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SINFONIA  
DRAMMATICA

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NAZIONALE DELLA RAI

ROBERT  
TREVINO





OTTORINO RESPIGHI

# OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)

## Sinfonia Drammatica (1913–15)

**63:37**

- |   |  |       |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | I Allegro energico                           | 24:38 |
| 2 | II Andante sostenuto, con grande espressione | 19:21 |
| 3 | III Allegro impetuoso                        | 19:38 |

ORCHESTRA SINFONICA NAZIONALE DELLA RAI  
ROBERT TREVINO, conductor

## Ottorino Respighi: *Sinfonia Drammatica*

The *Sinfonia Drammatica* was Respighi's longest and most ambitious orchestral work to date. He had previously written various shorter pieces for orchestra, including a *Burlesca* (1906) and the *Overture Carnevalesca* (1913), but nothing on the scale of a symphony.

The years surrounding the composition of the *Sinfonia* (1913–15) were not among his happiest, and this perhaps accounts for the generally sombre mood of the work. He was still finding it difficult to come to terms with his recent move to Rome, where, at the start of 1913, he had taken up a teaching post at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory. And in October of the same year, he wrote a letter to the mezzo-soprano Chiarina Fino-Savio, lamenting that he had somehow become entangled in a marriage engagement in Bologna, which he now deeply regretted. All this against the backdrop of the threat – and then the reality – of a pan-European war, which finally involved Italy in May 1915, just a few months after the work's premiere.

He first mentions his intention to compose a large-scale symphonic work in an earlier letter to Fino-Savio, dated 4 May 1913, and continues to keep her informed of its progress in a regular exchange of correspondence with his close friend and confidante. From the tone of his letters, we can gather that he found the project particularly challenging. More than one year later, in a letter dated 16 November 1914, he speaks of a "colossal task" and a "mammoth undertaking" that was draining all his energy.

The *Sinfonia* was not completed until well into the autumn of 1914 and was given its first performance at the Augusteo theatre in Rome on 24 January 1915, conducted by Bernadino Molinari, to whom the work was dedicated. A second performance was given three months later at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, on 7 April, again conducted by Molinari, in a concert that also featured Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*.

The three movements are marked *Allegro energico*, *Andante sostenuto* and *Allegro impetuoso*, a scheme that seems to support the idea that Respighi intended to write a symphony true and proper, rather than an extended composition with a structure based on some sort of extra-musical programme. On the other hand, the symphony does not lend itself easily to any straightforward analysis, as it tends to be highly episodic in nature, each movement being composed of numerous sections strongly contrasting in terms of dynamics, tempo and orchestral colour. However, a sense of overall unity is achieved through the use of motifs and rhythmic cells that return in varying guises throughout the work.

The three ominous timpani strokes that open the work and the subsequent descending and ascending motif provide the material for much of the movement, which is characterised by the alternation between powerful crescendos involving the entire orchestra and quieter, more meditative passages, often featuring passages for solo instruments. The sudden explosion of orchestral colour towards the end of the movement is, for example, quickly offset by a more subdued episode featuring a brief clarinet solo, which is then taken up by a solo violin. The lengthy movement finally reaches a serene and unassuming conclusion, sustained by a final murmuring of the timpani.

The *Andante sostenuto* opens in a mood of typical late-romantic pathos with a rich, descending theme on the strings, whose opening notes will reappear sporadically during the course of the movement. The theme is soon taken up by the woodwinds and afterwards by the whole orchestra. A more delicate episode ensues, featuring a fleeting semi-quaver figure shared by the woodwinds and strings, after which the opening theme reappears. The horns herald the start of a more restless episode that begins quietly and then gradually builds up to a dramatic climax involving the whole orchestra, with the trombones in the foreground. A quieter, lightly scored section is then introduced by the flute and harp, eventually bringing the music to a virtual standstill. A sudden orchestral burst is momentarily tempered by the harp and woodwind, and then gradually reaches a new climax, with repeated references to the first notes of the opening theme. A brief

hint of the semiquaver figure is followed by further fragments of the main theme, leading the movement towards a gentle conclusion, although the soft repeated timpani strokes, heard shortly before the closing bars, seem to presage an impending storm.

The 'storm' duly arrives with the turbulent opening of the third movement, momentarily subsiding only to reach a new, more frantic climax. The turbulence is eventually interrupted by a twisting, rather wistful melody on the clarinet, immediately taken up more forcefully by the strings. A slower, yet dramatic episode leads to a typical Respighian surge containing a clear reference to the main theme of the first movement. As in the first movement, two sets of contrasting themes can be roughly distinguished, making it possible to outline an extended sonata form consisting of an exposition, development and recapitulation. A series of octave calls on the brass paves the way for a protracted coda, marked *Tempo lento di marcia triste*, which opens with a solemn melody on the oboe that is then repeated and extended by the strings. After reaching a rousing climax, we hear echoes of material from the second movement, and finally, after almost one hundred measures of coda, the work ends with a powerful crescendo dominated by an exuberant show of brass and percussion.

The Roman premiere of the *Sinfonia* was, on the whole, well received. In a review published in *L'Avenire d'Italia* the following day, Cesare Paglia (alias Gaianus) describes it as: "A work that embraces the entire last chapter of the history of European symphonic music and lays the first stone for a primacy that our nation once had and that we all, with all our Latin blood, wish to regain." The second performance, held in the composer's home town of Bologna was, unsurprisingly, an unequivocal success. A brief report published in the *Corriere della Sera* (8 April 1915) informs us that "Respighi's work was a resounding success, and the composer was called back to the stage several times", while the local newspaper *Giornale della Mattina* speaks of "a powerful composition in three movements, which is a new manifestation of the exceptionally great talent of our illustrious fellow citizen" (8 April 1915).

The *Sinfonia* is an ambitious work that clearly reveals the composer's main points of reference at the time. Various commentators have pointed out similarities with César Franck's Symphony in D minor, especially in terms of its cyclic structure, while echoes of Richard Strauss and Rimsky-Korsakov can be heard off and on throughout the piece, not only in the handling of the orchestra but also in the contours of some of the melodic lines. And while Wagner is not generally considered one of Respighi's main sources of inspiration, the German composer's influence can be sensed, for example, in the prominence of the low brass at various key points in the work and, more notably, in the intense string writing at the beginning of the second movement. We should not, of course, forget the lasting influence of Giuseppe Martucci, Respighi's composition teacher at the conservatory in Bologna. Martucci was an ardent admirer of Wagner and, among other things, wrote two full-scale symphonies, today unjustly neglected.

Just a few years after writing the *Sinfonia*, Respighi began to explore new forms of expression that would become more characteristic of his mature style. But seen in the light of his early leaning towards late-Romanticism, the *Sinfonia Drammatica* represents an impressive achievement, marking an important milestone in his career.

**Michael Webb**

Author of *Ottorino Respighi: His Life and Times*

When an artist comes to approach a new work of art, I often describe it as going through a dense forest, and arriving at a wild mountain range. The path is opaque, wild, and unknown; even when one has a clear idea of the destination, the way to arrive there is unclear. It can be an intense and even harrowing experience. I give this image to you, our dear listener and fellow adventurer, with full encouragement.

When we at the RAI started our work on Respighi's *Sinfonia Drammatica* I stood in front of an orchestra where in all their collective experience not one single person had played nor heard the work we have recorded here for you. The *magnum opus* of one of Italy's most famous and renowned composers is almost completely unknown. This meant that, as conductor and orchestra, we had to pull out our metaphorical pickaxes, maps, and compasses to plot a path to the summit of this extraordinary work of art.

It's often said to me, 'if it's forgotten, maybe it's because it's no good.' Perhaps that is the case from time to time, but with this work, far from it. It is not performed, because it's so difficult! When we hear the name Respighi it's easier to program the *Pines of Rome* than to brave the dense and complex world of this *Sinfonia Drammatica*.

For instance, if we examine some of the most powerful works of the late romantic-style, Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Bruckner's Seventh, Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, to name a few, these works demand an enormous effort, but they are common in the repertoire. By the time a musician has won their place in a major orchestra, they would have played these works four or six times already, even in their youth orchestra days! This Respighi work is no less difficult or complex than a great Mahler symphony or Strauss tone-poem, yet with very little performance history we must start from 'scratch'.

We spent a full rehearsal week tirelessly going through every aspect, until we arrived at a seamless and heartfelt interpretation of this masterpiece. How do I know that we managed that? Because while recording, I saw tears of emotions, angelic smiles, red faces flushed with blood-pumping passion. While walking out of the hall I heard musicians whistling or singing melodies; I could see in the nearby cafe where many of

the musicians eat, people discussing with enormous energy the depth and impact of this music.

I've recorded a fair amount with my dear partners at Ondine, and with my longtime collaborators, the musicians of the RAI, and to date, I'm most proud of this recording. It is my most sincere hope that it will inspire others to help bring this masterpiece into the recognized pantheon of the truly great works of art, and give Respighi the admiration he rightly deserves.

**Robert Trevino**

The **Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della Rai** made its official debut in 1994 with Georges Prêtre and Giuseppe Sinopoli.

Andrés Orozco-Estrada is currently Principal Conductor of OSN Rai; Fabio Luisi is its Conductor Emeritus.

Robert Trevino served as Principal Guest Conductor of the Rai OSN from season 2021/2022 to season 2024/2025. Jeffrey Tate was Principal Guest Conductor from 1998 to 2002 and Honorary Conductor from 2002 to 2011. Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos was its Principal Conductor from 2001 to 2007. Gianandrea Noseda was Principal Guest Conductor from 2003 to 2006. From 1996 to 2001, Eliahu Inbal was Honorary Conductor of the Orchestra. From 2009 to 2016 Juraj Valčuha has been the Orchestra's Principal Conductor. James Conlon was the last Principal Conductor from 2016 to 2020.

Other important guest conductors include Carlo Maria Giulini, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Mstislav Rostropovič, Myung-Whun Chung, Lorin Maazel, Zubin Mehta, Yuri Ahronovitch, Valery Gergiev, Marek Janowski, Semyon Bychkov, Kirill Petrenko, Vladimir Jurowski, Riccardo Chailly, Gerd Albrecht, Hartmut Hänchen, Mikko Franck, Christoph Eschenbach, Daniel Harding and Daniele Gatti.

The Orchestra had numerous prestigious engagements worldwide: besides its international tours (Japan, England, Ireland, France, Spain, Canary, South America, Greece), and an invitation in 2006 to the Salzburg Festival and to Berlin's Philharmonie, more recent years have seen the Orchestra performing at the Abu Dhabi Classics Festival in the United Arab Emirates in 2011, and in tours in Germany, Austria and Slovakia, including the debut at the Musikverein in Vienna. The Rai Orchestra also made its debuts at the RadiRO Festival in 2012 and at the Enescu Festival in Bucharest in 2013. It held concert tours in Germany and Switzerland in the Autumn of 2014, in Russia in October 2015 and in the south of Italy in April 2016. In December 2016 the Orchestra made its debut in Oman (Muscat) at the Royal Opera House with Beethoven 9th Symphony and in October 2017 at the Vienna Konzerthaus and in October 2021 held a prestigious

concert tour in Germany with debuts at the Kölner Philharmonie, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg and Alte Oper Frankfurt. In June 2022 the Orchestra returned to tour Southern Italy (Catania, Catanzaro, Salerno, Matera and Brindisi) and in September 2023 returned to the Royal Opera House in Muscat.

In November 2025 the orchestra toured Spain with Maestro Orozco-Estrada, making its debut at the Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, the ADDA Auditorio in Alicante, and the Auditorio Nacional de Música in Madrid.

The Rai Orchestra was in residence at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro for the edition 2017 to 2024.

[www.raicultura.it/orchestrairai](http://www.raicultura.it/orchestrairai)

**Robert Trevino**  
Conductor

**Principal Conductor, George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra**

"Frankly gorgeous conducting." *New York Times*

"Trevino forms one symphonic organism that, with its delicate lines, its piercing nine-note chord blocks, venomous scherzos and waltzing dances of death, turns the whole span into the turning of a musical wheel of fortune... Very enthusiastic applause."  
*Leipziger Volkszeitung*

**Robert Trevino** is regularly to be seen on the podiums of the world's leading orchestras, from the London Symphony Orchestra to the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig to the Baltimore Symphony. He has been named the incoming Principal Conductor of the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra – after an enormously successful debut with them earlier this season. He is the former Principal Guest Conductor of the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI.

The 2025/26 season also sees Trevino with the London Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Filarmonica della Scala, Wiener Symphoniker, Bamberger Symphoniker, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Osaka Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, La Filarmonica Arturo Toscanini and Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México.

Other regular collaborators include the Münchner Philharmoniker, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Dresdner Philharmonie, SWR Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart, NDR Hannover, Gürzenich Orchester Köln, MDR-Sinfonieorchester Leipzig, Orchestre dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia,

Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Helsinki Philharmonic, São Paulo Symphony, NHK Symphony, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, China Philharmonic, Russian National Orchestra and St Petersburg Philharmonic. He has also conducted a wide variety of orchestras in North America – also among them the symphony orchestras of Cleveland, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Utah, Toronto and Detroit. He has conducted at many leading festivals, including the Mahler Festival Leipzig, Milan Mahler Festival, MITO Festival, Puccini Festival and Enescu Festival. Trevino's opera work has included productions at Opernhaus Zurich, La Fenice, Washington National Opera and the Bolshoi Theater.

He was for eight years Music Director of the Basque National Orchestra, a period hailed as transformational in the orchestra's history. He was also Chief Conductor of the Malmo Symphony Orchestra. He has taken many orchestras on prestigious international tours, including to Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Turkey, Romania, Azerbaijan and South America.

Trevino's recording contract with Ondine has resulted in a widely-praised complete Beethoven symphonies cycle, two much-acclaimed Ravel albums, a Rautavaara album, Respighi's *Roman Trilogy*, and "Americascapes" – a survey of little-known American masterpieces, that won 'Best Recording of 2021' from Presto Music and was shortlisted for a Gramophone Award. "Americascapes 2 – American Opus" was released in late 2024 to similarly enthusiastic reviews. A cycle of Bruch symphonies with the Bamberger Symphoniker was released by CPO, now considered the modern reference recording. Between them, Robert Trevino's recordings have garnered more than 16 accolades from respected reviews publications around the world.

[www.robert-trevino.com](http://www.robert-trevino.com)

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