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Don't Choose the Nightingale:

Timbre, Index, and Birdsong in Respighi's *Pini di Roma*

Arman Schwartz

The fascist lifestyle magazine *La rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* advertised itself as the last word in modernity, promising news of “all the victories won by Art, Industry, and Labor.”¹ Readers browsing the January 1925 issue would not have been disappointed—there were essays about skiing and baseball, reports on magnetite mining in the Val d'Aosta and the latest performances of the *Ballets Russes* in London—but they might have been surprised by one article of a rather different stripe. Entitled “Con Orfeo al giardino zoologico” (With Orpheus at the Zoological Garden), and written by the avant-garde filmmaker and impresario Anton Giulio Bragaglia, it documented, with extensive photographs, an experiment in which gramophone records were played for the animals in Rome's zoo. We see a wolf, as it looks suspiciously through its cage at the sound capturing device. An elephant nudges the horn protruding from the wooden box with its own extended trunk. Perhaps the most engaged of all the beasts, Bragaglia suggested, was “a beautiful leopardess” named Checchina. “As if seized with great emotion, she paced around the instrument, contemplated and glanced at it, sniffed it, dared to approach it, and finally lay down to listen, like the most refined music lover.”²

¹ “E questa è anche la via di una attività sempre più diligente ed intensa, che ci viene imposta e che condurrà le nostre ricerche e i nostri commenti sulle tracce di tutti i fatti, sul coronamento di tutte le vittorie conseguite dall'Arte, dall'Industria e dal Lavoro.” “1925,” *La rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* (January 1925), 5.

² “Straordinario è stato il comportamento di Checchina, una bellissima femmina di leopardo. [...] Come vinta da grande commozione essa si è aggirata intorno all'apparecchio: l'ha contemplato soffermandosi a pause: l'ha fiutato, ha osato avvicinarsi e infine si è sdraiata ad ascoltarlo, come il più raffinato amatore di musica.” Anton Giulio Bragaglia, “Con Orfeo al giardino zoologico,” *La rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* (January 1925), 93.

Hardly a straightforward victory for Art and Industry, you might say. Despite its grandly mythological title, “Con Orfeo al giardino zoologico” made no strong claims for the power of music, nor for its own status as a scientific text. Even the specific gramophone records played (jazz? Enrico Caruso?) went maddeningly unmentioned. Falling short of the epochal significance of Bragaglia’s earlier manifesto on “Futurist Photodynamism,” and omitted from one exhaustive catalogue of the author’s works, “Con Orfeo al giardino zoologico” would hardly seem worthy of discussion at all—at least, were it not for the sake of two other, quite similar, experiments that had been conducted in England and Italy in the eight months prior to its publication.³

The first of these takes us to a sixteenth-century house near Oxted, Surrey in the spring of 1924. Foyle Riding, as the estate was known, was home to Colonel John and Annie Harrison, whose thirty-two-year-old daughter Beatrice (one of four, musically gifted sisters) had already established herself as the leading British cellist of her generation: she was Elgar’s preferred interpreter of his cello concerto, and something of a muse to Frederick Delius.⁴ Beatrice Harrison enjoyed practicing outside in her garden during warmer evenings, and night after night the local nightingales sang along in apparent sympathy with her etudes. Struck by the beauty of their song, and possessed by an almost messianic belief in her own powers to summon it, Harrison set to work convincing Sir John Reith, founder and general manager of the BBC, that (as she later put it) “the good God wished the world to hear the duet of the cello and the

³ See Alberto Cesare Alberti, *Poetica teatrale e bibliografia di Anton Giulio Bragaglia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978). For an introduction to Bragaglia’s most important manifesto, see “Futurist Photodynamism (1911),” trans. Lawrence S. Rainey, *Modernism/Modernity* 15 (2008), 363-379.

⁴ My discussion of Beatrice Harrison draws mainly on Iain Logie Baird, “Capturing the Song of the Nightingale,” *Science Museum Group Journal* 4 (2015), accessed 26 November 2016, doi: 10.15180/150402; and Beatrice Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales: The Autobiography of Beatrice Harrison*, ed. Patricia Cleveland-Peck (London: John Murray, 1985).

nightingale.”⁵ Despite considerable resistance, three sound engineers armed with the latest in microphone technology were dispensed from London for a test run on 13 May.⁶ Around 10:30pm the next evening, a scheduled performance by the Savoy Orchestra was interrupted to make way for the sounds of Surrey nightingales accompanied by the strains of Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Chant Hindou.” Harrison’s broadcast was heard by nearly one million people, and would go down in history as the first time that sound had been transmitted live from out of doors.

Despite the near-hysteria that greeted the broadcast—some 50,000 fan letters, enthusiastic praise from George V—it has largely faded from musicological memory. The same cannot be said of my next experiment, which returns us to Bragaglia’s Rome. On 14 December 1924 in the Auditorium Augusteo (then the city’s leading forum for orchestral music), Bernardino Molinari conducted the world premiere of Ottorino Respighi’s *Pini di Roma* (*Pines of Rome*) on a program that also featured a Vivaldi violin concerto, Beethoven’s First Symphony, the overtures to Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and Mussorgsky’s *Khovanshchina*, and a new orchestration of Debussy’s *L’Isle joyeuse*.⁷ A four-movement symphonic poem depicting different locations in the Eternal City at different times of day, *Pini di Roma* was designed to build on the success of Respighi’s earlier *Fontane di Roma* (*Fountains of Rome*, 1917), and would be followed by *Feste romane* (*Roman Festivals*) in 1928. Save for a few specifically local details, though, Respighi’s short program for his third movement could almost have served as a description of the scene at Foyle Riding: “A quiver runs through the air: the pines of the Janiculum are

⁵ Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales*, 131.

⁶ For a detailed account of the specific technologies involved, see Baird, “Capturing the Song of the Nightingale.”

⁷ The original concert program is housed in the Bibliomediateca of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. Thanks to Annalisa Bini for her generous introduction to the archive.

silhouetted in the clear light of the full moon. A nightingale sings.”⁸ This last sentence has become notorious. For instead of depicting the bird’s song through conventional means—flute, violin, or coloratura soprano, as many of the other composers on the December concert had done to much acclaim—Respighi opted to use a gramophone record of an actual nightingale, accompanied by a five-part choir of muted, trilling violins. No composer had combined live and pre-recorded music before and, although Respighi is still regarded as one of the twentieth century’s greatest orchestrators, it was by dint of this innovation that he earned a place, however minor, in the great history of musical modernism.

To summarize: between May 1924 and January 1925, three artists working in substantially different contexts proposed new ways of configuring relationships between musical instruments, non-human animals, and the latest sound technology. Their experiments refracted and reiterated one another, as if in a hall of mirrors. Bragaglia and Harrison used music (live or recorded) to coax responses from the natural world; Harrison and Respighi combined the song of nightingales with the swoons of late-Romantic strings. (Should we note that Rimsky-Korsakov, author of the melody that Harrison claimed her birds liked best of all, was also Respighi’s composition teacher?) If Bragaglia brought a household noise machine out of doors—as did Harrison, by carrying her cello into her garden—Respighi reversed the process, importing the voices of nature into an Italian concert hall.

What are historians to do with such material? Close attention to the decidedly eccentric efforts of Bragaglia, Harrison, and Respighi might easily be dismissed as “quirk historicism,” to use Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart’s phrase for scholarship in

⁸ All quotations from Respighi’s program are translated from the published edition of his orchestral score; translations have been modified to reflect more closely the original language. See Ottorino Respighi, *Fontane di Roma, Pini di Roma, Feste Romane* (Milan: Ricordi, 1946; Amsterdam, Hal Leonard, 2016), 70.

which the recounting of “objets trouvés and historical micronarratives [...] overwhelms and even supplants any larger critical goals.”⁹ At the same time, it seems significant that the three well-trod historical anecdotes on which Mathew and Smart base their critique (an attempt, in 1798 Paris, to see how elephants reacted to live music; a mechanical duck constructed in 1738; a Swiss-Chinese music box imitated by Giacomo Puccini in his incomplete opera *Turandot*) so closely resemble the items in my own cabinet of curiosities. Perhaps, then, the “quirky” may be less a general category of historical phenomena and more a convenient term for dispensing with a variety of (Enlightenment and modernist) projects that proposed novel relationships between the human, the animal, and the mechanical, unsettling the tenets of Romantic subjectivity. To put this somewhat differently: it is one thing to claim that we should aim “to write openly about what moves us musically, rather than displacing our musical attractions onto nearby objects,” but quite another when those objects were not adjacent to more properly autonomous musical performances and works but rather, as was patently the case with Harrison and Respighi, part of the very substance of their attraction in the first place.¹⁰

According to Mathew and Smart, one of the defining features of the quirk is its “mobility,” the ease by which it can be inserted into a multiplicity of historical narratives.¹¹ This has certainly proven true in the case of Respighi’s nightingale, which has been called upon to illustrate many larger trends in the 1920s and beyond. For Richard Taruskin, the composer’s “recourse to what in 1924 was ‘high technology,’ and the extreme resort to realism (to the point of coercing the listener’s imagination),” may have been “indicative of a Fascist mentality.”¹² Mark Katz connects Respighi’s

⁹ Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations* 132 (2015), 62.

¹⁰ Mathew and Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room,” 72.

¹¹ Mathew and Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room,” 73.

¹² Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, vol. 5 of *The Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 450.

experiment to a vogue for “*Grammophonmusik*” in Weimar Germany; Friedrich Kittler hears it as heralding a new era of electromagnetism, a “media link combining an orchestral score with phonographic kilohertz sensuality.”¹³ Still others have puzzled over Respighi’s apparent anticipation of both *musique concrète* and more recent electro-acoustic music.¹⁴ And if Respighi’s nightingale flutters promiscuously between historical contexts, it also ruffles some important recent theoretical accounts of orchestration. Both an objective and impersonal incursion into the nineteenth-century orchestra and a glistening and quasi-mystical sonic apparition, the gramophone-instrument in *Pini di Roma* cannot be tethered to either of the categories “machine modernism” or “machine romanticism” that structure Thomas Patteson’s study of the modernist instrumentarium.¹⁵ Otherwise watertight assertions—“musical instruments express the inner states of the composer or the performer, moving outward from the mind to the world, while scientific instruments bring external states of the world into the consciousness of observers, moving from the world to the mind”—do not obtain.¹⁶

But what if we gave up on trying to insert Respighi’s innovation into pre-existing categories, and instead attended more closely to its sound? The birdsong in *Pini di Roma*

¹³ See Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 111; and Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 98.

¹⁴ See, for example, Simon Emmerson, “Combining the Acoustic and the Digital: Music for Instruments and Computers or Pre-recorded Sound,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Computer Music*, ed. Roger T. Dean (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168; Andrew Hugill, “The Origins of Electronic Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*, ed. Nick Collins and Julio d’Escriván (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15; and Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 293. For Pierre Schaeffer’s own less than enthusiastic comments on his Italian forebear, see *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2012), 159.

¹⁵ See Thomas Patteson, *Instruments for New Music: Sound, Technology, and Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 6.

¹⁶ John Tresch and Emily I. Dolan, “Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Music and Science,” *Osiris* 28 (2013), 281.

confounds many conventional techniques of musical description but, as I argue in this chapter, the concept of timbre offers an especially powerful tool for thinking through its deployment in the work. On the one hand, my emphasis on timbre is pragmatic. Respighi's handling of orchestral color is routinely described as the most distinctive, and also most potentially disturbing, aspect of his style (even *New Grove* feels the need to caution that the composer's tone-poems were "probably, in truth, more influenced [...] by a simple, child-like delight in the kaleidoscopic riches of a modern orchestra than by the pageantry of fascism"), yet it is less clear how his technique functions, or what it aims to achieve.¹⁷ On the other, Respighi's "recourse to what in 1924 was 'high technology'" was originally understood within a much older discourse on orchestral sound. For listeners in the 1920s, that is to say, *Pini di Roma's* climactic nightingale seemed less to herald the future—whether totalitarian, objectivist, electromagnetic, or acousmatic—than to crystalize some longstanding worries about the proper relationship between animals, machines, and musical instruments, and about the status and integrity of meaning and representation within the symphony itself. The confused and seemingly contradictory reactions of early critics will raise larger questions about the status of acoustic materiality within the symphonic and operatic repertoire of the early twentieth century, and these questions, in turn, might prompt us to investigate the strange material history of the specific nightingale record Respighi used. To begin, though, it may be helpful to consider what Italian composers of Respighi's generation talked about when they talked about the

¹⁷ John C.G. Waterhouse, et al. "Respighi, Ottorino," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed 30 November 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/47335>. For an invaluable overview of writings on Respighi, see Lee G. Barrow, *Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936): An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2004). On the shadow of Italian fascism in the composer's reception history, see Barrow, "Guilt by Association: The Effect of Attitudes toward Fascism on the Critical Assessment of the Music of Ottorino Respighi," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 42 (2011), 79-95.

modern orchestra. As we shall see, birds and beasts figured in the discussion with surprising prominence.

Malipiero's Animal Problem

Perhaps the closest thing to a theory of instrumental timbre in early twentieth-century Italy was "Orchestra e orchestrazione," a long essay that Gian Francesco Malipiero published in two successive issues of the *Rivista musicale italiana* in 1916 and 1917.¹⁸

Described as "idiosyncratic but revealing" by the composer's most dedicated commentator, "Orchestra e orchestrazione" might, more provocatively, be imagined as one of those anarchic documents of "southern thinking" celebrated by Roberto Dainotto for their ability to unsettle the historiographical pieties of Western Europe.¹⁹ In either case, Malipiero's essay is certainly not a practical treatise on orchestration along the lines of earlier and more canonical texts by Rimsky-Korsakov and Hector Berlioz. Indeed, as the composer asserts: "It is absurd to delude oneself into believing that it would be possible to fix rules for combining musical instruments."²⁰ For Malipiero, such rules can only formalize *a posteriori* "the individual and inimitable expression of the composers who applied them."²¹ As for his own essay, it might best be understood as a critical history of these "expressions." Malipiero insists that orchestration is as integral to a musical work as harmony, melody, form, or poetic content, and advocates an aesthetic in which all

¹⁸ See Gian Francesco Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," *Rivista musicale italiana* 23 (1916), 559-569, and 24 (1917), 89-120. A revised version of the essay was published as *L'Orchestra* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1920), and reissued in English as *The Orchestra*, trans. Eric Blom (London: J. and W. Chester, 1921).

¹⁹ See John C. G. Waterhouse, "G. F. Malipiero's Crisis Years (1913-19)," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 108 (1981-1982), 129n8; and Roberto Maria Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Dainotto adopts the phrase "southern thinking" from Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Bari: Laterza, 2007).

²⁰ "È assurdo illudersi che sia possibile fissare regole sul modo di amalgamare gli strumenti musicali." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 91.

²¹ "Le teorie degli 'impasti' non sono attuabili con criteri universali, ma rappresentano l'espressione individuale ed inimitabile dei musicisti da cui sono state applicate." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 91.

these elements exist in an original and unrepeatable synthesis that follows no rules other than those of a composer's inspiration.

If this seems an impossibly high standard, it was, according to Malipiero, one that even Beethoven regularly failed to meet. Speaking of the composer's nine symphonies, he observes:

the pages that resist, and probably will always resist, the ravages of time are those that involve not only "thematic development" but have a further ideal significance, like the Eroica's "funeral march," the first and second movements of the "Pastoral," and the second part of the Ninth Symphony. Without *disclosing* a poetic plot, the first movement of the Fifth and the allegretto of the Seventh also allow one to sense intuitively an extra-musical connection [...] When he moved beyond musical composition and was also a poet, Beethoven anticipated impressionism, and the movements mentioned above live outside of time and are neither music, nor painting, but "*masterpieces*."²²

Beethoven's very best music, that is to say, was animated by a guiding but immaterial poetic inspiration, an "ideal significance" that lay beyond mere thematic ingenuity.

Although Malipiero associates Beethoven's surpassing of the limits of "musical composition" with "impressionism," he is careful to note that: "One must not, however, confuse impressionism with 'program music'." "When, at the end of the Pastoral Symphony's 'Scene by the Brook,' Beethoven tries to reproduce *mechanically* the song of

²² "Delle nove sinfonie di Beethoven resistono, e probabilmente resisteranno sempre all'ingiurie del tempo, quelle pagine che non sono soltanto 'svolgimento tematico' ma che hanno un significato ideale, come la 'marcia funebre' dell'Eroica, il primo e secondo tempo della 'pastorale' e la II^a parte della IX^a sinfonia. Senza *palesare* una trama poetica, anche il primo tempo della V^a sinfonia e l'allegretto della settima lasciano intuire un legame ultra-musicale [...] Beethoven ha precorso l'impressionismo dove oltre che musicista è stato anche poeta, e i brani ora citati vivono fuori dal tempo e non sono più né musica, né pittura, ma '*capolavori*'." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 94.

the nightingale, the cuckoo, and the quail, he shatters the impression abruptly with a realistic note too *'trivial'* to fit in with the rest."²³

In his resistance to familiar oppositions between “absolute” and “program” music—and, indeed, to conventional distinctions between music and the other arts—Malipiero hews closely to the idealist aesthetics of his compatriot Benedetto Croce, for whom “all the arts are music, if thereby we wish to give emphasis to the emotional origin of artistic images, excluding from their number those constructed mechanically or burdened with realism.”²⁴ From such a perspective, though, the history of orchestral music after Beethoven could only have seemed the history of a broken dialectic. Malipiero suggests that Berlioz was unable “to realize his visions as a colorist,” because “he lacked the musical substance worthy of the instrumental material at his disposal.”²⁵ In contrast, Johannes Brahms’s attempts to avoid the problem of musical substance altogether led him to fall victim to a “*deliberate* austerity, which too often makes him ponderous and academic.”²⁶ As for the twentieth century, the relentless pursuit of novelty for its own sake seems to have left far behind any sense of unity or higher purpose. “The colossal score of *Gurrelieder* is a cerebral effort undertaken to astonish the ‘eye’,” Malipiero writes, and “the exorbitant number of instruments is not enough to cover up all that is antiquated in the work.” “When the musical material is not dominated by the ‘thought’ that it should serve, the artifice becomes apparent, and therefore

²³ “Non bisogna però confondere l’impressionismo con la musica ‘a programma.’ Quando nella ‘pastorale,’ alla fine della ‘scena al ruscello,’ Beethoven cerca riprodurre *meccanicamente* il canto dell’usignuolo, del cuculo e della quaglia, egli distrugge bruscamente l’impressione con una nota realistica troppo *‘piccola,’* per resistere col resto.” Malipiero, “Orchestra e orchestrazione,” 94.

²⁴ Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics* [1913], trans. Patrick Romanell (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 26. For the original, see *Breviario di Estetica*, in *Nuovi saggi di estetica*, ed. Mario Scotti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1991), 11-86, here 35.

²⁵ “Per realizzare la visione di colorista, gli è mancata la sostanza armonica adeguata alla materia istrumentale di cui disponeva.” Malipiero, “Orchestra e orchestrazione,” 96.

²⁶ “Ciò non toglie alla sua linea sinfonica quell’austerità *voluta*, che troppo spesso lo rende pesante e accademico.” Malipiero, “Orchestra e orchestrazione,” 96.

[Arnold] Schoenberg's abstruse harmonies do not belong to a new tendency, but are only like oxygen to the dying."²⁷

Yet Malipiero was, in the end, no pessimist. Having dispensed with Schoenberg, Richard Strauss ("this Meyerbeer of the twentieth century"), and Gustav Mahler ("on a par with Richard Strauss"), his history concludes by celebrating Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel as the true inheritors of Beethoven's never-fully-realized symphonic "impressionism."²⁸ The evocative titles of the three movements in Debussy's *La Mer* "announce the author's impressionistic intentions without deflating them." The fact that each movement is scored for different instruments, "according to its exigencies," is a sign of an original synthesis between content and expression.²⁹ Even more compelling was Ravel's suite *Ma Mère l'Oye*, a work that inspired some of the strangest language in Malipiero's essay:

Typical in this very modern symphony is the transformation undergone by the instruments themselves, which often almost assume the material form of that which they are supposed to represent. Thus, in the scene "Les entretiens de la Belle et de la

²⁷ "Dove la materia musicale non è dominata dal 'pensiero' cui deve obbedire, risalta l'artificio, perciò le astruserie armoniche dello Schönberg non appartengono ad una nuova tendenza, ma sono come l'ossigeno per l'agonizzante. La mastodontica partitura di "Gurre-Lieder" (1911) è uno sforzo cerebrale compiuto per sbalordire "l'occhio." Difatti il numero esorbitante degli istrumenti non basta a coprire ciò che vi è di antiquato." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 109.

²⁸ "La personalità di questo Meyerbeer del XX^o secolo ha importanza non trascurabile perchè occupa un posto eminentissimo nella parabola wagneriana [...] Gustavo Mahler può benissimo venir considerato alla stregua di Riccardo Strauss." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 100.

²⁹ "Nei tre schizzi sinfonici 'La mer' (ognuno dei quali ha, secondo le esigenze, un numero different di istrumenti), quasi con la solita orchestra egli riesce a rendere la vastità del mare, ed i tre titoli [...] annunciano, senza menomarle, le intenzioni impressionistiche dell'autore e facilitano, senza essere una programma, il seguirlo nel suo mondo sinfonico tutto personale." Malipiero, "Orchestra e orchestrazione," 102-103.

Bête,” the double-bassoon is “The Beast,” and will remain imprinted as such every time it is heard in this descriptive movement!³⁰

What makes Ravel’s creatures superior to those “insignificant” quails and cuckoos in the Pastoral Symphony? The answer seems to be that they have inspired a more thoroughgoing—and, indeed, almost mystical—transubstantiation between instrumental sign and real-world referent. Beethoven could have chosen to depict the song of his quail with a flute, oboe, or clarinet, in other words, but the bond between double-bassoon and “beast” was indissoluble. Given this, Malipiero was surely right to exclaim, in a footnote to his revised version of the essay: “It is strange that *Ma Mère l’Oye* was originally conceived for piano four hands and subsequently orchestrated!” Nonetheless, he concluded that, “[Ravel’s] orchestration probably *existed* already before it was reduced for piano four hands, if not materially, than certainly in its symphonic essence.”³¹ Timbre, for Malipiero, was not color, but substance.

One can only stand in amazement before an aesthetic system that regards *Mother Goose* as a more complete and fully-realized masterwork than the Ninth Symphony. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that Malipiero struggled to put his ideas into practice. Between 1911 and 1922, he composed three orchestral sets all titled *Impressioni dal vero* (Impressions from Life). A brief description of the first suite will give some indication of the basic problem:

The work in question is a triptych of short, picturesque orchestral pieces, each of them based on the sound of the bird which gives the individual piece its title. The first

³⁰ “Tipica è nella modernissima sinfonia la trasformazione che subiscono gli stessi istrumenti, assumendo spesso quasi la forma materiale di ciò che devono rappresentare. Così nel quadro ‘Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,’ il contrafagotto è ‘La Bête’ e come tale rimarrà scolpito ogni qualvolta si risentirà in questo brano descrittivo!” Malipiero, “Orchestra e orchestrazione,” 104-105.

³¹ “È strano che in origine «Ma mère l’Oye» sia stata concepita per pianoforte a quattro mani e poi orchestrata! Probabilmente l’orchestrazione *esisteva* già prima della riduzione per piano a quattro mani, se non materialmente, certo nella sua essenza sinfonica.” Malipiero, *L’orchestra*, 45n1.

Impressione, “Il capinero,” features the song of the blackcap (not, as a mistranslation in the published miniature score would have it, the garden-warbler); the second, “Il picchio,” is pervaded by the drumming of a woodpecker; while the third is entirely built round a soft, hypnotic ostinato on two flutes which almost literally reproduces the mysterious, insistent call of that tiny owl of the Mediterranean regions known here as the scops owl, but in Italy, more onomatopoeically, as “Il chiù.”³²

Should the fact that Malipiero’s extra-musical sources can be identified with such ornithological precision be taken as a sign of failure or bad faith? On the one hand, we might note that, unlike in the Pastoral Symphony, Malipiero’s bird songs generate much of the primary thematic content of his works. On the other, we might place our trust in the composer’s own, somewhat tortured program notes. “Nature, ‘heard’ by a composer, cannot but suggest a musical idea,” he writes of his first suite, “But it is not absolutely necessary that the composer imitates or attempts to remake the voice of nature, which would always be an ugly adulteration.”³³ The pieces that constitute his third set of *Impressioni dal vero* “do not mean to reproduce materially that which I saw or heard but are rather the musical echo of certain feelings experienced in the face of various expressions of nature and of life.”³⁴

A Nightingale Joins the Band

“While in his preceding work, *The Fountains of Rome*, the composer sought to reproduce by means of tone an impression of Nature, in *The Pines of Rome* he uses Nature as a point

³² Waterhouse, “Malipiero’s Crisis Years,” 126-127.

³³ “La natura, «ascoltata» da un musicista, non può suggerire che un’idea musicale. Ma non è assolutamente necessario che il musicista imiti, cerchi di rifare la voce della natura, ché sarebbe sempre una brutta contraffazione.” In *L’opera di Gian Francesco Malipiero: Saggi di scrittori italiani e stranieri*, ed. Guido M. Gatti (Treviso: Canova, 1952), 220.

³⁴ “Anche queste *Impressioni dal vero* non intendono riprodurre materialmente ciò che io ho veduto o sentito ma sono l’eco musicale di certe sensazioni di fronte a varie espressioni della natura e della vita.” *L’opera di Gian Francesco Malipiero*, 223.

of departure in order to recall memories and visions.”³⁵ This is how Respighi introduced his newest symphonic suite to audiences, and his comments suggest that however eccentric Malipiero’s essay may now seem, its anxieties about musical content were more broadly shared. Malipiero’s insistence that his tone poems were only the “echo[es] of certain feelings experienced in the face of various expressions of nature” has a precise counterpart in Respighi’s claim that *Pini di Roma* aimed not to “reproduce [...] Nature,” but only to “recall memories and visions” inspired by the natural world. Yet Respighi’s pre-emptive insistence on what might be termed deferred or second-order mimesis seems to have failed to convince many early critics of his work.

Reviews of the Roman premiere of *Pini di Roma* suggest that the aims and limits of musical representation were matters of real concern for Italian critics, themselves as schooled in the tenets of Crocean idealism as any of the composers they wrote about. Respighi’s final movement—a galumphing depiction of an ancient Roman army coming to life and marching toward the capitol (only two years after Benito Mussolini had attempted, in the sphere of politics, something similar)—was dismissed as bombastic, unbalanced, and overly realistic by the very listeners it might have seemed designed to court. A critic for the ultra-nationalist daily *L’idea nazionale* thought it “the weakest” of the four moments because its “ample sonorities drown out somewhat excessively the melodic spirit of the work.”³⁶ Similarly, the *Rivista nazionale di musica* called Respighi’s “imperial gait” “interesting,” but worried that “an overly long and persistent unleashing of drums [...] adds nothing to the description of the grandiose vision and involuntarily

³⁵ See the program book for *Pini di Roma*’s American debut with the Philharmonic Society of New York (14 and 15 January 1926), viewable via the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives, accessed 3 December 2016, <http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/c282ba0b-aafa-4fbb-985e-8bb4f3a2a014> (ID: 4035).

³⁶ “[...] più debole la quarta le cui ampie sonorità coprono forse un po’eccessivamente lo spirito melodico del lavoro.” Unsigned, “Concerto Molinari all’ ‘Augusteo’,” *L’idea nazionale* (16 December 1924), 3.

brings to mind the insistent, monotonous, and banal beats of the bass drum as used in the most sensational acts during circus shows.”³⁷ Such concern with timbral propriety and excessive literalism also helps explain the apparent lack of interest generated by the composer’s mediatic innovation. “The nightingale’s song, reproduced by means of a gramophone disc, may seem to some an overly realistic expedient [*un espediente troppo verista*],” mused one critic, recalling Malipiero’s comments on Beethoven’s “Scene by the Brook.”³⁸ Another felt that “the gramophone reproducing the nightingale’s song harmonized perfectly with the instruments of the orchestra” and described the resulting effect as “extremely successful.”³⁹ But these comments, modest in themselves, were rare. Indeed, they are the only ones that I have been able to uncover. Reviewer after reviewer simply failed to mention the gramophone at all.⁴⁰

This attitude of indifference—willed, polite, or merely plain—on the part of Italian critics is especially striking when juxtaposed with reactions to *Pini di Roma* during its next outing, conducted by Albert Coates at the Leeds Triennial Music Festival on 8 October 1925. Simply put, Respighi’s use of a pre-recorded birdsong dominated British commentary on his piece, as the very titles of reviews—“Strange Orchestration in Italian

³⁷ “[...] e non si è accorto che nell’ultima parte, anh’essa interessante per il suo incedere imperiale, di un troppo lungo ostinato scatenamento di colpi di batteria, che a nostro modesto avviso non aggiungono nulla alla descrizione della visione grandiosa e involontariamente ci sovengono alla mente gl’insistenti, monotoni, d’effetto banale, colpi di gran cassa dei numeri sensazionali dei circhi equestri.” Gaffurius, “‘I Pini di Roma’ all’Augusteo,” *Rivista nazionale di musica* (26 December 1924), 960.

³⁸ “[...] il canto dell’usignuolo, riprodotto mediante un disco di grammofono, sembrerà a taluno un espediente troppo verista [...]” A. G., “‘I pini di Roma,’ del m.o Respighi,” *La tribuna* (16 December 1924), 3.

³⁹ “Da rilevare l’impiego, felicissimo, del grammofono riprodotto il canto dell’usignuolo, armonizzandosi perfettamente con gli strumenti dell’orchestra.” Review in *L’epoca*, reprinted in “Musica sinfonica: ‘I Pini di Roma’ di Respighi,” *Musica d’Oggi* (1925), 66.

⁴⁰ Reviews of the premiere that do not mention the gramophone include, in addition to those in *L’idea nazionale* and *Rivista nazionale di musica* quoted above: Tancredi Mantovani, “Rassegna musicale,” *Nuova antologia di lettere, scienze ed arti* (16 January 1925), 216-220; “‘I Pini di Roma’ del m. Respighi all’Augusteo,” *Il giornale d’Italia* (16 December 1924), 3; and Gastone Rossi-Doria, “Lettera da Roma,” *Il pianoforte* (January 1925), 19-22. *Musica d’oggi*’s omnibus review (see n. 38), contains excerpts from additional reviews in *Il mondo* and *Il meridiano* that also do not mention the gramophone.

Work,” “Nightingale Joins the Band,” “The Gramophone as Member of the Orchestra”—make clear.⁴¹ At the same time, though, the emphasis on “joining” and “membership” in these titles also suggests that Respighi’s novelty was primarily understood, as it was in Italy, within a much longer history of orchestration, and as consistent with other more seemingly conventional timbral innovations elsewhere in his work. A preview of the tone poem published in *The Yorkshire Post* spoke of “carefully devised and elaborate colour effects, the strangest of which is the introduction of a gramophone record of an actual nightingale’s song.”⁴² W. McNaught, writing in *The Musical Times*, compared “the sound-fabrics of Scriabin, the glitter of Rimsky-Korsakov, [and] the gramophone trick of Respighi,” as if there was no true difference between a singing nightingale and soaring violins.⁴³ And when *Pini di Roma*, now conducted by Arturo Toscanini, debuted in New York on 14 January 1926, Olin Downes struck a similar note:

There is much beautiful orchestral tone, Italian in its softness and color. The voice of a nightingale is employed [...] for the first time in a symphony. The sound is made possible by certain recording mechanisms and is employed by the composer as one of many tone-colors of the orchestra. It is a pretty effect when it is heard in the slow movement, especially with the delicate and evanescent tone-tints that the composer provides.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most telling indication that Respighi’s “pretty effect” was understood as only “one of many tone-colors” appears in a short article published in *The Northern Whig and*

⁴¹ See H. T., “Evening Concert: Strange Orchestration in Italian Work,” *The Yorkshire Post* (9 October 1925), 7; unsigned, “Nightingale Joins the Band,” *The Courier* (9 October 1925), 3; and W. A. Chislett, “The Gramophone as a Member of the Orchestra,” *The Gramophone* (November 1925), 277.

⁴² H. T., “Strange Orchestration in Italian Work,” 7.

⁴³ W. McNaught, “The Leeds Festival,” *The Musical Times* (1 November 1925), 1006.

⁴⁴ Olin Downes, “Music: The Philharmonic Society,” *The New York Times* (15 January 1926), 19.

Belfast Post in 1927. “In addition to the ordinary orchestral resources of which Respighi makes use in ‘The Pines of Rome’,” the paper observed, “he also introduces a piano, a kind of rattle (*raganella*), and a gramophone record of a nightingale’s song.”⁴⁵ Here, again, no essential distinction is drawn between birds and rattles, between instruments struck, shaken, or merely switched on.

Yet to insist that Respighi’s nightingale was nothing more than a new timbre is to push conventional understandings of orchestration to their limits. The normalizing rhetoric of many British and American reviews was often undercut by a confusion about the boundaries between animals and instruments, an uncertainty about who, or what, was the agent of Respighi’s trick. For some critics, it was the nightingale itself that had entered the orchestra: “the voice of the nightingale is employed [...] for the first time in a symphony,” according to Downes, its appearance merely facilitated by “certain recording mechanisms.” Or, as *The Courier* put it more succinctly, “Nightingale Joins the Band.” For others, though, it was the gramophone itself that functioned (to quote *The Gramophone*) “as Member of the Orchestra,” an assumption also implicit in the *Whig and Post*’s catalogue of piano, rattle, and machine. Indeed, a worry that Respighi’s nightingale was simultaneously more real and more mediated than normal instruments informed many of the most hostile reactions to his work. *The Sunday Times* despaired that, “We may yet live to see the evening when the Pastoral Symphony will be given with real running water in the slow movement, nightingale by the Gramophone Company, quail by Messrs. Fortnum and Mason.”⁴⁶ *The Yorkshire Post* classed *Pini di Roma* among “extreme examples of a type of art which finds its best illustration in the effigies at Mdme. Tussaud’s, wax figures dressed in ‘real’ clothes.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Unsigned, “Broadcasting: Programmes for To-Day,” *The Northern Whig and Belfast Post* (17 February 1927), 10.

⁴⁶ H.F., “The Week’s Music: The L.S.O. Concert,” *The Sunday Times* (25 October 1925), 7.

⁴⁷ “Strange Orchestration in Italian Work,” 7.

References to Madame Tussaud's and Fortnum and Mason suggest a concern about the encroaching commodification of the artwork, but they also raise spectres of an altogether different sort. Jonathan Sterne has shown how thoroughly the discourse on early sound recording—the discourse, that is to say, on the artificial preservation of living voices—was imbricated with tropes of embalming and canned food.⁴⁸ One suspects that the critic for *The Sunday Times* was on a similar track when he spoke of the “queer attractiveness” of Respighi’s nightingale, and imagined that the effect “might have been better had the lights been put out and we had all held hands.” He reminded his readers of the story of a “little boy, who used to gaze with a blend of fascination and terror on a picture of a lion in a cage, the bars of the cage being real, inserted in the frame; the great thing was to put your fingers behind the bars and half-hope, half-fear that the lion would go for them.”⁴⁹ Such uncanny confusion of reality and imitation might also be understood in Malipiero’s terms. For the Italian composer, recall, a typical feature of “this very modern symphony is the transformation undergone by the instruments themselves, which often almost assume the material form of that which they are supposed to represent.” Like Ravel’s beast then, but even more disturbingly, Respighi’s nightingale was both instrument and animal, idea and material, a representation and a living thing.

Capturing Birdsong

The “queer attractiveness” of Respighi’s nightingale might be restated in more abstract terms. Following the semiotic system elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce, we can classify conventional musical representations of the natural world—the birdsongs in the Pastoral symphony, or the flowing streams in the same work—as “icons,” a category of

⁴⁸ See Jonathan Sterne, “A Resonant Tomb,” in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 287-333.

⁴⁹ H. F., “The L.S.O. Concert,” 7.

signs that communicate via a similarity between their own internal qualities (falling thirds; undulating string figures) and those of “real-world” things to which they refer.⁵⁰

Respighi’s pre-recorded nightingale, however, is perhaps music’s first true example of a Peircean “index,” a sign that points to, often by bearing the actual physical traces of, its object. For Mary Ann Doane: “The concept of the index [...] seems to acknowledge the invasion of semiotic systems by the real. The footprint, the weathercock, the photographic image—all testify to the fact that the referent was present and left its legible trace directly in representation.”⁵¹

Timbre, in these terms, might be described as a subspecies of indexicality.

Derived from the Greek word *tympanum* (the skin of a drum, or of the inner ear), timbre is, according to Katherine Bergeron “a site for both receiving and producing vibrations:”

On the one hand, it is the sonorous property that distinguishes one sound from the next, a property deriving from a prior moment of impact: a unique pattern of overtones that strikes the ear and leaves its own “vibration impression.” On the other, it suggests the actual material of the blow, the wood, gut, brass, or skin from which the impression emanates.⁵²

In this materialist account, timbre is not an ineffable property of music, but rather a physical force that “invades” semiosis with impressions of the bodies and objects that produce it. Respighi’s nightingale might be described, following Bergeron, as a radical and uncanny actualization of a repressed tendency within *all* music. If all sound has timbre, after all, then all sound is indexical.

⁵⁰ For an overview of Peirce’s theories, see *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵¹ See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

⁵² See Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 136.

And the nightingale's song is more uncanny still. Bergeron and Doane both highlight a temporal gap or fissure that disturbs the apparent presentness of timbre-as-indexicality: it is "a property deriving from a prior moment of impact," in Bergeron's words, and evidence of "the fact that the referent was present," in Doane's. This gap is hardly noteworthy, let alone unsettling, as long as the bodies of musicians are directly before our eyes. But Respighi's absent nightingale calls attention, once again, to how strange the act of listening to music always already was. To listen for timbre is to attend, paradoxically, to the physicality of traces, to mingle at a party when the guests have left the room.

Perhaps this is why *Pini di Roma* has long engendered a form of bird watching in its listeners, a desire to follow the acoustic footprints left by the composer's missing source. One anecdote, widely reported in the British press, asserted that Respighi's bird was purpose-raised in the H.M.V. studio in Hayes, and released on the completion of its first successful recording session.⁵³ Another, still current in some circles, claims that Respighi recorded the bird himself in one of the most famous pine groves on the Janiculum, that of the American Academy in Rome.⁵⁴ A critic for *Musical America* may have been somewhat closer to the truth when he noted, more matter-of-factly, that the recorded nightingale "has been on the market for some time. Respighi, hearing it by chance in an Italian shop, was seized with the thought of utilizing it in conjunction with an orchestra."⁵⁵ Regardless of their veracity, though, it seems significant that all these anecdotes are stories about artifice and mediation: they locate Respighi's inspiration in a sound studio, a walled and foreign-owned garden, or a record store, but never in the wild.

⁵³ See, for example, "Nightingale Joins the Band" (see n. 40).

⁵⁴ See Andrea Olmstead, "The Rome Prize from Leo Sowerby to David Diamond," in *Music and Musical Composition at the American Academy in Rome*, ed. Martin Brody (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 17.

⁵⁵ Oscar Thompson, "Toscanini, the Firebrand," *Musical America* (January 1926), 4.

And here we might briefly put Peircean interpretations to the side. If Respighi's gramophone record announces the eruption of indexical materiality into the rarefied terrain of the symphony, it also tells a very different story, one that might make us question whether timbre's bodies were ever there at all. The score of *Pini di Roma* requests a specific disc be used in performance—"No. R. 6105 del 'Concert Record Gramophone': *Il canto dell'usignolo*." This catalogue number—often cited by musicologists and sound scholars as a sort of *objet trouvé*, but never investigated in any detail—can refer, somewhat confusingly, to two similarly titled but distinct recordings: "Actual Bird Record Made by a Captive Nightingale No. 3," first released as a single-sided disc in Germany in 1910, and reissued by the Gramophone Company throughout Europe between 1911 and 1913 ("R. 6105" was the Milanese offprint); and a later "Actual Bird Record Made by a Captive Nightingale," recorded and released in 1913. The 1910 recording was the first commercial record ever made of a live bird; the 1913 one the second.⁵⁶

The genius behind both recordings was a Bremen hardware shop owner and amateur canary breeder by the name of Karl Reich.⁵⁷ Although his "actual bird records" would make him internationally famous, Reich was also engaged in two other pursuits that are relevant in the present context. He spent much of his life struggling to breed a red canary—a species that did not exist, and never had existed, in nature. And, with greater success, he taught his (yellow) canaries to sing the more conventionally beautiful songs of nightingales. (This second labor was especially impressive because it required altering nightingales' own biological rhythms, so that they would warble throughout the

⁵⁶ On these recordings, see Peter Copeland, Jeffrey Boswall and Leonard Petts, *Birdsongs on Old Records: A Coarsegroove Discography of Palearctic Region Bird Sound 1910-1958* (London: [The authors] in Association with British Library or Wildlife Sounds, National Sound Archive, 1988), 10-13.

⁵⁷ In this paragraph, I draw on Tim Birkhead, *A Brand-New Bird: How Two Amateur Scientists Created the First Genetically Engineered Animal* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 40-44.

summer, when their “students” were newly born.) Reich was not the first person to produce “nightingale-canaries”—and bird’s voices had been retrained for centuries through music boxes known as *serinettes*—but he was the first to realize that by teaching nestlings a new tune he could produce a self-perpetuating hybrid strain.⁵⁸

The media theorist Jacob Smith suggests that even the simplest domestic canary should be considered “media architecture,” and reminds us that “cage birds were precursors to television, radio, and the phonograph as sources of sonic entertainment in the home.”⁵⁹ It thus makes sense that Reich’s early interest in transferring and reproducing birdsong would eventually lead to the production of literal sound recordings, which would sometimes even substitute for live nightingales in the training of his flock. And, as would prove the case with later sonic entertainments, fidelity to nature, however mediated, was always one important goal. Reich produced his 1910 recordings, one of which can be heard in Figure 1, by placing a gramophone directly in front of a bird’s cage. In 1911, after his records had been greeted with awe by the members of the Fifth Ornithological Society Congress, seated in a darkened hall in Berlin, Reich tried and failed to produce a second set of discs featuring birds that flew freely—or, at least, more freely—around a room. Then, in 1913, he hit on a new solution. By building a fake gramophone, and placing food inside the horn, he could train his animals to grow comfortable climbing into the real machine—in essence, capturing their voices of their own accord (“Record Made by a Captive Nightingale,” as the label put it). Reich’s innovation “accounts for the increased volume of the 1913

⁵⁸ The term “nightingale-canaries” is Birkhead’s; see *A Brand-New Bird*, 44.

⁵⁹ See Jacob Smith, *Eco-Sonic Media* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 44 and 42-43. For more on birdsong and (and as) technology, see David Wills, *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 257-281.

records, and may also explain why all the individuals sound remarkably natural,” notes one historian with little apparent irony.⁶⁰ **[Figure 1 near here]**

The prize for recording truly wild birds would in the end go to Beatrice Harrison, however, who—aided by electric technologies unavailable in 1913—released a widely disseminated two-disc album on H. M. V.’s populist “Plum Label” in 1927. The first of these discs contains a recording of an English nightingale on one side and, on the other, an unedited document of “Dawn in an Old World Garden,” in which we hear, “the Nightingale, two Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*, a distant cockerel, and a very loud hum, presumably caused by dew on the microphone cable.”⁶¹ The second disc presents the nightingales accompanied by Harrison in two of their favorite melodies: the Londonderry Air (reproduced in Figure 2) and the inevitable “Chant Hindou.” Yet the intermingling of wild birds with interspecies duets and pronounced mechanical traces suggests that “remarkable naturalness” was never the exclusive point. In 1931, Reich outdid Harrison by recording a chorus of 30 nightingales and canaries accompanied by a string orchestra in Berlin’s Beethovensaal, and records that joined birdsong with light classics were popular throughout the decade.⁶² **[Figure 2 near here]**

What is more, the whole vogue for documenting birdsong, whether alone or alongside human instruments, was coterminus with a mania for recording human bird imitators: celebrities such as Charles Kellogg, Margaret McKee, Charles Crawford Grost, and Edward Avis, whose virtuosically whistled simulacra of different bird calls drew huge crowds in the early twentieth century.⁶³ Like the discs of Reich and Harrison (who has long-stood accused—significantly, if unfairly—of relying on the secret services of an avian impressionist), their records often involved musical accompaniment, and were

⁶⁰ See Copeland et al, *Birdsong on Old Records*, 12.

⁶¹ See Copeland et al, *Birdsong on Old Records*, 15.

⁶² See Copeland et al, *Birdsong on Old Records*, 20-21.

⁶³ See Smith, *Eco-Sonic Media*, 52-67.

marketed both as quasi-scientific curiosities and as popular entertainment.⁶⁴ Sometimes they moved confusingly between the two. Short descriptive scenes along the lines of “Dawn in an Old World Garden” were popular, with “Morning on the Farm” and “Buying the Christmas Dinner” emerging as distinct sub-genres. A 1914 record imagined the song of a bird that might have been produced had a goldfinch mated with a lark.⁶⁵ And what sense is one to make of a 1916 record that featured Kellogg—both a vaudeville performer and a committed conservationist, who toured America in a motorized redwood tree he called the “travel log”—whistling in heterophony with the Victor Orchestra as it played an arrangement of Ethelbert Woodbridge Nevin’s popular “Narcissus”?⁶⁶ A man imitates a bird imitating a string orchestra playing a song *about* uncanny doubling—unless, in some final mad twist, we are meant to hear the orchestra as imitating or harmonizing with the non-existent bird.

Against Nature

The patron saint of bird imitators was surely Igor Stravinsky—that media archaeologist *manqué* who, late in life, kept a pet canary that entertained him by singing amorous duets with an electric juicer.⁶⁷ His short three-act opera *Le Rossignol* (*The Nightingale*, 1914), set in a fantastical Chinese court, centers on a singing contest between a real nightingale and a mechanical imitation; the Emperor gives the automaton the prize, exiling the live bird from his kingdom. And yet, as Daniel Albright suggests, the Emperor could hardly have chosen otherwise (an impossible dilemma alluded to in this essay’s title). For while the

⁶⁴ For a fascinating discography of these recordings, see Peter Copeland and Jeffrey Boswall, “A Discography of Human Imitation of Bird Sound,” *Recorded Sound* 83 (1983), 73-100.

⁶⁵ See Copeland and Boswall, “Human Imitation of Bird Sound,” 80.

⁶⁶ The recording can be heard via the Library of Congress’s National Jukebox site, at <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/4316/>.

⁶⁷ See Daniel Albright, *Stravinsky: The Music Box and the Nightingale* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 24.

“real” nightingale may return to claim its rightful place in the opera’s conclusion, this apparent “triumph of Nature over Art [...] is reversed in the depths of the music.”⁶⁸ Stravinsky’s two birds sound equally artificial, and *Le Rossignol* is a “demonstration of the fact that in music, no natural system can exist, no means of embracing or imitating nature can exist.”⁶⁹ The composer, in Albright’s account, emerges an anti-Peircean: his denial of any reality outside of representation, like his attempts to discourage vibrato, rubato, dynamic gradations, and other audible traces of human performance (when he didn’t do away with it entirely), was an effort to banish indexicality from the art work.

La Boutique fantasque (1919), Respighi’s own contribution to the *Ballets Russes*, takes a distinctly Stravinskian pleasure in artifice and automation: the “magic toyshop” of its title is full of uncannily realistic dolls, who—like the protagonists in Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (1911)—come alive and dance at night. And *La bella dormiente nel bosco* (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1922), Respighi’s short three-act puppet opera after Charles Perrault, seems clearly indebted to *Le Rossignol*—not just in the artificially warbling coloratura nightingale that opens the work, but in its pervasive delight in mechanicity and arch parodies of Wagner. Should we then speak of a secret affinity between Stravinsky and Respighi, those two star students of Rimsky-Korsakov? In addition, of course, to the elaborately unnatural bird machine at the heart of *Pini di Roma*, one might cite a coyly anti-humanist anecdote recounted by Respighi’s wife:

In March we were back in Rome and spent a most enjoyable time preparing *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Teatro dei Piccoli. “How marvellous,” remarked Respighi, “to deal with a cast which, once the rehearsal is over, you can pack away in a trunk. And

⁶⁸ Albright, *The Music Box and the Nightingale*, 22.

⁶⁹ Albright, *The Music Box and the Nightingale*, 24.

you don't have to listen to boring complaints and tittle-tattle as happens so often with their live colleagues.”⁷⁰

Or a not dissimilar essay, published in *Modern Music*, where Respighi calls to do away with human actors in terms that bring to mind the basic conceit of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*:

The puppet theater [...] is the ideal theater because it eliminates the conflict always present on the dramatic stage between the scene, which is an artificial element, and the actor, who is the representative of reality—a conflict which the Greeks sought to overcome by adopting the mask and the buskin thereby reducing the protagonists to giant living puppets.⁷¹

Or, then again, the fact that Respighi was championed by Toscanini, that arch-objectivist orchestral puppet master. In his New York debut, he paid the composer what might be described as the ultimate neo-classical tribute: pairing *Pini di Roma* with Haydn's most gleefully mechanical symphony—No. 101 in D Major, “The Clock.”

It may, however, be a mistake to overstate Respighi's commitment to the impersonal aesthetics of Stravinsky. His adaptations of “early” keyboard and lute pieces—*Gli uccelli* (*The Birds*, 1928), the three sets of *Antiche danze ed arie per liuto* (*Ancient Dances and Airs for Lute*, 1917-1932)—glisten in a way that Stravinsky's never do, and they bear no obvious marks of irony and disenchantment. A more accurate point of comparison may be Ravel: another of the early twentieth century's master orchestrators, after all, and the composer who Malipiero placed at the very forefront of symphonic modernity.⁷² And here the points of contact are both more precise and more eccentric: a shared zeal for orchestrating keyboard music (in Ravel's case, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*,

⁷⁰ Elsa Respighi, *Respighi: His Life Story*, trans. Gwyn Morris (Milan: Ricordi, 1962), 87.

⁷¹ Ottorino Respighi, “Marionette as Seen by an Italian,” *Modern Music* 3 (1926), 17.

⁷² From a different perspective, it may be worth mentioning that Schoenberg singled out “Stravinsky, Ravel, and Respighi” as the composers who had ruined the appetites of American audiences for his own music. See Arnold Schoenberg, “Circular to My Friends on my Sixtieth Birthday (1934),” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 27.

Pictures at an Exhibition); a delight in esoteric Renaissance parody techniques (Respighi's song "Sopra un'aria antica," based on Parisotti; Ravel's two *soggetti cavati* "on the names" of Haydn and Fauré); a love of birds (*Histoires naturelles*, *Oiseaux tristes*), reanimated playthings (*L'Enfant et le sortilège*), and the tales of Perrault (*Ma Mère l'Oye*). Like Respighi, Ravel flirted with but never fully embraced a Stravinskian world-view: for Vladimir Jankélévitch, the composer's joy in the sheer sensuality of orchestral timbre was one sign among many that his music was only ever "half-indifferent."⁷³

Perhaps the most suggestive connection between Ravel and Respighi in this context is their shared interest in Gerhart Hauptmann's verse drama *Die versunkene Glocke* (*The Sunken Bell*, 1896)—a work whose enchanted fairy creatures, magical plot twists, and staunchly Romantic idealism could only have infuriated Stravinsky. (Ravel worked enthusiastically on *La Cloche engloutie*, his never-completed five-act operatic adaptation of the play, from 1908 until 1914.⁷⁴ *La campana sommersa*, Respighi's four-act version, debuted in Hamburg in 1927.) Hauptmann's drama narrates the adventures of Heinrich, a master bell-maker, in his quest to forge an instrument so perfect that:

Und wie es anhebt, heimlich, zehrend-bang,
 Bald Nachtigallenschmerz, bald Taubenlachen—
 Da bricht das Eis in jeder Menschenbrust,
 Und Haß und Groll und Wut und Qual und Pein
 Zerschmilzt in heißen, heißen, heißen Tränen.⁷⁵

⁷³ See Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, trans. Margaret Crosland (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 134. The classic attempt to locate Ravel within the terms of Stravinsky's neo-classicism is Carolyn Abbate, "Outside the Tomb," in *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 185-246; for a more sceptical view, see Deborah Mawer, "Musical Objects and Machines," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47-67.

⁷⁴ For a brief account of Ravel's operatic project, see Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 50.

⁷⁵ Gerhart Hauptmann, *Die versunkene Glocke: Ein deutsches Märchendrama* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1897), 104.

[And as its tones rise—furtively, consumingly anxious; now like the nightingale’s lament, now like the dove’s laugh—then the ice in every human breast melts, and hate, and resentment, and fury, and suffering, and pain stream out in hot, hot, hot tears.]

Part of the attraction of the play for Ravel and Respighi was surely its demand for a series of extravagant sound effects: elves at work in a tinkling foundry in the air, a church bell that tolls magically from the bottom of a lake. But if *Die versunkene Glocke* posed a series of challenges for the orchestrator, it might also have seemed an allegory about the challenges of orchestration. Heinrich, after all, is a man devoted to wringing ever more beautiful sounds from raw materials.

Hauptmann’s play might have had an additional significance for Italian composers of Respighi’s generation. Respighi, like Malipiero, is usually described as a member of the “*generazione dell’Ottanta*”: a loose-knit group of composers, all born around 1880, who attempted to craft an identity for Italian music that was not predicated on opera.⁷⁶ Their immediate target was *verismo*, as embodied in the stage works of Pietro Mascagni and Puccini. For Respighi, Malipiero, and their ilk, *verismo* opera was too commercial, feminine, and petit-bourgeois—but also too positivist, too concerned with the raw substance of reality itself.⁷⁷ Croce’s comments on art “burdened with realism,” quoted above, were directed at *verismo* and its literary sources; his philosophy, like the decadent aestheticism of Gabriele D’Annunzio, was embraced by Italian composers as an alternative—a distinctly highbrow alternative—to vulgar materialism.

As I have argued elsewhere, a defining feature of *verismo* opera is its unprecedented reliance on the sound of church bells: barely musical, and easily locatable

⁷⁶ The term was coined by the Italian musicologist Massimo Mila in his *Breve storia della musica* (Milan: Bianchi-Giovini, 1946).

⁷⁷ On the cultural politics of the *generazione dell’Ottanta*, see Ben Earle, *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29-62.

within the space of diegesis, bells offered composers an illusion of acoustic immediacy, the promise of pure indexicality and of unmediated access to the real.⁷⁸ Bells do not, as one might expect, disappear in post-*verismo* opera (Hauptmann, it is worth noting, had himself been one of the leading lights of German naturalism earlier in his career), but they are de-materialized, so to speak, and set free from human hands. In the climax of *La campana sommersa*, the all-important underwater bell begins tolling mysteriously to mark the death of Heinrich's wife. In the conclusion of Respighi's *Belfagor* (1923), a miraculous intervention by the Virgin Mary leads a set of church bells to sound of their own accord. And we will never know who (if anyone) rings the solitary church bell that emerges from a tissue of bell-like timbres—piano, harp, tubular chimes, celesta—in the final moments of “La fontana di Villa Medici al tramonto,” the concluding movement of *Fontane di Roma*. This was perhaps the most beautiful of all Respighi's bell effects, but also perhaps his clearest acknowledgment that—as in Ravel's haunting, elusive *La Vallée des cloches*—the mysteries of timbre are best guarded by the abstractions of purely instrumental music.

Reading the *Pines* (with D'Annunzio)

There are no church bells in *Pini di Roma*, although tubular chimes add to the impious clamor of the first movement, and a tam-tam is instructed somewhat gingerly to play “*come una campana*” in the second. And yet, of all Respighi's dramatic and orchestral works, *Pini di Roma* is perhaps the one most extensively concerned with the problem of post-*verismo* indexicality. When an Italian critic wondered if the third movement's

⁷⁸ See my “*Verismo Bells*,” in *Puccini's Soundscapes: Realism and Modernity in Italian Opera* (Florence: Olschki, 2016), 45-70. For further discussions of the place of indexicality and materiality in early twentieth-century Italian opera, see Ellen Lockhart, “*Laggiù nel Soledad: Indexing and Archiving the Operatic West*,” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, ed. Arman Schwartz and Emanuele Senici (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 85-109; and Alessandra Campana and Christopher Morris, “Puccini's Things: Materials and Media in *Il trittico*,” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 133-157.

nightingale was possibly “*un espediente troppo verista*,” he raised a question that was very much the composer’s own.⁷⁹

It may prove instructive, in this context, to consider Respighi’s complete published program for the work:

I. *The Pines of Villa Borghese*. Children are playing in the pine grove of Villa Borghese: they dance round in circles, they pretend to be soldiers, marching and fighting, they become intoxicated with their shrieks like sparrows in the evening, and depart in a swarm. Suddenly, the scene changes...

II. *Pines near a Catacomb*. ... and behold the shadows of pines circling the entrance of a catacomb: a heartfelt psalmody rises from the depths and fills the air solemnly like a hymn, then mysteriously disperses.

III. *The Pines of the Janiculum*. A quiver runs through the air: the pines of the Janiculum are silhouetted in the clear light of the full moon. A nightingale sings.

IV. *The Pines of the Appian Way*. Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic countryside watched over by solitary pines. Indistinct, incessant, the rhythm of innumerable footsteps. The poet has a fantastic vision of ancient glories: the trumpets sound and, in the brilliance of the new sun, a consular army bursts forth toward the Via Sacra, in order to ascend the steps of the Campidoglio in triumph.⁸⁰

Although the text seems clearly designed to frustrate straightforward narrative expectations, distinct patterns and geometries emerge. Topographically, the symphony describes a counter-clockwise tour around Rome’s perimeter, following the contours of the Aurelian Wall from the Villa Borghese (northeast) to the Janiculum (west) and then the Appian Way (south east). Horometrically, it presents another sort of circle, progressing from day to night to dawn. Historically, it moves back in time—from the

⁷⁹ A. G., “I pini di Roma” (see n. 37).

⁸⁰ Respighi, *Fontane di Roma, Pini di Roma, Feste Romane*, 70.

contemporary city through early Christianity (the era of the catacombs) to the pre-Christian Roman Republic (the time of the consular army)—but also forward, beginning with children playing at being soldiers and ending with real men in uniform. At the still point of all these cycles stands, appropriately enough, a hill dedicated to Janus: the god of beginnings, endings, and transitions, whose two faces looked both forward and back in time.

As for the program's explicit acoustic cues, it is significant that all four movements call out for—and, in the score, are rewarded with—sonic apparitions and found objects: the children's cries, which Respighi would dutifully transcribe from real life, in the first movement; the psalmody in the second—modal, intoned by choirs of strings and winds in parallel fifths, and introduced portentously by an offstage trumpet (located "*il più lontano possibile*") and the aforementioned tam-tam; the nightingale, of course, in the third movement; and, finally, the "indistinct, incessant" footsteps of the soldiers, approximated though an ostinato sounded by the piano, timpani, and low strings, and eventually enlivened by the carefully calibrated entrances of six fanfaring flugelhorns. Respighi's program presents the fictional sources of these sound events as increasingly mysterious (children, subterranean monks, ghostly soldiers) and also as increasingly remote from concrete, physical locations: we see the children before our eyes; we know where the catacomb is, even if we cannot peer into it; the bird is surely somewhere in the distance; the soldiers are nowhere and everywhere at once.

The overarching conceit of pine groves animated by mysterious sounds puzzled many British and American listeners but, for Italians, it might well have recalled D'Annunzio's famous, and famously sonorous, poem "La pioggia nel pineto" (Rain in the Pinewood, 1902), a meditation of sorts on the diverse timbres of nature:

Ascolta. Risponde
al pianto il canto

delle cicale
che il pianto australe
non impaura,
né il ciel cinerino.
E il pino
ha un suono, e il mirto
altro suono, e il ginepro
altro ancóra, stromenti
diversi
sotto innumerevoli dita.⁸¹

[Listen. The song of the cicadas responds to the weeping, the austral wind's weeping does not frighten them, nor that of the ashen sky. And the pine has a sound, and the myrtle another sound, and the juniper yet another, different instruments under countless fingers.]

For other Roman audience members, the sounds of reanimated consular soldiers and underground monks might have resonated uncannily with the performance venue in which they were seated: a circular concert hall built directly atop the tomb of Emperor Augustus—a tomb, moreover, that itself had originally been festooned with rings of pines.⁸² Beyond these potential associations, though, it seems clear that Respighi's program is designed to encourage a specific form of imaginative listening in its audience. As in *La campana sommersa* and *Belfagor*, it is not that the actual sounds Respighi will use

⁸¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, "La pioggia nel pineto," in *Alyone*, ed. Federico Roncoroni (Milan: Mondadori, 1982), 254-255, lines 40-51.

⁸² The concert hall would be demolished by Mussolini, who personally struck the first blow on 22 October 1934, in an effort to "liberate" the ancient imperial energies underneath. His blunt gesture might make one question the wisdom of attempting to hear a "fascist" message behind the rather more circumspect pageantry of Respighi's suite. See Borden W. Painter Jr., *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 73.

are especially innovative or strange but, rather, that we are invited to hear them in new ways, as if we were wandering through D'Annunzio's forest, listening to otherwise ordinary instruments and pretending they were played by absent, phantom hands.

One enraptured audience member was thus on the right track when he compared *Pini di Roma* to previous evocations of mystical arbours in the verse of Dante, Pascoli, Leopardi, de Nerval, and Baudelaire. Indeed, he felt that Respighi had surpassed these poets in his attempt to “give a soul and a voice (and such a soul, and such a powerful voice!) to the august, age-old Italian pine forests.”⁸³ After all, the writer noted:

It is only Music that—with the immense variety of its rhythms, and with its pauses, full of mysterious efficacy in themselves—can give sensible form to the shivers and shudders that reach our soul from all the Life that surrounds us: it alone can take advantage of a sensibility “not circumscribed by the Idea,” and only it is suited for receiving wholly all the voices—some screaming and others merely murmuring—that issue from the Universe.⁸⁴

This is surely the most overwrought response to *Pini di Roma* ever penned, but it may also be among the more accurate accounts of its ambitions. And with these comments in mind, we might now turn to “I pini del Gianicolo” and Respighi's main acoustic event: the climactic song of the nightingale, issuing forth as if from the Universe itself.

Listening to the *Pines* (with Beethoven)

⁸³ “Ottorino Respighi, all'«Augusteo», diede anima e voce (e che grande anima, e che possente voce!) alle auguste secolari selve dei pini italiani.” Il Farmacista, “La sinfonia dei pini,” *Giornale d'Italia* (16 December 1924), 3.

⁸⁴ “È la Musica soltanto che con l'immensa varietà dei suo ritmi e delle sue pause, piene anch'esse di misteriosa efficacia, può dar forma sensibile ai brividi e ai fremiti che giungono all'anima nostra da tutta la Vita da cui siamo circondati: essa soltanto che può valersi di una sensibilità «non circoscritta dall'Idea», è idonea ad accogliere pienamente tutte le voci—urlanti e appena mormoranti—che vengono dall'Universo.” “La sinfonia dei pini,” 3.

First, though, a brief description of the movement as a whole may be in order. “I pini del Gianicolo” is—but also is not quite—written in a conventional ternary form, and this form, however you describe it, is defined as much by orchestration as by any other properties. The movement opens in B Major with an improvisatory, cadenza-like flourish played by the piano—a jarring timbral effect after the lower, darker sounds (bassoons and contrabassoon; muted violas, cellos, and double-basses) that had concluded the second movement. (Although the piano plays in all four sections of the piece, it is usually treated percussively, and as part of the ensemble. This is its only moment in the spotlight.) After the opening keyboard gesture, we hear a soaring, pentatonic melody, played “*come in sogno*” by a solo clarinet against a backdrop of sustained and muted strings. The four-bar melody sounds three times and then is echoed once more by the cellos before we transition to the second, more active, intensely chromatic, and brilliantly orchestrated section, in E major. A new four-bar melody—full of piquant, almost jazzy, modal mixtures—is played first by a solo oboe, then a solo cello, then the full choir of violins, as descending sixteenth-note figures, assigned to the harp and celesta, shimmer in the background. The final section reverts to the original clarinet melody, now taken up by all the winds and accompanied by a whirling, wildly expanded version of the initial piano arpeggios, but there is little sense of arrival here. As restless as the opening part was rapt, this “*da capo*” sounds more like a transition or sonata development than a true return. Finally, the opening piano figure re-emerges—exact, unaltered—to bring the movement to rest in the home key.

Then something unexpected happens. As can be seen in Figure 3, the clarinet plays its melody again—unaccompanied, for three whole bars, by any other sound. In a sense, the return of the clarinet melody, especially in such a naked form, is the movement’s true acoustic surprise. Was the final piano cadenza not a concluding gesture after all but, more remarkably, a cue that the whole piece was starting up again? And, if

so, why has the orchestra gone missing? Perhaps this is one of the “pauses, full of mysterious efficacy” to which the critic quoted above referred. The clarinet comes to rest on its final pitch, this time dramatically prolonged, and only now does the nightingale begin warbling. But why? Was the bird’s song somehow missing or occluded during the “first” run-through of the piece? Has the clarinet’s insistent, arching melody finally succeeded in calling the object of its longing into being? Or has the dreaming clarinetist left the concert hall far behind, finding herself alone and out of doors? (If, that is, the bird is supposed to be outside at all. Recorded indoors at close range and amplified, in some early performances, by a newly invented and unprecedentedly loud electric Brunswick Panatrope, Respighi’s nightingale would have sounded closer to the audience than the wild bird evoked in his program ever could have.⁸⁵) Trilling violins, perhaps designed to mask the surface noise of the record itself, expand outward chromatically from F-sharp until they come to rest on a B Major tonic triad muddied with an added ninth.⁸⁶ The clarinet melody, stripped of its expressive dotted rhythms, is repeated for one last time by a harp playing harmonics; the dissonant C-sharp less resolves than vanishes; and the bird song dissipates—just as the children’s songs and the monks’ psalmody had dissipated—as the soldiers begin their heavy march. **[Figure 3 around here]**

One way of making sense of the mystery of the final moments of “I pini del Gianicolo” is by comparison with the conclusion to the second movement of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony: a work that, as we have seen, figured prominently in discussions of the limits of musical representation and in the reception of *Pini di Roma*

⁸⁵ The Brunswick Panatrope is mentioned prominently in the program book for *Pini di Roma*’s New York debut (see n. 34). For descriptions of the machine and its effects, see Ross Laird, *New York Sessions, 1916-1926*, vol. 1 of *Brunswick Records: A Discography of Recordings, 1916-1931* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 16.

⁸⁶ On the potentially phantasmagorical functions of the violins, see W. A. Chislett, “The Gramophone as Member of the Orchestra” (see n. 40).

itself. In the endlessly derided coda to Beethoven's "Scene by the Brook," the orchestra, which has been ceaselessly rippling throughout the movement, comes to rest in the home key, and an unaccompanied flute, oboe, and pair of clarinets (carefully identified as "nightingale," "quail," and "cuckoo" in the score) play a sort of bird cadenza, which brings the movement to its close.⁸⁷ The structural positions of Beethoven's and Respighi's birdcalls are so similar that it is tempting to imagine the latter as a self-conscious critique or rewriting of the former. And although it would be easy to hear (as many critics did) Respighi attempting to outdo his forebear in terms of realism, it may be more accurate to suggest that the undeniably greater realism of his mediatized songbird was there to produce exactly the opposite effect: an uncanny acousmatic apparition—a nightingale acoustically present but physically absent, simultaneously right there in the concert hall and sounding as if from someplace far away—that frees Beethoven's disappointingly earthbound birdcalls and allows them to join the choir of ghostly human voices that echo elsewhere in his work.

More prosaically, it may be worth observing that Beethoven's avian trio emerges at the end of a movement that *had already* been noteworthy for a variety of restrained scenic effects: rushing water, bird-like chirps. As such, it threatens to unsettle a constitutive balance between musical form and mimetic content (those sixteenth-note ripples, after all, were also part of the first theme). In contrast, Respighi's nightingale is the only realistic detail in a movement that otherwise eschews representation and clear meaning—a movement, in fact, whose program stands out from the rest of *Pini di Roma* for its lack of human characters and narrative details. Malipiero hated Beethoven's "insignificant" birdcalls because they seemed to betray the more elevated, spiritual

⁸⁷ Some of the more notable critiques of Beethoven's birdcalls are discussed in Owen Jander, "The Prophetic Conversation in Beethoven's 'Scene by the Brook,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993), 508-559. For an important discussion of the status of birdsong in eighteenth-century theorizations of music more broadly, see Matthew Head, "Birdsong and the Origins of Music," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 122 (1997), 1-23.

impressionism of the “Scene by the Brook” as a whole. Respighi, you might say, suffers from the opposite problem: his movement is too abstract, and his nightingale is too mysterious to be incorporated into any larger context.

Pini di Roma's climactic acousmatic apparition may thus have less to do with earlier musical representations of birdsong than with the enchanted bell effects in Respighi's own operas and other tone poems. But, just as it evokes these scenes and passages, it also suffers by comparison. In the affective economy of *Die versunkene Glocke*, the sonorous power of “*nachtigallenschmerz*” ranked well below that of church bells, and with good reason. The timbre of bells carries with it a host of mystical and Romantic associations that no mere songbird could aspire to, as well as a basic ontological distinctiveness. (You cannot imitate a church bell by whistling. You cannot hang one in your living room). To paraphrase Winston Churchill, Respighi's nightingale is a riddle wrapped in a mystery but without the all-important enigma to enclose it.

Orchestration as Alchemy

What attitude, in the end, should one take toward Respighi's imperfect sonic sorcery, poised in some confusing place between Symbolism and Objectivism, between reality and the ideal, nature and pure artifice? Some historical listeners let themselves be swept away. Many more resisted. It would be hard to think of a twentieth-century composition that has inspired more spurious biographical anecdotes than *Pini di Roma*, more efforts to explain—and, hence, explain away—a single musical conceit. Recent scholarly attempts to trap the composer's nightingale within some specific historiographical cage or other (politics, media networks, the list goes on) pursue the logic of these early fabrications. Yet the bird remains elusive.

Perhaps it is wise to let the anecdotes proliferate: to conclude with two more stories about the origins of *Pini di Roma*—less in the interest of demystification, though,

than as a way of reflecting further on the mystery of the orchestrator's art. While neither may prove especially reliable, both, especially when read alongside one another, might still enrich our appreciation of Respighi's strange timbral poetics, and of the peculiar status of acoustic materiality within his works.

The first anecdote appears in a short notice published in the *Music Educators Journal* on the occasion of the composer's death:

The story goes that about a dozen years ago on a night in Rome a congenial company gathered in a studio of the American Academy on the Janiculum hill. The conversation was led by a man whose good nature and intelligence shone in his eyes and sounded as clearly in his speech. Presently he sat at the piano, where he improvised in a manner fascinating to his audience.

In an interlude, through an open window came from the dark pines of the hill the ineffable song of a nightingale. A hush fell upon the group as the birdsong mounted in trills no coloratura could approach.

At that moment, in the soul of the man at the piano was born the symphonic poem, "The Pines of Rome."⁸⁸

Whether or not this is an accurate account of the inspiration behind "I pini del Gianicolo," it does function as an unusually compelling description of its final moments, in which improvisatory piano passagework is interrupted by the ineffable song of an absent bird. Lacking corroborating evidence, it would surely be a mistake to interpret the conclusion of "I pini del Gianicolo" as an autobiographical *mise-en-abime* of its own genesis. We might nevertheless be prompted to hear the movement's prominent piano part not just as one new timbre among many, but rather *as a piano*: a household instrument that, exactly like the "Actual Bird Record Made by a Captive Nightingale," retains its material associations even as it enters the charmed circle of Respighi's

⁸⁸ E. S. B., "Armchair Gossip," *Music Educators Journal* 22 (1936), 62.

orchestra. (The piano and the nightingale, in this account, are like synecdoches of the pre-existing musical works—seventeenth-century recorder pieces, Rossini's *Péché de vieillesse*, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*—that Respighi obsessively re-orchestrated: acoustic found objects that hold on to their specific histories even as they are transformed into something sparkling and new.⁸⁹) Pursuing this line of reasoning further, we might interpret the pairing of piano and nightingale as restaging either of two versions of Beatrice Harrison's primal scene. Perhaps the piano, like Harrison's cello, itself summons forth the voices of the forest, in a little allegory of the triumph of Art over Nature. Or, then again, perhaps its nocturne-like flourishes are designed to relocate briefly the listener within a domestic space, thus making the bird's song—unusually clear and loud, recall—sound not like it intrudes from out of doors, but rather, and as it did for Harrison's entranced early auditors, on the radio.⁹⁰

My second anecdote returns us to Rome's Villa Borghese, the park that served as the setting for the first movement of *Pini di Roma* and also contained within itself the famous zoological garden with which my essay began. If Bragaglia, the erstwhile Futurist, carried a portable gramophone and photographic equipment into this storied, sylvan space, Respighi took a somewhat opposite approach. According to his wife Elsa:

Round about that time [November 1920]—I remember as if it were today—the Maestro asked me to sing for him the songs I sang as a child at play in the Villa Borghese and which he had heard me humming to some tiny tot or other. The request surprised me and I was most amused to see Ottorino taking down the simple tunes that Italian children have sung for centuries. The same tunes, enhanced, were to

⁸⁹ I refer to “L’usignuolo,” the penultimate movement of *Gli uccelli*, based on a melody transcribed for recorder by Jacob van Eyck; *La Boutique fantasque*, based on Rossini’s piano pieces; and Respighi’s “realization” of Monteverdi’s opera, which debuted at La Scala in 1935.

⁹⁰ On similar radiophonic effects in operas contemporaneous with *Pini di Roma*, see my *Puccini’s Soundscapes*, 85-98.

reappear later in the radiant, joyous, inimitable first movement of *The Pines of Rome*.

Sometimes my contribution to the Maestro's compositions was unforeseen and involuntary and I can only like it to the carefree flight of an insect carrying precious fertilising pollen from flower to flower.⁹¹

We are presented here, and as in the preceding anecdote, with an image of the orchestrator as alchemist, gathering meagre found objects that he then transmogrifies into “radiant, joyous, inimitable” sound, like a rare flower coaxed to burst forth from a seed. At the same time, though, there is something unsettling about Elsa’s final metaphor of herself as insect. She casts herself in a role disturbingly similar to that of Respighi’s bird itself—an animal whose voice was captured, “enhanced,” and refashioned into something “unforeseen and involuntary.” Her words bring to mind the uncanny children in “I pini di Villa Borghese” who, in the shadow of Rome’s zoo, play games of war and then “become intoxicated with their shrieks like sparrows in the evening, and depart in a swarm.” They also recall another myth of origins: “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale.”⁹²

⁹¹ Elsa Respighi, *Respighi*, 83.

⁹² T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land” [1922], in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 64, lines 99-100.