



Musical Insights: Italian Holidays
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Richard Strauss, 1864-1949

Aus Italien, Op. 16

Richard Strauss essentially had two careers. In his first career (roughly 1882-1900), his primary musical output was tone poems, while in the second (roughly 1900-1941) he focused on opera. Scattered among those two genres, he produced songs, chamber music, and the like, but tone poems and opera are the major headings in his worklist. *Aus Italien*, from 1886, belongs in the tone poem group although it is in four movements like a symphony:

1. Auf der Campagna (In Campagna)
2. In Roms Ruinen (In the Ruins of Rome)
3. Am Strande von Sorrent (On the Beach at Sorrento)
4. Neapolitanisches Volksleben (Neapolitan Folk Life)

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The premiere was given in Munich, by the Court Orchestra under the composer, in 1887. The piece traveled quickly--the American premiere was offered in Philadelphia by Theodore Thomas and his orchestra in 1888. Impressive for the work of a 24-year-old composer in those days.

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Leonard Bernstein once observed that Dvořák's famous symphony carries a subtitle of "From the New World." That is, this work is something of a musical postcard from America back to Bohemia, and thus its music must be understood in largely Czech rather than American terms. One might make a similar observation about this Strauss tone poem whose title, in English, is *From Italy*. Another postcard, perhaps.

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Strauss used "Funiculì, Funiculà" in *Aus Italien's* final movement, which reflects peasant life around Naples. Strauss thought he had a folk song at hand (most people today likely also think this is folk song material), but it is a composed song, from the pen of one Luigi Denza. The song was only six years old at the time Strauss used it, and Denza asserted his rights to it via court action—and he won.

Ottorino Respighi, 1879-1936

Fountains of Rome

This broadly talented Italian composer (he also was a conductor, violinist, pianist, and teacher) was the first of his countrymen since Vivaldi and his contemporaries in the eighteenth century to be known as a composer of instrumental works rather than of opera. His studies began in Bologna, but after he accepted a position as a violist in a St. Petersburg opera house, he took the opportunity to study with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1901). While their styles could not be confused, Respighi clearly learned a great deal from the Russian master of orchestration. He then studied briefly with Max Bruch in Berlin (1902-03) while a career as a violinist and violist, as well as pianist at a vocal academy, kept him in Berlin. Primarily on the strength of two operas, he was appointed professor of composition at Liceo di Santa Cecilia (Rome) in 1913. In 1923, he was appointed director of the school, but by 1926 he realized he could not find sufficient time for composition and left the conservatory.

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As befits a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, Respighi is admired for his “brilliant and luscious” orchestration skills, to use Michael Kennedy’s terms, and he is often seen as a kind of Italian descendent of the impressionist style associated with Debussy. Both traits are easily heard in his justly famous triptych on the fountains, pines, and festivals of Rome.

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Fontane di Roma (The Fountains of Rome) was completed in 1916 and serves as the first of Respighi’s three works celebrating Rome. Its four movements supply musical portraits of the fountains in the Valle Giulia area at dawn, of Bernini’s Tritone Fountain in the morning, of the Trevi Fountain at midday, and of the Fountain in the Villa Medici at sunset. These moments were chosen, the composer tells us, because these are the times “in which their character is most in harmony with the surrounding landscape, or in which their beauty appears most impressive to the observer.”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1840-1893

Capriccio Italien, Op. 45

In 1877, Tchaikovsky entered a loveless and nearly disastrous marriage. To escape his wife and regain some version of sanity, he spent the winter of 1877-78 in Italy, and as a result, he returned to Italy a number of times when he felt the need for his mental and emotional health. His *Capriccio Italien*, seen in this light, might represent something deeper than merely a travelogue piece.

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Tchaikovsky got the inspiration for this tone poem during a stay in Rome during the 1880 carnival season, and he completed the work that spring. He later wrote of it, “I have sketched the rough draft of an Italian Capriccio based on popular melodies. It will be effective because of the wonderful melodies I happened to pick up, partly from published collections and partly out in the streets with my own ears.” One such melody is the opening fanfare, which came from a cavalry evening bugle call.

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Since the work is an Italian caprice, and not a Roman one, the composer allowed himself to include a central melody reminiscent of a Venetian gondolier’s song.

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Tchaikovsky concludes the work with a *saltarello*, a quick Roman dance. He was not the first to be enchanted by this dance—Mendelssohn offers a saltarello as the last movement of his Symphony No. 4, the “Italian.”