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FRIDAY 30 APRIL 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

RESPIGHI *Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 3*

SIBELIUS *Pelléas et Mélisande, Op. 46*

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Proinnsías Ó Duinn conductor

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



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PROGRAMME NOTES

OTTORINO RESPIGHI 1879-1936

Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 3

Ottorino Respighi was not only a composer of original work for symphony orchestra, operas and ballets (best known, perhaps, for his trilogy *Pines of Rome*, *Fountains of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*) but a musicologist with an interest in the music of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular he composed three suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances* based on music for the lute, a guitar-like instrument with a quiet and intimate character. By transposing the melodies for orchestral instruments, Respighi was able to achieve a fuller sound, but the third suite, which dates from 1931-1932, is written for strings only. Based on songs for the lute and baroque guitar, it has a melancholy mood which the strings are able to convey more subtly than the full orchestra.

The four movements (from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) are:

1. *Italiana*, a graceful dance marked *andantino*;
2. *Arie di corte* (courtly airs): the first dance appears first in the celli, in a stately fashion; then comes a faster dance, while the third is to be played “slowly and with great expression”, with the final dance more stately and restrained.
3. *Siciliana* - a rather formal dance marked *andantino* leads to
4. *Passacaglia* - a theme and variations in a variety of tempi, concluding in a lively *vivace*.

Programme note Richard Pine © RTÉ

JEAN SIBELIUS 1865-1957

***Pelléas et Mélisande* Op. 46**

Sibelius owed the inspiration for most of his music to the Finnish epic poem *Kalevala*, which gave rise to his symphonies and to works like *Tapiola*, the *Karelia* suite, the *Lemminkäinen* suite and *Finlandia*.

But he was also drawn to the theatre, due in part to the fact that the symbolist movement (of which Maurice Maeterlinck was one of the chief exponents) was introduced to Helsinki in the 1890s. Sibelius had written the music for the play *Death* by his brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt in 1903 and two years later he told a friend “I couldn’t resist it – writing for the theatre”. He composed incidental music for Maeterlinck’s play *Pelléas et Mélisande* (which three years earlier had been the subject of Debussy’s only opera, and also inspired work by Gabriel Fauré and Arnold Schoenberg). The same year he himself conducted the performance, which consisted of five overtures to the acts of the play, and five other movements.

Later, Sibelius arranged the music into an orchestral suite, omitting one of the vocal items, and giving each movement a name to identify the mood he wanted to achieve, corresponding to the action and the atmosphere in Maeterlinck’s play.

The suite’s resulting nine movements are:

1. *At the Castle Gate* (This theme may be familiar to older viewers of the BBC’s *Sky at Night* presented by Patrick Moore.)
It’s an atmospheric number, setting the scene for
2. *The entrance of Mélisande* – identified with a solo on the *cor anglais* which underlines the fact that she is crying, because she loves Pelléas, rather than his elder brother who is wooing her.
3. *At the Seashore* depicts the first romantic meeting of the lovers, and the doomed affair is emphasised by the rumbling in the basses. The couple meet again in

4. *Spring in the Park* – a happier note with a suggestion of a waltz, but with tragic undertones nevertheless.
5. *Three Blind Sisters*, again featuring the cor anglais, brings back Mélisande alone, and again unhappy as the prospects for her love of Pelléas are diminishing.
6. *Pastorale* is scored for woodwind and strings.
7. *Mélisande at the Spinning-Wheel* is the most dramatic movement up to this point, very “symphonic” in both size and scope, with whirring violas taking on the tragic note, depicting the spinning wheel.
8. The brief *Entr’acte* brings us back to the love theme, and leads to
9. *The Death of Mélisande* – the tragic conclusion to the doomed love affair of Pelléas and Mélisande – the longest and most intense of the movements of this short suite, where Sibelius uses his skill at orchestration to portray the full depths of the tragedy of a young love lost.

Many years later, a theatre director was playing the piano arrangement that Sibelius made of this suite; it was overheard by someone who had no knowledge of the music or the composer but remarked “It sounds just like Maeterlinck”: so successfully had Sibelius – whose music usually evokes the forests, lakes and indeed mythology of Finland – captured the essence of the symbolist playwright. Ironically, in later years Maeterlinck did invite Sibelius to visit him, but the composer never took up the invitation, remarking “I had something more important to do”.

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