

## **Living Color**

by René Spencer Saller

This program celebrates the range and scope of the orchestra in works by four great colorists, representing four different nations. The first piece after the intermission is the U.S. premiere of *Solastalgia*, a piccolo concerto by the Estonian composer Erkki-Sven Tüür. Stéphane Denève led the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in the world premiere, in Amsterdam, on December 6, 2017. *Solastalgia* was co-commissioned by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the RCO, and the London Philharmonic.

The concert begins with a familiar favorite: *Capriccio espagnol*, by the Russian composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. Rimsky, who was mostly self-taught, became so renowned for his orchestration that he feared it would overshadow his compositional achievements. “The opinion reached by both critics and the public that the *Capriccio* is a magnificently orchestrated piece is wrong,” he declared. “The *Capriccio* is a brilliant composition for the orchestra.”

Before the intermission, we'll hear *Cantus Arcticus*, the best-known work by the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara, who died two years ago at the age of 87. Completed in 1972, *Cantus Arcticus* combines both actual birdsong (derived from field recordings) and instrumental sonorities that deliberately mimic the sound of Arctic birds. Indeed, the subtitle of *Cantus Arcticus* is "a concerto for birds and orchestra."

After the Tüür premiere, we close the program with a symphonic poem by Italian composer Ottorino Respighi: *Pini di Roma (Pines of Rome)*. With this richly cinematic, daringly original showpiece, Respighi gave generations of Hollywood film composers a vast toolbox of sonic effects to plunder and repurpose.

### **Rimsky-Korsakov *Capriccio espagnol***

The Italian word *capriccio* means “caprice” or “whim,” which perfectly describes the playful mood of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Capriccio espagnol*. Completed in 1887, the work began as a fantasy for violin and orchestra and evolved into a full-fledged orchestral showpiece. It boasts a bold gypsy-flavored solo violin, and some of its themes were derived

from traditional Spanish folk songs and dances. Although the title evokes Italy and Spain, *Capriccio espagnol* was written entirely in Russia. It reflects the composer's research and imagination more than his travels as an officer in the Imperial Navy.

Praised by Tchaikovsky as "a colossal masterpiece of instrumentation," *Capriccio espagnol* demonstrates Rimsky's consummate grasp of orchestral effect. Unlike most of his peers, he didn't compose at the piano; he considered the entire orchestra to be his primary instrument. At the first rehearsal, the musicians concluded each section with a round of applause.

### **A Closer Listen**

*Capriccio espagnol* contains five brief linked sections. True to its origins in dance, it is rhythmically complex, with a correspondingly elaborate percussion section. The first movement, the Alborado, or "morning serenade," is based on a traditional Asturian dance and features two sprightly clarinet solos. It is followed by the stately Variazioni, which begins with a gravely beautiful horn melody and ends with an intensely chromatic flute cadenza. Another headlong Alborado follows, in which martial drums and horns are interrupted by a boisterous violin solo. The ensuing gypsy song spins out five showy cadenzas for horns, solo violin, flute, clarinet, and harp before morphing into a passionate triple-time dance. The closing fandango, a whirlwind of cymbals and castanets, resurrects the Alborado theme, sets it on fire, and stomps triumphantly on the embers. In just about 15 minutes, the *Capriccio* has blazed through five movements, at least a couple of continents, and the technical capacities of the large modern orchestra.

### **Rautavaara: *Cantus Arcticus***

Born in Helsinki, in 1928, Einojuhani Rautavaara studied composition at the Sibelius Academy. In 1955, when he was in his late twenties, he was nominated for a grant to study in the United States by Jean Sibelius himself, who was then 90 years old. Comparisons of the two famous Finns are inevitable, and almost too easy. Rautavaara shared with his mentor a devotion to the natural world and the pleasures of tonality. Both composers produced a great deal of wildly experimental yet unapologetically sensuous music.

Before his death in 2016, Rautavaara completed an impressive body of work: eight symphonies, nine operas (on Vincent Van Gogh and Rasputin, among others), a dozen concertos, and countless choral, chamber, and orchestral pieces. His most famous composition remains *Cantus Arcticus*, Op. 61, from 1972. This three-movement "concerto for birds and orchestra" incorporates field recordings and aleatoric (random or improvisatory) procedures. At the beginning of the score, Rautavaara appended this instruction: "Think of Autumn and Tchaikovsky."

### **The Composer Speaks**

"The *Cantus Arcticus* was commissioned by the 'Arctic' University of Oulu for its degree ceremony. Instead of the conventional festive cantata for choir and orchestra, I wrote a 'concerto for birds and orchestra.' The bird sounds were taped in the Arctic Circle and the marshlands of Liminka [a municipality in the former province of Oulu, in Northern Finland]. The first movement, *Suo* ('The Marsh'), opens with two solo flutes. They are gradually joined by other wind instruments and the sounds of bog birds in spring. Finally, the strings enter with a broad melody that might be interpreted as the voice and mood of a person walking in the wilds. In *Melankolia* ('Melancholy'), the featured bird is the shore lark; its twitter has been brought down by two octaves to make it a 'ghost bird'. *Joutsenet muuttavat* ('Swans migrating') is an aleatory texture with four independent instrumental groups. The texture constantly increases in complexity, and the sounds of the migrating swans are multiplied too, until finally the sound is lost in the distance."—Einojuhani Rautavaara

### **Tüür: Solastalgia**

Erkki-Sven Tüür received his formal training on flute and percussion before going on to study composition at the Tallinn Conservatoire (later renamed the Estonian Academy of Music). He first attracted notice in the late 1970s, as a rock musician—a rather risky activity under the totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union. Influenced by King Crimson, Yes, and Frank Zappa, the 20-year-old composer formed the successful progressive-rock band In Spe, which he describes as "a laboratory... to test my ideas." Although he left In Spe in 1984, its influence endures: "My music didn't change that dramatically," he said in a recent

interview. "The ideas moved from this music I wrote for In Spe to larger scorings. So it was never a jump from one stylistic approach to another. This was very evolutionary."

Over the subsequent decades, Tüür has written nine symphonies, numerous orchestral and chamber-music pieces, and an opera. Although he has completed ten concertos, *Solastalgia* is his first for piccolo (he has yet to write a concerto for flute). He describes it as "musica concertante" as opposed to a traditional concerto: "The piccolo acts as a trigger to call up the different movements in the orchestra. [It] has a specific leading role, but it's always interacting with the orchestra."

### **The Composer Speaks**

"*Solastalgia* is a neologism that describes a form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change, such as mining or climate change. Coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht in 2003, it was formed from a combination of the Latin word *sōlācium* ('comfort') and the Greek root *-algia* ('pain')....

"As opposed to nostalgia..., the melancholia or distress experienced by individuals when separated from a loved home (or homesickness), 'solastalgia' is the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment.

"I mostly live in Hiiumaa (an island in the Baltic Sea), on a farm on Kõpu peninsula. When the wind happens to blow from the north, I can hear the waves break on the other side of the forest. There are no other houses in sight. From the windows of my studio, I can often spot deer, foxes, and cranes. It takes about ten minutes to walk through the protected forest down to the beach. And I feel how every day my life in this miraculous place grows increasingly rare and somehow unreal. Like some sort of an illusion.

"Where I live, the impact of global climate change manifests itself in that winters are no longer winters and summers no longer summers. In my childhood it was ordinary for cars to drive to mainland on a 25-km ice bridge in the winter. There was a lot of snow. And summers were so

warm that swimming in the sea was the most natural thing in the world. Today's reality is that the difference between winter and summer equinoxes is often only 4 to 5 degrees. There is no place to hide from the ubiquitous environmental change caused by human activity. [...]

"The piccolo in this score is the catalyst of great processes in the orchestra.... Initially, the piccolo phrases are replied to by a 'same-gender' sound: the flute, alto flute, and bass flute. The introduction of more melodious motifs is accompanied by the entire woodwind section and, gradually, by the whole orchestra. It is remarkable how the orchestral waves inspired by the piccolo grow more intense and then slowly emancipate. Everything flows in the direction of increasing rhythmical activity and expanding tessitura, spirally developing in waves that accumulate more and more energy.

"...I have called my composition method 'vectorial,' as I develop my musical material according to factors such as 'the angle of ascent or descent,' 'curve characteristics,' the direction of energy accumulation and eruption, etc. I want to emphasize that although this sounds extremely artificial, the decisions I make when composing are still largely based on intuition.... And when I listen to my music, the most important thing is whether its developmental arc sounds natural or not...."—Erkki-Sven Tüür (translated by Pirjo Püvi; the composer's program notes, which have been edited for length and clarity, can be read in their entirety at the composer's website, [erkkisven.com](http://erkkisven.com))

### **Respighi, *Pini di Roma***

Although his eight operas were relative failures, no Italian of the 20th century was a more successful symphonist than Ottorino Respighi. During the height of his fame, he was second only to Puccini in popularity. He received his early musical training in his native Bologna, but his education didn't stop there. While working in Russia as an orchestral violist, he studied composition and orchestration with Rimsky-Korsakov, whose brilliant use of orchestral color greatly influenced the younger man's style. Respighi was particularly admired for his pictorialism, his uncanny ability to paint a scene in sounds.

### **Four Ways of Looking at Pine Trees**

*Pini di Roma (Pines of Rome)* is the second installment in what is

sometimes called Respighi's "Roman triptych." Composed in 1923 and 1924, the symphonic poem was an even bigger hit than its hugely popular predecessor, *Fontane di Roma* (*Fountains of Rome*). Each of its four movements depicts pine trees at various hours, in different Roman locations. In a performance note, Respighi wrote that he used nature "as a point of departure, in order to recall memories and visions. The centuries-old trees that dominate so characteristically the Roman landscape become testimony for the principal events in Roman life."

In the final movement he scored parts for six buccine (plural of *buccina*; two bass, two soprano, and two tenor). The buccina, ancestor of the trumpet and trombone, is an ancient brass instrument that was once used in the Roman army. Despite this specification, Respighi assumed that the buccine parts would be performed on modern saxhorns or flugelhorns; they are played here by four trumpets and two trombones, placed in a balcony aisle.

### **A Closer Listen**

In the lively, sun-dappled first movement, children play under the trees in the Villa Borghese gardens, singing nursery rhymes and pretending to be soldiers. The dirgelike second movement, which features a trumpet situated in one of the balconies, describes the pines surrounding a rural chapel, where priests chant (trombones) and a hymn floats over an echoing catacomb (offstage trumpet). A nocturne follows, as the moon silvers the pines around the temple of Janus. This movement features a recording of an actual nightingale's song—Respighi was ridiculed for this innovation—and offstage flugelhorns, which represent an approaching army. In the final movement, Respighi portrays the pines at dawn, as an army marches along the Via Appia. Amid the triumphant and sometimes menacing sonorities of the advancing soldiers—pealing horns and a rumbling organ—Respighi inserts an elegiac duet between bassoon and English horn. It's a reminder that grief and joy are inseparable: every victory contains a loss.

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