



RESPIGHI

Belkis, Queen of Sheba—Suite

Dance of the Gnomes

The Pines of Rome

EIJI OUE
MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA



A PROF. JOHNSON 24-BIT HDCD® RECORDING



OTTORINO RESPIGHI

(1879-1936)

Belkis, Queen of Sheba is a product of Respighi's final period, composed in 1930-31 as a "full-evening" ballet. Respighi was neither the first nor the last to deal musically with the Biblical story of the Queen's visit to King Solomon, but his treatment is as distinctive as his personal style. His general interest in the arts and culture of antiquity moved him to bone up on the music known or believed to have been characteristic of the ancient Arabs and Hebrews, and to make use of it—particularly in his substantial array of percussion instruments and his sinuous themes for various woodwinds—in evoking the exoticism and the majesty of the Biblical setting and its characters. He augmented the large orchestra not only with an offstage band and a wind machine, but with sitars and other actual Eastern instruments—and with voices: both a chorus to sing and a narrator to recite verses by the poet Claudio Guastalla, who provided the scenario for the work. (He had composed an opera libretto on the subject, but never found a composer for it.) Leonide Massine devised the choreography, and Nicola Benois, the son of Diaghilev's famous designer Alexandre Benois, designed the sets and costumes for the enormous cast, headed by Leila Bederkhan and David Lichine. An estimated one thousand performers were involved in the premiere, given at La Scala on January 23,

1932. Critics from America and all over Europe gave the lavish production the most enthusiastic reviews, but it had a run of only eleven performances; the ballet was apparently never produced again, and the score was published only in a piano reduction. As Elsa Respighi suggested in her biography of her husband, *Belkis* was simply “too big” to have a realistic chance of becoming a repertory piece.

Respighi himself, not about to write off his opulent 80-minute score after those eleven performances, decided to preserve its most striking episodes in two orchestral suites. In the face of his declining health, however, he managed to create only a single suite, published in 1934. In no other work, perhaps, did he so clearly identify himself as a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, some of whose own most characteristic works are also rich in the coloring we associate with the Orient—as that term has been understood historically: designating not the Far East, but the lands of the Arabian Nights and the Bible—and who created similar concert suites from several of his operas. Respighi’s ballet score provided him with the opportunity and the materials to create a work that might be regarded natural descendant of the exotic and voluptuous *Scheherazade* and *Antar* and the concert suite from *The Golden Cockerel*.

The first half of Respighi’s suite presents portraits of the two principal characters, while the second half depicts the celebration attendant upon the Queen’s arrival in Jerusalem. The opening movement, SOLOMON’S DREAM, is from the second of the ballet’s seven scenes—which, following one given over to narration, is the beginning of the action. Solomon, brooding in his harem and dressed for the night, rejects his favorite wives, feeling this night is for solitude. He calls for his chief scribe, who will write his letter of invitation to Belkis, the Queen of Sheba. Following a sort of entr’acte for solo cello, the music now moves forward to Scene 5, in which Solomon and his royal visitor

meet for the first time and Belkis, finding the King in person more glorious than his legend, falls helpless at his feet.

The second movement, THE DANCE OF BELKIS AT DAWN, is set in the Queen's garden at Kitor, where she sleeps on her jewelled divan. Solomon's phoenix, having reported to him that Belkis has fallen in love with him from afar, now has deposited the King's letter of invitation on the Queen's bed and hidden in a shrub. It is at this point that Belkis awakes from her dream of Solomon and dances in honor of the rising sun, whose spreading light illumines her palace and the Red Sea in the distance.

Far removed from the world of dreams, the two final movements celebrate the Queen's presence in Jerusalem with wild dances. The third movement, WAR DANCE, begins with a drum dance from the ballet's final section: young men roll several huge drums into position and then leap up on them to pound out a fierce rhythm with their feet. This gives way to similarly rousing music from an earlier scene: Belkis's arrival, in which she and her retinue are enthusiastically greeted upon her arrival by Solomon's African warriors.

The ORGIASTIC DANCE that concludes the suite is entirely from the ballet's tumultuous final scene, Solomon's feast in the Queen's honor, held in his garden amid cedars and palm trees. The music is by turn sensuous and warlike, Solomon's great feast for his guest surpassing even Borodin's Polovtsian entertainment for Prince Igor in its vigorous abandon and sheer masses of singers and dancers. At the climactic moment, according to Guastalla's poem, "two high thrones gradually become visible in the distance, and seated majestically upon them are King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—motionless as idols of gold."

It may be noted that the present recording is the first to present the suite with its movements in the sequence indicated by the composer. It is the first as well with the solo tenor Respighi specified in the final movement, rather than the trumpet he indicated as an alternative.

Another poet was involved in the creation of the *Dance of the Gnomes*, which Respighi completed in 1920, three years after the first part of his Roman trilogy, *The Fountains of Rome*. Carlo Clausetti (1869-1943) was not only a poet, but also a lawyer and an important figure in the world of music publishing. He was both an editor and a director of G. Ricordi, the firm that published the music of Respighi, Puccini and numerous other important Italian composers. Clausetti was in fact a part-time composer and stage director himself. His narrative poem *Ballata delle gnomidi*, first published in August 1899 in the Naples journal *Il mattino*, was expanded more than 20 years later to serve as preface to Respighi's score. It is a tale of gnomes wreaking considerably more than mere mischief, and not upon humans but upon one another, specifically with the female of the species torturing and murdering the male in the course of a most unconventional wedding night. Two female gnomes hustle their shared bridegroom off to the nuptial bed, whereupon they inflict fatal damage; then, cheered on by other gnomes, they drag the abused corpse to a hilltop and toss it into the sea, touching off a fiendish celebration on the part of their horrendous associates.

There are numerous precedents for such tales, but most of them involve beautiful seductresses and noble victims, while in this case the grotesque character of both the predators and their victim tends to underscore the nightmarish nature of this altogether bizarre little drama. Clausetti's poem may be rendered in English as follows:

Dragging the raving gnome, the she-gnomes run on,
Their flimsy skirts flutter in the wind.
The tiny fellow kicks about between his two brides,
The three awaited by a single nuptial bed.
Oh, gnomides, make haste,
Lest he fall exhausted when the Great Bear falls from sight!
No torch was lighted for the distorted nuptials,
But hordes of gnomes outside awaited eagerly their prey.
And the thick night was pierced by a sharp cry,
So painful as to rout the darkness.
Then silence: the new dawn was breaking,
The mad wives drew their lifeless bridegroom from the alcove
And ran with the corpse, followed by the throng of cunning little gnomes
Swarming about and muttering prayers more like curses,
In a blasphemous jargon heard in the infernal depths.
By a rough path they reached a broad hill
Whose sharp ridge overlooked a sea of blue.
In a twinkling the filthy husband was hurled down its slope,
And thus the rite ended.
Now on the summit of the hill, after their sleepless night,
The two she-gnomes dance in the morning breeze.
And, while the day is breaking, the tiny creatures
Join in the dance of the vicious widows.
They shriek, they mock, they bite or laugh aloud;
A wild frenzy possesses them all, as in a witches' sabbath.

The Italian title, *Ballata delle gnomidi*, is sometimes translated "Ballad of the Gnomes," which might indeed seem apt for a narrative or descriptive work, but "Dance of the Gnomes" is surely closer to the sense of this scenario. (The term

ballata, used from the 13th century to the 15th to designate a form of dance-song, had served earlier as a synonym for *danza*.) The work's premiere, in Rome on April 11, 1920, under Bernardino Molinari, was decidedly not a success. Although Toscanini, Reiner and a few other conductors championed it for several years, it more or less disappeared just before World War II and has been heard very seldom since then.

By all odds the most consistently popular of all Respighi's compositions in any form is *The Pines of Rome*, which the dedicated Molinari introduced in the subject city on December 14, 1924—and whose American premiere was part of Toscanini's debut concert with the New York Philharmonic 13 months later. This music has certain pictorial elements in common with Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a work best-known in Ravel's orchestral setting (recorded by Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra, RR-79), which preceded *The Pines* by just two years. Both works contain scenes of children at play, each contains a serenade, each an evocation of catacombs, and each has as its capstone a mighty celebration of ancient glories. Respighi's score calls for a larger orchestra, with the addition of an organ and a phonograph (!), and the brass augmented by six *buccine*—the *buccina* being an ancient Roman trumpet with a circular tube, its bell resting on the performer's shoulder. Respighi indicated that the *buccine* may be replaced by additional trumpets and trombones, and that option is taken in the performance presented here.

As in the trilogy's preceding segment, *The Fountains of Rome*, the four sections of *The Pines* correspond to various times of day, though in this case Respighi did not specify those times in his titles. In *The Fountains* the sequence is from dawn to sunset; in *The Pines* it is from midday to dawn. And in direct contrast to *The Fountains*, in which he had used Bernini's artifacts as focal points for extolling the glories of nature,

Respighi's approach in *The Pines*, he said, was to "use nature as a point of departure, in order to recall memories and visions." The pines, which are everywhere in Rome, were in this work "to become testimony for the principal events in Roman life."

A scintillating scherzo, *THE PINES OF THE VILLA BORGHESE*, opens the work, depicting children in the shrill delights of their games. One of these, echoed in a popular tune, is the Italian version of "Ring around the rosey." An insistent command from the trumpets cuts through the din and brings the raucous activity to a sudden halt.

THE PINES NEAR A CATACOMB makes use of a plainchant figure to conjure up a mysterious and solemn impression. After a brief tranquil interlude the ominous mood returns; a chant of martyrs, the composer advises, "rises from the depths, re-echoes silently, like a hymn, and then mysteriously dies away."

A piano cadenza and a sinuous tune from the solo clarinet introduce *THE PINES OF THE JANICULUM*, a voluptuous nocturne colored by the harp, celesta and murmuring strings. The score calls for the playing of a specific recording of an actual nightingale's singing at the end of this section.

After the nightingale's song the scene changes to *THE PINES OF THE APPIAN WAY*. As the dawn mists rise and settle, the tread of ghostly legions is felt and, in Lionel Salter's splendid phrase, "fanfares begin to echo down the centuries." The mists disperse in the blaze of thousands of burnished helmets and breastplates. The already large orchestra swells with the addition of the organ and augmented brass. Respighi's note concludes, "To the poet's fantasy appears a vision of past glories. Trumpets blaze, and the army of the Consul advances brilliantly in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting the Capitoline Hill in final triumph."

— Richard Freed

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Producer: J. Tambllyn Henderson, Jr.

Associate Producer: Giancarlo Guerrero, Associate Conductor, Minnesota Orchestra

Recording Engineer: Keith O. Johnson

Executive Producers: Marcia Martin, JTH

Editing / Mastering: Paul Stubblebine, JTH

Design: Bill Roarty, JTH

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Special thanks to Edward Johnson for sharing his comprehensive material on *Belkis, Queen of Sheba*. – RF

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CHAD SHELTON, tenor, can be heard on another recording with the Minnesota Orchestra, *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe* by Dominick Argento (RR-91). With Eiji Oue and the orchestra, he has performed in concert Janáček's *Diary of One Who Vanished*, Bach's *Magnificat*, Mozart's *Vespers*, Handel's *Messiah*, and most recently, Mozart's *Requiem*. He appears regularly with the Houston Grand Opera and Opera Studio, and has sung with Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Baton Rouge Opera, Wolf Trap Opera, and Australian Opera. During the 2000-2001 season he made his Portland Opera debut and next season debuts in Europe at Opéra National du Rhin in Strasbourg. The Texas native holds a bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University as well as a master's degree and an artist diploma from the Yale University School of Music.



Eiji OUE became the ninth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 1995. Before joining the Minnesota Orchestra, Eiji Oue served as music director of Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic from 1991 to 1995. For four years prior to the Erie post, Oue was associate conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic. He has guest conducted widely throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 1996 Oue became music director of the Grand Teton Music Festival, and the following year he was named Chief Conductor of Germany's Radio-Philharmonie Hannover of the NDR.

A native of Hiroshima, Japan, Eiji Oue studied at the Toho School of Music, where he began his conducting studies with Hideo Saito, who had been the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Oue first came to the United States in 1978 when Ozawa invited him to spend the summer studying at the Tanglewood Music Center. He subsequently studied at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he was awarded an artist diploma in conducting. While at Tanglewood, Oue became a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. During the summer of 1990, Oue assisted Bernstein in the creation of the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, serving as resident conductor for the Festival Orchestra.

Eiji Oue has won numerous honors and awards, among them the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood in 1980 and both first prize and the Hans Haring Gold Medal in the 1981 conducting competition at the Salzburg Mozarteum. And some honors are unofficial: the family of Leonard Bernstein presented Oue with the baton and concert jacket from the maestro's last concert.

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

The Minnesota Orchestra, founded in 1903 as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, has long been recognized as one of America's leading symphony orchestras. Eiji Oue carries on the tradition embodied in the ensemble's roster of celebrated music directors: Edo de Waart (1986-95), Sir Neville Marriner (1979-86), Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1960-79), Antal Doráti (1949-60), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1937-49), Eugene Ormandy (1931-36), Henri Verbrugghen (1923-31) and Emil Oberhoffer (1903-22).

The Minnesota Orchestra's radio history began in 1923 with a national broadcast under guest conductor Bruno Walter and continues today with a broadcast series produced by Minnesota Public Radio for the Public Radio International network and carried on more than 150 stations in the United States as well as on the cable system of WFMT, Chicago's commercial fine arts radio station. Historic recordings of this orchestra, which date back to 1924, include releases for RCA Victor, Columbia, Mercury "Living Presence" and Vox Records. In more recent seasons they have been augmented by discs on the Telarc, EMI/Angel, CBS, Philips and Virgin Classics labels.

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RESPIGHI

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3 WAR DANCE 2:49 4 ORGIASTIC DANCE (Chad Shelton, tenor) 5:18

Dance of the Gnomes *15:44*

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7 ALLA MARCIA FUNEBRE 2:38 8 ALLEGRO 4:45

The Pines of Rome *22:39*

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