

***Canzon noni toni, a 12***  
**Giovanni Gabrieli (c. 1554/57-1612)**

Written: 1597

Movements: one

Style: Venetian Polychoral

Duration: 4 minutes

Two pieces on tonight's program owe their existence to a building. Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* to exploit the large resonant space of Gloucester Cathedral in England. The *Canzon noni toni, a 12* is one of many compositions written for the Basilica of St. Marks in Venice. That splendid building is built in the shape of a Greek cross, with each arm of the cross having a nave, side aisles and a choir loft. Having a choir in each in loft trying to sing *together* would be nearly impossible, so composers in the sixteenth century exploited the great distances between choirs along with the reverberant acoustics and developed a style of music where opposing choirs would imitate and echo each other. The resulting style is what is now called the "Venetian polychoral style." If you were a worshiper at St. Mark's you would have a "surround-sound" experience with choirs of voices or instruments coming at you from two, three and sometimes even four directions!

In order to keep the waves of sound that meet in the center of the building from clashing, the Venetian school composers had to keep the basic harmonic structure of their music fairly simple without a lot of chromatic inflection. Each choir of voices or instruments would have at least four separate voices moving somewhat independently of each other. The individual voices in each choir would be fairly active—otherwise the resulting sound would simply be mush. Giovanni Gabrieli was probably trained by his uncle Andrea Gabrieli. He became the organist of St. Marks in 1585 and is one of the last composers to write in the grand Venetian polychoral style. Tonight's *Canzon* comes from a collection of music published in 1597 called "Sacred Symphonies." The term *noni toni* probably refers to a specific mode or scale that was familiar to

the Venetian musicians at the time. The number twelve refers to the number of separate voices: twelve independent musical lines grouped into three different choirs. During Gabrieli's lifetime musical tastes were beginning to change. Soon a new art form "opera" would claim the attention of most composers. As the public became fascinated with the new music, it forgot the old. There is very little evidence that Gabrieli's music was played in St. Mark's after his death until he was "rediscovered" in the twentieth century!

DeVos Performance Hall is not nearly as big as St. Mark's, nor nearly as reverberant. Nevertheless, you will get a taste tonight of some of the most glorious sacred music ever written.

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***Grosse Fugue, Op. 133***

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Written: 1825

Movements: One

Style: Classical

Duration: 16 minutes

On March 21, 1826, Beethoven chose not to attend the premiere of the new string quartet that he had just written for the Russian Prince Nicholas Galitzin. Instead, like a nervous producer, he waited at a nearby tavern. During Beethoven's day, when audiences liked what they heard, even if it was the middle movement of a piece, they would demand an encore immediately—a live version of hitting the "repeat" button on an iPod. At the tavern following the performance, one of the performers told Beethoven that the audience had demanded encores of the second and fourth movements of the string quartet. "Yes, those delicacies! But why not the [final movement] fugue? He paused, thought, and then blurted out, "Cattle! Asses!"

Beethoven's publisher Artaria felt that last movement was too difficult for performer and audience alike and so asked him to write a new final movement for the string quartet.

Uncharacteristically, Beethoven agreed. The string quartet with the new final movement was published as the Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130 and the older last movement was published as a separate piece, now known as the *Grosse (Grand) Fugue, Op. 133*. Beethoven also wrote a piano four-hand transcription of the piece. These days it is frequently heard played by a full string orchestra rather than just a string quartet.

The *Grosse Fugue* begins with a twenty-four measure “overture” that in very angular fashion introduces one of the two themes of the fugue. Then, very quietly, the first violins introduce the other theme. Suddenly, again in a very vigorous fashion, the fugue proper begins, simultaneously working with the two themes—in essence a double fugue. (A fugue is a form of music that involves having one voice or instrument imitate the melody of another, but at a different pitch level. A double fugue involves having two themes that can be imitated simultaneously!) Following an extensive initial fugue, there are “a series of sections, in contrasting keys, rhythms and tempi. Sections often break off suddenly, without real preparation, to create a structural texture that is jagged and surprising. Toward the end, there is a slowing, with long pauses, leading into a recapitulation of the overture, and on to a rushing finale that ends the movement.”

The only other documented performance of the *Grosse Fugue* in the nineteenth century was in 1853. Beethoven’s younger contemporary Louis Spohr called it an “indecipherable, uncorrected horror.” It wasn’t until the twentieth century that the *Grosse Fugue* gained full acceptance by both audiences and performers as one of Beethoven’s great masterworks. Igor Stravinsky called it “an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever.”

***Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis***  
**Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)**

Written: 1910

Movements: One

Style: Early 20<sup>th</sup> century

Duration: 17 minutes

As the title would suggest, the inspiration for the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* was the work of composer Thomas Tallis (1505-1585). Tallis was not only a great composer, he was an astute politician. He remained a Roman Catholic throughout the social and religious changes of 16<sup>th</sup> century England, but managed to endear himself to every monarch that took the throne. He was even a favorite of the protestant Queen Elizabeth, who granted him the exclusive privilege of printing music and music paper for all of England.

The theme for the *Fantasia* comes from a hymn by Tallis published in 1567 in the *Metrical English Psalter*. The melody is in Phrygian mode (the scale you hear if play the white keys on the piano starting on the note “E”), and sets the text, “Why fumeth in sight: the Gentiles spite, in fury raging stout?” Three and one-half centuries later, when the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams was serving as editor for the English Hymnal for the Anglican Church, he included Tallis’ hymn. (It is still found in many Christian hymnals, albeit with a different text.) In 1908, Vaughan Williams used Tallis’ tune in a production of *Pilgrim’s Progress* and again in 1910 when he was asked to write a new piece “*the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*” for the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester Cathedral.

Vaughan Williams’ score calls for a large string orchestra, a smaller and separate string orchestra, and a solo string quartet. Those three groups often perform all together and sometimes separately as they respond and echo each other. Much like Gabrieli’s *Canzon noni toni*, the antiphonal writing and the resonant, open sound so characteristic of English music is ideally suited to expansive spaces – in this case Gloucester Cathedral.

The *Fantasia* is a series of free variations of the hymn, sometimes quoting Tallis' hymn in full and often developing fragments of the melody between the three groups of strings. At its premiere, the piece was an immediate success. The *London Times* review of the premiere said, "Throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new. The work is wonderful because it seems to lift one into some unknown regions of musical thought and feeling."

Vaughan Williams wrote the *Fantasia* in the same year he wrote his *First Symphony*. They are his first major orchestral works and represent a time of renewal of the great heritage of English music. With Edward Elgar, William Walton, and Benjamin Britten, Vaughan Williams began to reclaim England's musical soul. Critic Hubert Foss wrote that the pages of the *Fantasia* "hold the faith of England, in its soil and its tradition, firmly believed yet expressed in no articulated details. There is quiet ecstasy, and then alongside it comes a kind of blind persistence, a faithful pilgrimage towards the unseen light."

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### ***Bonham***

**Christopher Rouse (1949- )**

Written: 1988

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 6 minutes

It would take a composer who was the first to teach an accredited course at a major music school on the history of rock to write a piece celebrating John Bonham, the legendary drummer for Led Zeppelin. That composer is Christopher Rouse, Musical America's "Composer of the Year for 2009."

The Led Zeppelin website has a dedicatory paragraph regarding John Bonham:

Describing the style of John Bonham's drumming instantly conjures up visions of the thunderous power he created. His contributions to rock music were revolutionary, and his talent unmatched and irreplaceable. . . . Live performances truly showcased his abilities during the numerous improvised jams throughout every concert and of course his famous "Moby Dick" drum solo; reaching a half-hour in length at times! His legendary right foot (on his bass pedal) and lightning fast triplets were his instant trademark.

John Bonham's death in 1980 caused Led Zeppelin to disband. Christopher Rouse composed *Bonham* as a tribute in 1988 for an ensemble of eight percussionists. In an interview with Andrew Druckenbrod of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Christopher Rouse admitted that his reputation in people's minds was "as a kind of prince of darkness." "It just happened that every time I had a piece to write, somebody died whose death had a big effect on me," he said. He calls his *Symphony No. 1* "Death without transfiguration." The musicians of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra "where he was composer in residence," called him "Mr. Sunshine." The reason for this irony? "I am known for writing a very dark, disturbing music."

*Bonham* begins with a quote from "When the Levee Breaks" and "immediately invokes the Led Zep ethos of monolithic power." As Rouse says, "Bonham had that sonic onslaught first of all . . . His enormous wall of percussive sound, when joined to the subtlety and elegance of his drumming, made for almost an orchestral approach to playing the drums."

Christopher Rouse was born in Baltimore, Maryland and went to Oberlin College. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from Cornell University. He was on the composition faculty at the Eastman School of Music until 2002 and since then has taught composition at the Juilliard School. He has written numerous works for many of this country's leading orchestras and numerous solo works for some of the leading performers of our day. His *Trombone*

*Concerto* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. His *Concert de Gaudi* won a Grammy Award in 2002 for Best Contemporary Composition.

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***Appalachian Spring***

**Aaron Copland (1900-1990)**

Written: 1942-44

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 23 minutes

Much of Aaron Copland's fame as a composer rests on his three brilliant scores for ballet: *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Appalachian Spring*. He didn't start out writing in the style found in those three ballets. As a young man he was much more allied with the modernist movement in America. However, in the 1930's he

. . . began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer . . . It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms."

The success of *El Salon Mexico* (1936), *Billy the Kid* (1938), *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942) and *Rodeo* (1942) proved that Copland's newfound populism was the right course.

When Copland accepted a commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation to write a ballet for Martha Graham in 1942, the only restrictions that he knew of were that it had to be for a small enough orchestra to fit in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress—only 13 players and be about thirty minutes long. He knew that the general subject of the ballet

had to do with the pioneering American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope.”

As Martha Graham worked on the choreography with the music, the ballet grew into a

“ . . . pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.”

Several years after the premiere of the ballet with the small pit orchestra, Copland extracted a large amount of the music and arranged it for a large orchestra. He describes the eight sections of the piece:

1. Very slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
  2. Fast. Sudden burst of unison strings in A major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both elated and religious gives the keynote to this scene.
  3. Moderate. Duo for the Bride and her Intended—scene of tenderness and passion.
  4. Quite fast. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feeling suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
  5. Still faster. Solo dance of the Bride—presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.
  6. Very slowly (as at first). Transition scene to music reminiscent of the introduction.
  7. Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer husband.
- There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and

published under the title “The Gift to Be Simple.” The melody most borrowed and used almost literally is called “Simple Gifts.”

8. Moderate. Coda. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end the couple are left “quiet and strong in their new house.” Muted strings intone a hushed prayer-like chorale passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.

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### ***Roman Festivals***

**Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)**

Written: 1928

Movements: Four (played without pause)

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 28 minutes

When it comes to the music of the twentieth century, scholars tend to focus on the “giants,” those composers whose work break with the past and set music on new paths. Those giants, like Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, produced most of their earth-shattering works in the first thirty years of the century. They had a powerful influence on all music. But there are also the “not-so-giants” who were actively writing at the same time. Their music, much of it very interesting and good, has had a difficult time making it into the standard repertoire.

Because of his conservative nature, Ottorino Respighi never made it into the pantheon of the great composers. Nevertheless, in terms of mastering the craft of writing for orchestra, he has few equals. Respighi didn’t want to be *avant-garde*. Instead, he desired above all to compose music that would speak to his compatriots about all aspects of their beloved country in a musical language that was beautiful and easy for ordinary people to accept and enjoy. The works that he is best known for are a series of three symphonic pictures called *tone poems*. In each, Respighi handles the orchestra as if it were a canvas on which he places vivid sound colors. The first,

written in 1916 is called *The Fountains of Rome*. Respighi wrote the second in 1924: *The Pines of Rome*. The third, *Roman Festivals*, not as well known as the first two, was composed in 1928.

Thankfully, these works *are* part of the standard repertoire and *are* audience favorites.

For all three of his great tone-poems, Respighi provided a prose rendition at the beginning of each piece describing the music. For the Roman Festivals he wrote:

I. CIRCENSES. (Circuses.) A threatening sky hangs over the Circus Maximus, but it is the people's holiday: "Ave Nero!" The iron doors are unlocked, the strains of a religious song and the howling of wild beasts mingle in the air. The crowd comes to its feet in frenzy. Unperturbed, the song of the martyrs gathers strength, conquers, and then is drowned out in the tumult.

II. IL GIUBILEO. (The Jubilee.) Pilgrims trail down the long road, praying. Finally, from the summit of Monte Mario appears to ardent eyes the gasping spirits of the Holy City: "Rome! Rome!" A hymn of praise bursts forth, the churches ring out their reply.

III. L=OTTOBRATA. (The Ottobratta B October festival.) In the Roman castelli covered with vines; echoes of the hunt, tinkling bells, songs of love. Then in the tender twilight arises a romantic serenade.

IV. LA BEFANA. (The Epiphany.) The night before Epiphany in the Piazza Navona: a characteristic rhythm of trumpets dominates the frantic clamor; above the swelling noise float, from time to time, rustic motifs, saltarello cadenzas, the strains of a barrel-organ in a booth, and the call of a barker, the harsh song and the lively stornello with its expression of the popular sentiment "Lassàtase passà, somo Romani!" ("Let us pass, we are Romans!").

When Respighi finished *Roman Festivals* he wrote "With the present constitution of the

orchestra, it is impossible to achieve more, and I do not think I shall write any more scores of this kind. Now I am much more interested in small ensembles and the small orchestra.” After the final outburst of sound at the end of *Roman Festivals*, you will understand why Respighi felt it was impossible to “achieve more.”

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