: The Birds (Gli uccelli), P. 154 - 5. The Cuckoo (Il cuccù) 4:15 6 Respighi: Brazilian Impressions, P. 153 - 1. Tropical Night 9:48 7 Respighi: Brazilian Impressions, P. 153 - 2. Butantan 4:46 8 Respighi: Brazilian Impressions, P. 153 - 3. Song and Dance 4:34 9 Respighi: Fountains of Rome, P. 106 - The Fountain of Valle Giulia (La fontana di Valle Giulia all'alba) 4:10 10 Respighi: Fountains of Rome, P. 106 - The Triton Fountain (La fontana di Tritone al mattino) 2:12 11 Respighi: Fountains of Rome, P. 106 - The Fountain of Trevi (La fontana di Trevi al meriggio) 3:40 12 Respighi: Fountains of Rome, P. 106 - The Villa Medici Fountain (La fontana di Villa Medici al tramonto) 5:28 13 Respighi: Pines of Rome, P. 141 - The Pines of Villa Borghese (I pini di Villa Borghese) 2:43 14 Respighi: Pines of Rome, P. 141 - The Pines near a Catacomb (Pini presso una catacomba) 5:34 15 Respighi: Pines of Rome, P. 141 - The Pines of the Janiculum (I pini del Gianicolo) 5:37 16 Respighi: Pines of Rome, P. 141 - The Pines of the Appian Way (I pini della Via Appia) 5:25 London Symphony Orchestra (1-8) Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra (9-16) Antal Dorati - conductor

The disc offers four of Respighi's most enduringly popular scores upon which his reputation as composer is predominantly based. For these recordings Dorati uses two separate orchestras. The earliest performances, The Birds and Brazilian Impressions were recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1957 at Watford Town Hall. Almost three years later the Fountains of Rome and Pines of Rome were recorded with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1960 at the University of Minnesota.

The justly popular suite for small orchestra The Birds from 1927 is Respighi's attempt at transcribing birdsong into musical notation. Each of the five pieces is based on melodies from

the seventeenth and eighteenth century by four European composers principally the Italian, Pasquini. The Prelude deploys Pasquini's memorable and much admired melody. In the remaining pieces The dove, The hen, The nightingale and The cuckoo can be found many fine examples of Respighi's cheerful and witty writing. At times in The cuckoo I was reminded of Copland's prairie music of the great outdoors.

From 1928 Brazilian Impressions is a three movement orchestral suite based on popular folk melodies that Respighi had heard in Brazil. The opening score Tropical Night has a convincing sultry nocturnal feel laced with hints of the tango. Following a visit to a snake farm the central movement Butantan is a successful and suitably edgy depiction of a snakes slithering through the undergrowth. Concluding the score is the colourful and pleasing Song and Dance based on folk music heard at a carnival.

In both suites The Birds and Brazilian Impressions the London Symphony Orchestra play well but do not quite deliver the necessary polish and controlled exuberance to allow the music to be heard at its best.

Finally we have Respighi's two most famous scores: the highly descriptive symphonic poems the Fountains of Rome and Pines of Rome. These cemented his international reputation. From 1916 the Fountains of Rome is a musical depiction of his inspirations from four Roman fountains. A languid scene, The Valle Giulia Fountain at Dawn has a distinctly bucolic feel. Buoyant and excitable, The Triton Fountain in the Morning conveys a convincing impression of water spouts. With heavier textures the Trevi Fountain at Mid-day commences with solemnity that develops into euphoria. With notable brass contributions the music represents a scene of Neptune's chariot pulled by seahorses. At times I was reminded of film scores to classic Hollywood epics of the silver screen. The Villa Medici fountain at Sunset provides a pastoral conclusion with notable woodwind contributions. Tender and affectionately expressive playing leads onwards to a distant tolling bell heralding the ebb of the music.

Pines of Rome a tone poem for large orchestra, is again cast in four movements: in effect a series of nature impressions. The Pines of the Villa Borghese represents excitable and energetic children at play in the pine groves. In this colourful and thrilling score I was strongly reminded of music that might accompany a swashbuckling movie romp with Errol Flynn. I did wonder if Korngold knew this piece. A shadows and mystery inhabit the movement Pines near a Catacomb. Again that strong sense of an epic Hollywood 'sword and sandal' film score is evident. Strongly impressionist in disposition The Pines of the Janiculum is lush and tender. A recording of a Nightingale can be heard over tremolo strings. So much for twentieth century Avant-garde composers writing music for orchestra and tape. A thrilling sense of foreboding fills

the air in The Pines of the Appian Way with a distinct Middle Eastern flavour suffusing the writing. It feels as if a marching army can be heard approaching in the distance, coming closer and closer, resulting in a thunderous climax.

On these final two scores Dorati conducts the Minneapolis Symphony. Although the performance is more than acceptable these scores would have benefited from a higher calibre of playing than that provided by the Minneapolis Orchestra. --- Michael Cookson, musicweb-international.com

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