Ottorino Respighi’s *Laud to the Nativity*: The neo-medieval elements as representation of the neo-classical style

I. Overview

A. Ottorino Respighi
   1. 1879–1936
   2. Well-known for his orchestral tone poems
      i. *Pines of Rome*
      ii. *Fountains of Rome*

B. Stylistic elements of Respighi’s works
   1. Hard to determine a specific label
   2. Would be inspired by what is around him and compose, so quite varied in output
   3. Knew how to balance classical foundation with contemporary trends
      i. Against the trend towards “brain music” rather than “heart music” of the early 20th century
      ii. Believed that there was still much creative potential within the limits of classical forms
   4. Gifted melodist
      i. Was very successful at songwriting during his early studies
         a. Apparent in the vocal lines of the *Laud to the Nativity*
            1. Variety of texture and color
            2. Natural feeling of spontaneity
            3. Enjoyed the beauty and simplicity of a well-composed melodic line

C. Influences on compositional style
   1. Respighi studied compositions with Luigi Torchi and Giuseppe Martucci
      i. Gave foundation in the classical approach to composition
   2. Studied with Rimsky-Korsakov
      i. Impressed with orchestration ideas
         a. Three axioms of orchestration set by Rimsky-Korsakov
            1. Within the orchestra, there are no “ugly tones”
            2. Orchestral writing should be easy to play
            3. A work should be written for the size of the orchestra that is to perform it (Rimsky-Korsakov, 48–49)
      b. Orchestra became one of Respighi’s strengths
   3. Influenced by Debussy’s impressionistic style
      i. Short motives then connect to form longer melodic line
      ii. Wash of sound and color/timbre
      iii. Use of parallel chords
      iv. Repetitious rhythms
      v. Pentatonic, whole tone, and chromatic scales
         a. Respighi did not agree with his music being labeled as impressionistic, but rather influenced by impressionism
         b. Turned to earlier styles and techniques to get away from the impressionistic label
   4. Greatly influenced by his wife, Elsa
      i. Respighi was prone to depression
         a. Elsa helped him through those times and encouraged him to continue to compose
      ii. Suggested the use of Gregorian chant within his works
         a. From 1920 until his death, many compositions included chant
   5. Extensive travels
      i. Great interest in linguistics
      ii. Exposure to various musical cultures influenced musical style
6. Only wrote two choral compositions
   i. *La Primavera* (Spring)
   ii. *Lauda per la Natività del Signore* (Laud to the Nativity)

7. Had plans for a third piece
   i. *Maria Egiziaca* (Mary of Egypt)
      a. Extended illness did not allow him to continue

II. *Lauda per la Natività del Signore*

   A. Compositional overview
      1. Written between 1928 and 1930
         i. Inspired by harpsichord recital at the Chigi Palace in Siena
         ii. Premiere was at the Chigi Palace on November 22, 1930
         iii. Dedicated to Count Guido Chigi Saracini
      2. Text attributed to Jacopone da Todi
         i. 1230–1306
            a. Umbrian friar
            b. From anonymous collection *Lauda Umbra*
            c. Italian lauda
               1. Medieval hymn of praise
               2. Usually focus on the praise of the birth, passion or resurrection of Christ
                  or the Virgin Mary
                  i. Also saints or the Holy Spirit
               3. Attributed to the work of St. Francis of Assisi
            d. Text is set predominately in dialogue form
               1. Small reflective sections, but mostly tell of the story between characters
               2. Narrator not included
            e. Rhythmic foundation is based on agogic, dynamic, and tonic accents
               1. Natural text accents in Italian language are given longer note duration
                  (agogic)
               2. Accent that provides subtle emphasis on the correct syllable based on
                  common pronunciation (tonic)
                  i. Makes English version not as meaningful
                  ii. Has gift for text settings that may not translate to other
                      languages
            f. From Luke 2
               1. Poem centers around the shepherds
                  i. Influence of Italian *pifferari*
                     a. Rhythmic motives and drones
                  ii. Use of pastoral rhythms
                     a. 6/8 or 12/8
                  iii. Example 1
3. Cantata-like style
   i. Three soloists
      a. Angel: soprano
      b. Virgin Mary: soprano
      c. Shepherd: tenor
   ii. SATB chorus
      a. Shepherds and angels
   iii. Small orchestra
      a. Flute, oboe, English horn, bassoon, triangle, and piano

4. Blending of pre-18th and early 20th century elements
   i. Part of his final period of compositional style
      a. Considerable influence of Baroque opera, madrigals, church modes, and
         Gregorian chant
      b. Technique of archaizing
         1. Incorporating elements of earlier periods into contemporary works
         2. Begun by Ildebrando Pizzetti (early 1900)
      c. Generally used for color and effect rather than focal element

5. Unusual use of instruments
   i. Small chamber ensemble
      a. Pastoral-quality instrumentation
      b. Gives a sense of simplicity
      c. Archaic quality
      d. Stylistic of neo-classical trend of the time
         1. Reaction to the large orchestras and loud sounds of the late-Romantic
            era

6. Revitalized choral composing in Italy

B. Form

1. Elements suggest operatic element
   i. Use of three performing elements
      a. Soloists
      b. Chorus
      c. Orchestra
         1. Also used in cantata form
            i. Main focus on chorus lead it to the cantata designation more
               than opera
   ii. Instructions for staging
      a. Dialogue-laude of 16th century evolved into early oratorio
   iii. Demanding choral parts

2. Genre best described as mid-17th century Italian oratorio
   i. Approximately 20-30 minutes in length
   ii. Solo passages
   iii. Ensemble
   iv. Unstaged
   v. Dramatic/narrative

3. Structure
   i. Four main sections with coda
      a. Strongly influenced by text sections
   ii. Very little repetition of theme
      a. Only A section returns
         1. End of section I and in the coda
C. Choral writing
   1. Extremely varied
      i. Strict chordal to polyphonic
      ii. Large unaccompanied sections
      iii. Unison to seven-part divisi
      iv. Central focus to accompaniment for soloists

D. Compositional Devices and Harmonic Functionality
   1. Shifting of compositional style with change of text focus
      i. Variation from chromatic to diatonic
         a. Example of chromatic (Example 2)
         b. Example of diatonic (Example 3)

   2. Overall analysis of tonal structure is of post-Romantic style
      i. Harmonic movement has elements of Renaissance and early Baroque style
         a. Cross-relations
         b. Tertian relationships

3. Tonality
   i. General key center apparent
ii. Shifts and modulations can be prolonged or frequent

iii. Modality
   a. When paired with chromaticism and rapid modulations, it tends to blur the pure
tonal center
   b. Phrygian mode (Example 4)

4. Early music elements
   i. Plainsong / Gregorian chant
      a. Example 5

   ii. Folk-song style
   iii. 16th-century madrigals
   iv. Mordents
      a. Example 6

   v. Hemiola
vi. Points of imitation
   a. Example 7

vii. Neo-classical word painting
   a. Melody “abides” on the word abiding
   b. Example 8
5. Contemporary compositional devices
   i. Open 5th's
      a. Example 9
ii. Extended parallelism
   a. Example 10

   b. Function is two-fold
      1. Change tessitura from high to low
      2. Change tonal center from A to Bb

   iii. Non-traditional chords
      a. Non-dominant 7th and 11th chords
         1. Not used within traditional structure
      b. Added tones to traditional chords
      c. Non-tertian chords
6. Pedal tones
   i. Example 11

E. Analysis of Sections
1. Section I
   i. Mm. 1-93
   ii. Part A
       a. Harmony emphasizes octave and the open 5th
       b. Pastorale-style influence
          1. 9/8 meter
   iii. Part B
       a. Aeolian mode
       b. Emphasis on 7th, 9th, and 11th chords
   iv. Part A’
       a. Combination of characteristics from A and B
       b. Tertian harmony over sustained open 5ths
2. Section II
   i. Mm. 94-161
   ii. Two distinct parts of texture
       a. Chordal
       b. Contrapuntal
   iii. Three types of timbre
       a. Vocal
          1. Part A
          b. Instrumental
             1. Part B
       c. Combination of the two
   iv. Melodic motive is similar to section I
       a. Helps with relation between the sections
          1. Only the first phrase
       b. Use of melodic imitation of motives
          1. Both part A and part B
   v. Rhythmic focus between section I and II is apparent
       a. Slowing of rhythmic pace
1. Tempo slows at beginning of section
2. Change from triple to duple
   i. 9/8 to 4/4
b. As section II continues, there is an increase in rhythmic intensity
   1. Harmonic rhythm becomes faster
   2. Addition of rhythmic motives in accompanying chordal parts
vi. Harmonic structure
   a. Alternation between G minor, D minor, and Bb major triads
   b. Inclusion of 7th chords
   c. Emphasis on open 5th
3. Section III
   i. Mm. 162-353
   ii. Lullaby quality at beginning
      a. Contour of melody
      b. Triples
   iii. Longest and most stylistically varied section
      a. Chordal and contrapuntal
      b. Combined vocal and instrumental timbre
         1. Thicker texture
            i. Addition of instruments for full ensemble
         2. Three-part male chorus
            i. Prayer offered by the shepherds
iv. Modes
   a. Phrygian
      1. Dominance of lowered 2nd scale degree through large sections
   b. Mixolydian
      1. Transposition of modes common
   c. Non-traditional cadences
      1. Only time 7th is raised at a cadence is when its functional harmony is as
         the 3rd of the dominant triad
v. Rhythm
   a. Very little rhythmic variety in this section
      1. Madrigal style
      2. Some tempi changes
   b. General decrease in rhythmic intensity through this section
      1. Triplet primary motive
vi. Harmony
   a. Most impressionistic section
      1. Added tones in chords
         i. 6ths and 7ths
      2. Parallel chords
         i. Follows the melodic line rather than being functional
   b. Major-minor focus
      1. Use of Ab pedal point
4. Section IV
   i. Mm. 354-460
   ii. Rhythm and tempo becomes more active
      a. Use of syncopation
   iii. Text is forcefully set with rhythmic emphasis
      a. Melody in octaves to allow text to be clear
         1. Timbre of a trumpet
         2. Outlining of chord in melody gives the effect of bells
iv. Texture
   a. Polyphonic
      1. Part A is canonic and fugal
      2. Part B is homophonic with polyphonic energy and influence
v. Diminution
   a. Chordal melody in whole notes, then half notes
      1. Into quarter notes during imitative section
vi. Augmentation
   a. Baroque technique of lengthening note values at end of A section
vii. Imitation
   a. Very important in this section
   b. Ascending perfect 5\textsuperscript{th} used repeatedly

5. Coda
   i. Mm. 461-487
   ii. Lack of rhythmic and melodic activity
      a. Contemplative nature
      b. Rhythmic motive from section I
      c. Recitative on one pitch
         1. Melody line is in the accompaniment
   iii. Harmony
      a. Mostly in choral parts
      b. 7\textsuperscript{th}, 9\textsuperscript{th}, and 11\textsuperscript{th} chords
      c. Ending on unison A


