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DIGITAL

World Premiere Recordings

RESPIGI

BELKIS, QUEEN OF SHEBA

Orchestral Suite

METAMORPHOSEON

Theme and Variations

GEOFFREY SIMON

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA



RESPIGHI is justly famous as the most successful Italian composer of his time for music of poetic and visual inspiration which, as John Waterhouse notes in his *New Grove* article on the composer, is "preoccupied with vivid orchestral colours." However, as Dr. Waterhouse goes on to point out, "one should not ignore the series of large and unexpectedly sober abstract works" of Respighi's later years which show a more serious style. Both categories of music are represented here: a spectacular Suite from a brilliantly scored ballet is coupled with a virtuoso set of *Orchestral Variations* which are without pictorial or literary influences and therefore 'pure music.' These are two works among many of Respighi's compositions that reveal an unsuspected range and quality but which have been totally obscured by the success of his Roman Trilogy. Their neglect is inexplicable both in the concert-hall and on record, where they now appear for the first time.

In 1931, Respighi began composing the music for one of his most ambitious stage-works: the full-scale epic-ballet **Belkis, Regina di Saba**, which was to be mounted by La Scala, Milan, the

following season. The exoticism of the biblical legend of Solomon and Sheba had long held a special fascination for him and he drew on two elements in telling the story in his music: the Hebraic, in which he studied and emulated the melodic characteristics of ancient Hebrew songs; and the Arabic, where he stressed oriental rhythms with a vast assortment of native percussion instruments.

The ballet evoked the wondrous journey undertaken in the year 1000 B.C. by Belkis, the Queen of Sheba, in response to an imperial message from Solomon, the King of Israel. The birds and the winds have told him that he is loved from afar by this beautiful young Queen of the South, so he sends for her to come to his throne that he may render her great honour and homage. Belkis travels across the desert in a huge treasure-laden caravan with warriors and slaves, elephants and camels, and her union with Solomon is celebrated by tumultuous rejoicing.

The full eighty-minute ballet required an enormous orchestra, including such unconventional instruments as sitars and wind-machines, a phalanx of off-stage brass, a chorus, several vocal soloists, and a narrator who related the legendary story in verse. Respighi's

wife, Elsa, attended the rehearsals and wrote that "the score is dazzlingly rich and contains many new and beautiful ideas." His literary collaborator, Claudio Guastalla, supplied the scenario by using an opera libretto on the subject that he had once fashioned from holy writ. The noted Russian choreographer Leonide Massine arranged tableaux and dances of immense variety, and engaged an excellent Persian ballerina, Leila Bederkhan, for the part of Belkis, whilst Solomon was played by David Lichine, one of the finest young dancers of his generation. For the decor, Nicola Benois produced a stunning array of opulent backcloths and grandiose sets, as well as the designs for over 600 costumes, and a sumptuously decorative entertainment was thus devised.

The ballet was premiered with tremendous success on 23rd January 1932 and received high praise not only in the Italian press but also abroad. In the *New York Times*, Raymond Hall wrote: "Respighi has achieved a technical tour-de-force: he strove mainly for colour and spectacle and has achieved his goal brilliantly, immersing his score in vivid oriental atmosphere from beginning to end. As a lavish spectacle, *Belkis, Regina di Saba* represents one of the

milestone achievements of this house."

Two years later, Respighi extracted the purely Orchestral Suite recorded here. The order of movements in the published Suite mainly follows the action of the ballet, but the present performance interchanges the two middle movements so as to heighten the overall musical and dramatic contrast. The first movement is entitled **The Dream of Solomon** and comes from the opening scene in Solomon's torch-lit harem in Jerusalem. The brief brooding prelude, depicting his solitude as he gazes at a bright starry sky, is followed by a solemn march episode: "The beautiful King enters, his bearing religious and majestic, lost in profound thoughts." After an expressive cello solo, unison strings break in with passionate love-music from the scene later in the ballet portraying the actual meeting between Belkis and Solomon: "And when, raising her eyes, she recognises that wise and mighty and beautiful King whose call of love she has heard from the ends of the earth, the young virgin, overcome by emotion, falls at his feet like a little dead dove."

The **War Dance** which follows takes music from two different scenes in the ballet. The opening is a raunchy *Dance on the Drums* which

occurs during the final scene of celebration: "Bronzed and near-naked young athletes run on, rolling enormous drums onto which they jump and dance, thundering out the rhythm with frantic feet." This section calls for 'large and small War Drums' and it leads straight into an *allegro impetuoso* where Solomon's negro warriors, by way of salutation on the Queen of Sheba's arrival in Jerusalem, "utter savage warcries whilst brandishing long lances and dancing their fantastic dance."

The next movement features the languid, irregular rhythm of an Arab Drum and is entitled **The Dance of Belkis at Dawn**. It contains some of Respighi's most sensual music and is an erotic picture of the Queen of Sheba's first appearance in the ballet. She is seen at daybreak on a ruby-studded divan of green malachite, watched over by four black slaves, in the luxuriant hanging gardens of Kitor. In the distance are the towers of the royal palace and further off is the Red Sea, coloured purple by the sunrise. "Beautiful as the olive in the field and languishing for love of Solomon, Belkis sleeps her pure sleep. She awakens, and raising her hands to salute the light of the world, dances barefoot in honour of the newly-risen sun."

The last movement of the Suite constitutes the ballet's finale — an **Orgiastic Dance** marking the union of Solomon and Sheba. Raymond Hall wrote: "The final orgy of the thousand-odd people on the stage at La Scala works up into a deafening tumult of sound and a paroxysm of rhythm that finds a par only in the Dionysian climaxes of the *Sacre du Printemps*. Respighi has pounded out this uproar with an insistence little short of sardonic fury... At the Scala première it brought the audience to its feet in a frenzy of excitement that burst into an interminable ovation." The setting is Solomon's marvellous palace garden of cedars and palm-trees where a great feast of rejoicing is prepared: "A mighty horde of young men and girls, warriors and slaves of every race and colour, rises up in an orgiastic dance, letting loose a mighty clamour of laughter and greetings. And then, at the peak of the furore, two high thrones gradually become visible in the distance, and seated majestically upon them are King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba — motionless as idols of gold."

The other work on this recording is
Metamorphoseon — Modi XII — Tema e

Variazioni per Orchestra — a forbidding title which disguises music of real beauty yet completely excludes the 'picturesque' element so often found in Respighi's work. There is, in short, not a pine or a fountain in sight!

The piece was one of several which were commissioned from international composers by Serge Koussevitzky to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1930. During the celebrations, he also gave the premières of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, Hindemith's *Concert Music for Strings and Brass*, Honegger's 1st Symphony, Roussel's 3rd Symphony, Prokofiev's 4th Symphony, and several American works, including Howard Hanson's *Romantic Symphony*.

Respighi was no stranger to Boston audiences: he had already conducted the orchestra in 1927 and was often championed by Koussevitsky himself, who had premiered *Church Windows* that same year and duly introduced *Metamorphoseon* on 7th November 1930. The following day, the *Boston Traveler* wrote: "Respighi's *Theme and Variations* emerged as a colossal achievement ... His is a rare genius for melody, an absolute technical command and above all, brilliant orchestration.

Altogether the new work is a masterly composition."

At first sight, it would appear that Respighi has written another of his ecclesiastical-style works, as the twelve variations are each numbered like mediaeval modes. But in fact he uses the word "mode" in its meaning of a "manner" or "way" of transforming a theme, and although the music does have a quasi-modal feel, it is actually rooted pretty firmly in B flat minor. And in writing a work especially for one of the world's greatest ensembles, Respighi particularly sought to exploit the virtuosity of each soloist or instrumental group, so that the result became a brilliant 'Concerto for Orchestra' in a Theme-and-Variations format.

Interestingly, although Respighi uses a basic 'ABA' pattern for the variations — so that calm outer sections flank briefer outbursts of stormier music throughout — he does in fact employ two major themes, not one. The first **Theme** is sonorously stated at the outset by the full string orchestra. A counter-melody on the clarinet provides material which will be heard again in various guises throughout the work. The *poco più mosso* middle section features a rising 'motto' in the lower registers of the orchestra

which forms the basis of the more dramatic central episodes in the succeeding variations.

Modus I — Undulating strings introduce the second of the work's two major themes, heard first in the woodwinds and later — after the contrasting middle section — in the unusual combination of solo cello and first violins in unison. **Modus II** — A solo viola, in duet with the cor anglais, plays a variant of the first theme with the overall musical character lightened by tripping woodwind-and-pizzicato accompaniments.

Modus III — This oboe-led variation (also based on the first theme) is a fervent lament with tragic rising-and-falling figurations in the lower strings.

Modus IV — Respighi reverts to his second major theme for a variation which provides a superb example of the kind of sonority which this master-orchestrator could conjure from instrumental forces. This section — marked *con grande espressione* — occupies the same position in *Metamorphoseon* as 'Nimrod' does in Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, except that Elgarian nobility is here replaced by music of impassioned tragedy which reaches a brass-laden climax before dying away to a series of fateful crashes on the tam-tam.

The same secondary theme is heard in the two scherzo variations which follow, where the metre constantly changes back and forth from triple to duple-time. **Modus V** — The clarinet has a brilliant solo to an accompaniment brightened by glockenspiel and piccolo. **Modus VI** — The whole orchestra is put through its paces in a display-piece variation where the theme appears in the bass-line.

Modus VII — This extraordinary section particularly caught the audience's ears at the première since it consists entirely of accompanied cadenzas. The featured solo instruments (several of which make more than one appearance) are harp, cello, violin, viola, horn, bassoon, flute, clarinet, oboe, and bass-clarinet.

Modus VIII — Respighi brings back his principal opening theme for a delightful intermezzo-style serenade with a quirky Prokofiev-like key-change from A to B major, and, like the other variations, a more intense central episode. **Modus IX** — High muted pianissimo strings usher in the first major theme whilst a few bars of the second are heard in counterpoint on the harp. After several wind-swept moments, the tranquillity of the opening reasserts itself, and descending chords lead

straight into the exuberant finale.

This consists of the last three variations linked together without pause, all based on Respighi's first theme. **Modus X** — The music launches into a short yet confident five-in-a-bar section with deft interplay between winds and pizzicato strings. The entry of the horns, upward-rushing scales on the violins, and a time-change to 4/4, signal the onset of **Modus XI** in which the virtuosity of the writing adds to the headlong excitement of the music. A change of tempo heralds the brilliant coda — **Modus XII** — and Respighi finally transforms his principal theme into a resplendent brass chorale, complete with organ accompaniment, bringing the whole work to a jubilant B flat major conclusion.

Edward Johnson

GEOFFREY SIMON has earned international renown amongst concert audiences and record collectors for his highly-praised performances of lesser-known orchestral masterpieces by major 19th and 20th century composers, and notable contemporary compositions.

He has appeared and recorded with the Philharmonia, the London Symphony and the English Chamber Orchestras, and guest-conducted the Bournemouth Symphony, Haifa Symphony, Israel Sinfonietta, Milwaukee Symphony, Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra and many others including the major orchestras of Australia.

His recording début, made in 1978 with the LSO in Bloch's *Sacred Service*, marked the inaugural classical release of Chandos Records and its success began a close association with Chandos which has produced a number of critically acclaimed recordings: an award-winning 4-record cycle of unfamiliar Tchaikovsky works, a best-selling Respighi album, of which this recording is a sequel, 1920s French ballet music, orchestral music by Smetana, and well-received discs of concerto works by Barber, Shostakovich, Gordon Jacob, Jurriaan Andriessen and John Downey.

Geoffrey Simon was born in 1946, in Adelaide. He studied at Melbourne University, the Juilliard School and Indiana University and assumed his first post in 1969, as Music Director of the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra. He won a major prize in the 1974 John Player International

Conductors' Award, which led to invitations to conduct in England and, from 1975-79, the Music Directorship of the Australian Sinfonia. He has since been active with recording projects, guest appearances, opera conducting and the training of young orchestral musicians in England and the United States.

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OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879 — 1936)

BELKIS, QUEEN OF SHEBA*(Belkis, Regina di Saba) (22:30)*Suite for Orchestra from the
Complete Ballet

- 1 1. The Dream of Solomon
(Il sogno di Salomone) (7:58)
- 2 2. War Dance *(Danza guerresca) (2:50)*
- 3 3. The Dance of Belkis at Dawn
(La Danza di Belkis all'aurora) (6:19)
- 4 4. Orgiastic Dance
(Danza orgiastica) (5:13)

METAMORPHOSEON*(Modi XII) (25:36)*

Theme and Variations for Orchestra

Theme *(Andante moderato) (1:49)*

- 5 6. Modus I *(Moderato non troppo) (1:53)*
- 7 7. Modus II *(Allegretto) (1:40)*
- 8 8. Modus III *(Lento) (2:20)*
- 9 9. Modus IV *(Lento espressivo) (2:39)*

10 Modus V *(Molto vivace) (0:36)*11 Modus VI *(Vivo) (0:44)*12 Modus VII *(Cadenze) (6:39)*13 Modus VIII *(Andantino mosso) (1:20)*14 Modus IX *(Lento non troppo) (2:19)*15 Modus X *(Molto allegro) (0:42)*16 Modus XI *(Molto allegro) (0:51)*17 Modus XII *(Vivo non troppo) (2:03)***PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA**Leader, Christopher Warren-Green
conducted by**GEOFFREY SIMON**

TT = 48:12

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