PROGRAM PAGE

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

STRAUSS' AN ALPINE SYMPHONY

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Jeffrey Multer, *Violin*

Friday, Oct 3, 2025, Straz Center at 8 pm
Sunday, Oct 5, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 2 pm

Richard Strauss
(1864 – 1949)

An Alpine Symphony
Nacht (Night)
Sonnenaufgang (Sunrise)
Der Anstieg (The Ascent)
Eintritt in den Wald (Entering the Forest)
Wanderung neben dem Bache (Wandering near the Stream)
Am Wasserfall (At the Waterfall)
Erscheinung (Apparition)
Auf blumige Wiesen (On Blooming Meadows)
Auf de Alm (On the Alpine Pasture)
Durch Dickicht und Gestrüpp auf Irrwegen (Going Astray)
Auf dem Gletscher (On the Glacier)
Gefahrvolle Augenblicke (Dangerous Moments)
Auf dem Gipfel (At the Summit)
Vision (View)
Nebel steigen auf (Fog Arises)
Die Sonne verdüstert sich allmählich (The Sun Gradually Darkens)
Elegie (Elegy)
Stille vor dem Sturm (Calm Before the Storm)
Gewitter und Sturm (Thunder and Storm)
Sonnenuntergang (Sunset)
Ausklang (Vanishing Sound)
Nacht (Night)

INTERMISSION

Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872 – 1958)

The Lark Ascending

Ottorino Respighi
(1879 – 1936)

Pines of Rome
I pini di Villa Borghese (The Pines of the Villa Borghese)
Pini presso una catacomba (Pines Near a Catacomb)
I pini del Gianicolo (The Pines of the Janiculum)
I pini della Via Appia (The Pines of the Appian Way)

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Richard Strauss (1864-1949)
An Alpine Symphony, Op. 64
Duration: ca. 51 minutes

What to listen for:

- *To create the musical tempest of a thunderstorm, the orchestra employs two seldom used but effective devices: a thunder sheet and wind machine.*

Richard Strauss lived most of his life in the Bavarian town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, in the shadow of the Alps, so it comes as no surprise that mountains played a role in his music. Just as the subject of trees influenced the Respighi work on this program, *An Alpine Symphony* is a majestic take on the grandeur of nature, both tranquil and imposing.

The symphony is technically a tone poem – an orchestral work that conveys a narrative beyond a strict musical structure. Each of its 22 short sections depicts a scene along a rugged trail, beginning and ending with *Night.* Listeners need only close their eyes and imagine hiking up and down a mountain, with all the breathtaking scenery, dangerous cliffs and frightful weather.

It isn't a simple stroll. The musical assignments are remarkably complex, and the orchestra must tackle not only the work's sheer length and varying textures, but an evolving fabric of polyphony over 45 minutes.

The original score – his largest – includes more than 125 players, quadruple woodwinds, thunder sheet and wind machine, two sets of timpani and harps, organ, and as many as 20 horns (some offstage).

"It's a huge piece with a huge orchestra," said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "And it makes for an extraordinary experience in the concert hall."

If anything, *An Alpine Symphony* is a study in dynamics: from the pianissimo of *Sunrise* to the cowbells of *In Flowery Meadows,* from the triumph of reaching the *Summit* to the raucous fury of the *Thunderstorm.* But for all its explosive energy, the symphony begins and ends in calm, as the hikers leave before dawn and return after dusk. Careful listening also reveals how Strauss wrote ascending phrases for the way *up* the mountain, and descending phrases for the way back *down*.

Here are the individual sections to follow in your mountain trek, although they will be projected above the stage during the performance:

Night, Sunrise, Ascent, Entry into the Forest, Wandering by the Brook, By the Waterfall, Apparition, In Flowery Meadows, On the Pastures, Through the Thicket and Briar, On the Glacier, Dangerous Moment, On the Summit, Vision, Mists Arrive, The Sun Gradually Darkens, Elegy, Calm before the Storm, Tempest and Storm, Descent, Sunset, Echo, and Night.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
The Lark Ascending
Duration: ca. 13 minutes

What to listen for:

- *Tranquil and transparent, the violin dances arabesques over the orchestra, mimicking the flight of a lark.*

The music of England was quiescent throughout much the 19th century, when France, Germany, Russia, Spain and other countries continued to forge their identities. But England soon would wake from its slumber with a distinctive style based on deep-rooted traditions dating back to the late Middle Ages.

England's long-dormant musical personality came alive in the works of Elgar, Holst, Delius, Walton and Britten. Joining them was Vaughan Williams, a large, sluggish man who finished nine symphonies before his death at age 85 and who created an indigenous sound that rose from the shires themselves.

Vaughan Williams loved the tradition of the English folk song and music that reflected the landscape of his country; he had little use for music of the Germanic European tradition: "As long as composers persist in serving up at second hand the externals of the music of other nations, they must not be surprised if audiences prefer the real Brahms, Wagner, Debussy and Stravinsky to their pale reflections."

After earning a doctorate degree in music at Cambridge in 1901, he joined the English Folk Song Society and immersed himself in simple tunes and oral lore he found in small villages and towns throughout England. The results were such classics as *Fantasia on a Theme by Tallis, On Wenlock Edge,* and the popular *Fantasia on Greensleeves.* In this tradition is the lovely *The Lark Ascending,* his homage to birdsong and to those who delight in listening to it.

Based on a poem by George Meredith, this ethereal 13-minute romance for violin and orchestra is one of the most exquisite creations in the repertoire, with impressionistic violin themes that seem to linger and evaporate. *Lark* is all about pastoral beauty and lightness, and of the simple charm of birdsong on a summer's day in the country. The composer included the following excerpt from Meredith's poem on the published score:

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.

For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
to lift us with him as he goes.

Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)
Pines of Rome
Duration: ca. 26 minutes

What to listen for:

- *The final movement depicts the ghosts of ancient Roman soldiers returning from battle along the Appian Way, their footsteps growing louder as they near, culminating in one of the great orchestral climaxes in music.*

Trees have adorned the canvases of countless painters over the centuries, from Leonardo da Vinci to Asher Durand, artists who found inspiration in the majesty of an ancient oak or the grace of a willow. But the wonder of trees and forests also has been crystallized by artists who paint with sound, and one of the more evocative is Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. Part of a triptych that includes the *Fountains of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*, this multicolored portrayal depicts four Italian landscapes, along with the bustle of people, animals and nature in repose.

Respighi is not regarded as one of the more important 20th-century composers, and he broke a long-standing Italian tradition by not writing a successful opera; none of his nine attempts survived the indifference of the public or critics. Instead, he aligned with a group of musicians who sought to revive their country's music through Renaissance and Baroque forms, an example being his atmospheric *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

As a composer, Respighi emphasized clarity in his orchestration, the interplay of light and shade, and melodic invention. His music in general is immensely likable – lavish, tuneful and buttressed by arching harmonies. Yes, he would have made a good painter, as his eye for detail and penchant for sweeping gesture are indelible, even if he wears on his sleeve the all-too obvious influence of Rimsky-Korsakov and Richard Strauss.

His masterpiece is, arguably, the four-movement tone poem, *Pines of Rome*, the composer's most frequently performed work. The music opens with *Pines of the Villa Borghese*, a depiction of an elegant estate surrounded by trees and where adults relax and children play in the background. The mood suddenly shifts at *Pines Near a Catacomb*, and the orchestra takes on a meditative quality as a hymn rises from the depths.

Again, the music changes course, this time to the *Pines of the Janiculum* bathed in moonlight. Audiences unfamiliar with this music may be surprised to hear, following a soft clarinet solo, the recorded sound of a nightingale.

Then comes the composer at his most convincing. In *Pines of the Appian Way*, Respighi introduces an ancient Roman army marching home from battle, the sound of footsteps and trumpets drawing near. Pushed forward by an insistent ostinato, the musical legion reaches its destination, and the orchestra pulls out all the stops in a triumphal close – one of the more bone-shaking codas in all of music.

"It ends up with perhaps the loudest, most wonderful music you'll ever hear," Francis said. "There are few programs we go full, full strength – this is one of them."

Kurt Loft is a journalist and music critic who has covered classical music for various publications and arts groups for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.