

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

1816

Rossini*Il Barbiere di Siviglia***MUSIC**Franz Schubert
Stabat Mater**ART**John Constable
Wivenhoe Park**LITERATURE**E. T. A. Hoffmann
Nussknacker und Mausekönig
(*The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*,
basis of ballet *The Nutcracker*)**HISTORY**Indiana is admitted as the 19th
U.S. state.

1892

Leoncavallo*Pagliacci***MUSIC**Edward Elgar
Serenade for Strings**ART**Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
At the Moulin Rouge**LITERATURE**Thomas Hardy
The Well-Beloved**HISTORY**Rudolf Diesel applies for a patent on
his compression ignition engine (the
Diesel engine).

1924

Respighi*Pines of Rome***MUSIC**George Gershwin
Rhapsody in Blue**ART**Marc Chagall
Green Violinist**LITERATURE**Edgar Rice Burroughs
The Land That Time Forgot**HISTORY**The death of Vladimir Lenin sparks a
power struggle in the Soviet Union,
paving the way for Joseph Stalin's rise.

SPANO CONDUCTS PUCCINI

In nineteenth-century Italy, if you were not an opera composer, you were not a composer at all. Italian audiences were mad for opera, so any composer wanting to make a living had to give it their best shot or go hungry.

And while it may be hard to discern from a 21st century vantage point, Italian opera of the 19th century was far from monolithic. With each passing decade, there appeared a new style or approach – often spurred on by the dizzying social, political, and artistic upheavals occurring throughout Europe at the time.

At the start of the century, Rossini gave us beautiful, flowing melodies, vocal virtuosity, and expressive recitatives that epitomized the *bel canto* style of opera. Works such as *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* showcased the human voice as the central instrument, with intricate ornamentation and seamless transitions between recitative and aria.

Following Rossini, composers such as Bellini and Donizetti retained the vocal demands of *bel canto*, but expanded its dramatic scope, adding fuel to the Romantic era's focus on personal and psychological depth.

Mid-century, Verdi managed to blend lyrical beauty with political and social commentary. In operas such as *La traviata* we find an expanded role for the orchestra, Wagnerian-style leitmotifs, and emphasized character psychology, giving rise to what we now consider “grand” opera.

Towards the late 19th century, Puccini led the *verismo* movement, which rejected the idealized characters of *bel canto* in favor of realistic, often tragic, human stories. Works like *La bohème* featured gritty, contemporary settings, complex character relationships, and a focus on emotional authenticity.

Without these pioneers boldly charting new artistic pathways in musical storytelling, 20th century artists like Respighi could never have envisioned opulent orchestral masterpieces, such as *Pines of Rome*, that paint vivid, often iridescent tableaux without even a single word.



SPANO CONDUCTS PUCCINI

Amica Rush Hour: Friday, April 9, 2027

TACO Classical: Saturday, April 10, 2027

RI Philharmonic Principal Guest Conductor, Robert Spano, offers us a cornucopia of treasures from the world of Italian opera and beyond tonight. As he is also the current Music Director for the Washington National Opera, it's a world that he both cherishes and knows well. Joining him are four rising stars from the Washington National Opera's Cafritz Young Artist program, who will not only perform a concert rendition of Act III from Puccini's *La bohème*, but also treat us to four of the most iconic arias from the 19th century Italian repertoire. These will be explored as a whole in the deeper dive below. But first, the concert opener!

Capriccio sinfonico

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858-1924)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

"Lavoro accanitamente per ultimare il mio pezzo che ora è a buon punto!" [I am working like a dog to complete my piece, which now is almost done!]

So wrote the young Puccini as he rushed to complete his graduation exercise for the Milan Conservatory. Determined to do more than produce the customary academic fugues and arias, he set himself the challenge of composing a grand orchestral work instead. "I felt inspired," he later told his biographer Arnaldo Fraccaroli. "I composed at home, in the street, in class, at the Osteria Aida or at the Excelsior of good old Signor Gigi, where one ate without the silly pretense of being able to pay for it; I wrote on odd sheets, bits of paper, and the margins of newspapers."

When Puccini showed this heap of jottings to his teacher, Amilcare Ponchielli, the respected elder sighed, "I can't make anything of it. It's just a mess." Even so, Puccini managed to prepare a legible score and set of parts by the deadline, and Franco Faccio, the celebrated music director of La Scala and a fellow Conservatory alumnus, agreed to conduct. Though the unfamiliar music challenged the student orchestra, the performance was more than a success. Puccini's newly penned *Capriccio sinfonico* caused a sensation.

The morning after the premiere, the influential critic Filippo Filippi praised the young composer in *La Perseveranza*: "He unquestionably possesses the rare essentials of a symphonic composer. I am certain he would be equally successful in the vocal field and in dramatic expression, but his orchestral composition contains so much unity of style, personality, character, and brilliant technique as is rarely found among the most mature composers."

Opera, however, was where the money was, so this most expansive of Puccini's three orchestral works became his last. Still, *Capriccio sinfonico* holds an important place in his oeuvre—not only as a source of ideas for the operas that followed (for example, the opening of its fast middle section reappears almost note for note at the start of *La bohème*), but also because it is the first work in which we hear the unmistakable "Puccini sound": a distinctive fusion of traditional Italian *bel canto* style with Wagnerian motivic writing and orchestral treatment. Listen in particular for the passion and richness he draws from the winds in the opening measures, the way lilting waltzes grow organically from his lyrical themes, and, of course, his extraordinary gift for expressive melody.

La bohème: Act III

GIACOMO PUCCINI

Last performed April 8, 1972 with Francis Madeira conducting and soloists Karan Armstrong, Louisa Budd, Barry Morell and John Darrenkamp. In addition to a solo soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

For many listeners, Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème* is the most perfect—and most heartbreaking—of operas. It tells the quintessential story of young love, holding together the exhilaration of first passion and the sorrow of loss. Based on Henri Murger's episodic novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, it offers a slice-of-life portrait of impoverished young artists in 19th-century Paris.

Its 1896 premiere, conducted by the 28-year-old Arturo Toscanini, was surprisingly not a triumph. Critics were puzzled. Expecting the grand, heroic passion of Puccini's earlier success *Manon Lescaut*, they instead encountered a story about poverty. They dismissed the plot as “trivial” and the music as “small,” built from a lost key, a cold attic, and a persistent cough. In one sense, they were right—and they entirely missed the point. Puccini's genius was to transform such seemingly ordinary details into a devastatingly universal tragedy, one that bypasses the intellect and speaks directly to the heart.

In Act III, a troubled Mimi wanders to a tavern on the outskirts of Paris to confront her beloved Rodolfo, whose jealousy has destroyed their once-happy relationship. After confiding in their mutual friend Marcello, she hides as Rodolfo arrives. Pressed for the truth, Rodolfo admits to Marcello that his jealousy is only a mask. The real source of his anguish is that Mimi is dying, and he knows her condition can only worsen in the poverty they share.

Overcome, Mimi steps forward from the shadows to embrace Rodolfo and say farewell while Marcello, drawn by the raucous laughter of his free-spirited girlfriend Musetta, rushes back into the tavern to get her. What follows is one of the most emotionally charged ensemble scenes in all of opera. The quartet “Addio dolce svegliare” (“Goodbye, sweet awakening”) is in effect a double-breakup duet: Rodolfo and Mimi, anticipating their final separation in spring, agree to remain together through the winter; while Musetta and Marcello trade bitter words and storm off in opposite directions. It is a masterful example of Puccini's ability to weave conflicting emotions into a unified, poignant scene.

Pagliacci: Prologue

RUGGERO LEONCAVALLO (1857-1919)

Last performed March 8, 1969 with Francis Madeira conducting and soloist Robert Gregori. In addition to a solo baritone, this piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, one oboe, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and two harps.

The Barber of Seville: “Una voce poco fa”

GIOACHINO ROSSINI (1792-1868)

Last performed April 27, 1974 with Francis Madeira conducting and soloist Roberta Peters. In addition to a solo mezzo-soprano, this piece is scored for piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings.

Cavalleria rusticana: Intermezzo

PIETRO MASCAGNI (1863-1945)

Last performed April 13, 2019 with Marie Jacquot conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, harp, organ and strings.

L'arlesiana: "È la solita storia del pastore"**FRANCESCO CILEA** (1866-1950)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. In addition to a solo tenor, this piece is scored for flute, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, harp and strings.

La traviata: "È strano, è strano... Ah fors'è lui... Sempre libera"**GIUSEPPE VERDI** (1813-1901)

Last performed May 8, 1993 with Zuohuang Chen conducting and soloist Maria Spacagna. In addition to a solo soprano, this piece is scored for piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp and strings.

In 19th century Italy, opera arias were as crucial to daily life as air. Combining artistic excellence, national identity, and political expression into something so eminently singable and memorable, these songs both defined and connected an emerging country of markedly passionate people. Opera houses like La Scala in Milan and the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples were centers of social life, providing elite and working classes alike an opportunity to connect personally with characters and stories that often reflected contemporary social or political issues.

As the century progressed, and these operas were performed and celebrated more and more across Europe and the Americas, great arias elevated the status of Italian composers and singers. Often featuring the *prima donna* or *prima uomo*, these arias were the emotional and artistic core of Italian opera. They could make or break not just a production, but an entire career.

So whether you find yourself drinking in beautiful, even tones, and long, lyrical phrases, or astonished by how even the most subtle shifts in volume, tempo, and articulation can reveal a character's inner turmoil or joy, the fact that 19th-century Italian arias continue to endure will, by the end of the evening, come as no surprise.

Pines of Rome**OTTORINO RESPIGHI** (1879-1936)

Last performed November 19, 2011 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, six buccine, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, piano, organ and strings.

Building on the artistic innovations and national pride ushered in by his 19th-century predecessors, and benefitting from "a few, but for me very important" lessons with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov of *Scheherazade* fame, Ottorino Respighi set out to craft his three most famous works: *Fountains of Rome* (1917), *Pines of Rome* (1924), and *Roman Festivals* (1929).

All three of these orchestral tone poems showcase Respighi's gift for creating music that is both vividly and specifically visual. Combining his penchant for the charm and tonal elegance of music of the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods with aesthetics and techniques from the early 20th century, Respighi's music overflows with beguiling and iridescent textures.

Of *Pines*, Respighi wrote that “the century-old trees which dominate so characteristically the Roman landscape become testimony for the principal events in Roman life.” Those events range from the shrill cries of playing children to the thunderous approach of Caesar’s army, with a recorded nightingale—Respighi strongly preferred an actual recording to a piccolo imitation—singing in between.

Each of the *Pines of Rome*’s four movements has its own subtitle, though they are played without pause, so the work unfolds in one continuous arc. In the first, “The Pines of Villa Borghese,” children play in the pine groves as the full orchestra (though most prominently the brass) sparkles. By contrast, the second, “The Pines near a Catacomb,” sets mournful, hymn-like phrases against a dark backdrop dominated by the strings.

A lighter mood returns in the third section, “The Pines of the Janiculum,” which Respighi imagined as a moonlit scene filled with birdsong. Here the piano comes strikingly to the fore, and the clarinet is given a long, lyrical solo. As the movement closes, the nightingale is heard. Without pause, the music then moves to “The Pines of the Appian Way,” evoking the ancient past and the Roman army, complete with instruments referred to in the score as “buccine” (ancestors of both the trumpet and the trombone originally used to summon Roman soldiers – now commonly played by flugelhorns and euphoniums), as it marches on the capital. At first the army seems distant, but the relentless tread of marching feet becomes unmistakable, even before the brass and percussion bring the soldiers fully into view. In grand operatic fashion, Respighi brings the work to a monumental close.