Neoclassical Idioms in Ottorino Respighi’s *Lauda per la Natività del Signore*

by

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Introduction

For a portion of the early twentieth century in Italy, the neoclassical aesthetic dominated the music scene (with the notable exception of Puccini’s music). Championed by composers such as Alfredo Casella, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Ildebrando Pizzetti, and Ottorino Respighi, the “generazione dell’Ottanta” produced a body of “rationalist” music that grew from a renewed interest in historical Italian culture.¹ Unlike their other neoclassical European contemporaries such as Igor Stravinsky, they did not seek to reconcile neoclassical form with the polytonal and even atonal advancements explored elsewhere. Rather, their embrace of the antique aesthetic reflected a growing trend, championed in part by the author and soldier Gabriele D’Annunzio, to reclaim a cultural heritage once considered lost.²

For Ottorino Respighi in particular, the neoclassical aesthetic provided a rigid yet adaptable framework with which he could demonstrate his deft understanding of early Baroque techniques and yet display his creativity and personality as a composer. One of his most successful neoclassical works is La Laudà per la Natività del Signore (1928-30), a small-scale “Christmas” cantata written for three soloists, chorus, and instrumental ensemble.

Yet despite the way the neoclassical idioms pervade the Laudà, Respighi’s music blurs the fine line between archaic retreads and early twentieth century innovation—and purposefully so. Thus I shall argue here

that Respighi utilizes late-Renaissance and early-Baroque idioms in the
Lauda as a means to explore the musical Post-Impressionism of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Though scholars of the Lauda have referred to and analyzed a large
number of late Renaissance and early Baroque idioms within the piece, the
body of this thesis will be limited to a core group of idioms that are more
relevant than others to the issue of Post-Impressionism at hand. I will discuss
how the Lauda reconciles Baroque pastoral instrumentation with sometimes
modern orchestration as well as the use of impressionistic modal modulations
within the Angel solo. Baroque-like motives throughout the Angel solo will be
analyzed for the way that they drive the modal modulations, which under
Respighi’s hand manage to be both pre-eighteenth and twentieth century in
nature. Finally I will analyze how Respighi uses Monteverdian
embellishments against a twentieth-century humming chorus to sympathetic
effect.

While the argument is not new among Respighi scholars, it has only
been researched to a limited extent. This particular argument is taken from
Luciano Gherardi, who wonders why Respighi, wanting to “interpret the new
particulars of the twentieth century . . . would feel the need to return to idioms
that would have seemed to already have concluded [their use in musical
practice].” 3 He essentially argues that Respighi is not “interested in a

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3 Gherardi, “Atteggiamenti Medievalistici Nell’Opera di Ottorino Respighi,” 231. All excerpts from
Italian works presented in English were translated by the author of this paper.
philological reconstruction [of antique idioms]” but rather a “dramatic recreation that leaves space . . . to explore modern sonorities.”

Thus according to Gherardi, Respighi uses Renaissance and baroque structure as a vehicle to explore the aural effects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century music. The juxtaposition can be witnessed, he writes, in the madrigal-like chorus that is followed immediately by the Gloria chorus with its distinctly late nineteenth-century orchestration (coupled furthermore with early baroque pastoral elements). He argues that the dichotomy between the two styles is alternately emphasized and diminished depending on the effect Respighi sought to achieve.

Like Gherardi, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi argues that Respighi, unlike most of his non-Italian neoclassical contemporaries, does not embrace older idioms from a politicized and reactionary point of view because “the concept of an art in crisis is foreign to him” as an Italian composer. Rather, his taste for the Renaissance and the baroque reflect his personality and interests, especially in relation to Monteverdi and other composers from the late Renaissance and early Baroque. According to Tomasi, however, Respighi’s Lauda is not a mere re-tread of baroque techniques; instead he argues that the composer reconciles pre-eighteenth century structure with “that typical Respighian tendency for Franco-Russian colors.”

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4 Ibid., 235.
5 Ibid., 236.
6 Tomasi, “La ‘Lauda’ Per Siena,” 254.
7 Ibid.
Though Lee Barrow agrees that the piece reflects influences from both pre-eighteenth century and modern music, he does not express a specific opinion or argument about it. The most comprehensive (but least analytical) scholar on Respighi’s *Lauda*, Barrow argues that the cantata is a successful example of the revived choral scene in Italy during the 1920s and 30s. He further contends that it is Respighi’s deft handling and “unique blending” of pre-eighteenth-century and early twentieth-century idioms that make it so approachable and contribute to its popularity among concert-goers. 8

What do these scholars mean by musical Post-Impressionism, however, within the context of Respighi, his influences, and his intent? Though he never directly refers to Post-Impressionism by name, Gherardi suggests that certain sonorities in the *Gloria* chorus of the *Lauda* reflect the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov, of whom Respighi was briefly a pupil. 9 Gherardi fails to specify or explain, however, how these aural effects are post-impressionistic in nature.

Tomasi, on the other hand, is more specific in defining his conception of “modern sonorities” in Respighi’s work after Impressionism. He describes the relationship between Post-Impressionism and Neoclassicalism as

a diverse musical formation [that] brings to itself disintegrated germs of a popular French melody anchored in modal traditions . . . that linguistic mood that Satie identifies as a gothic world . . . and from the 1880s a disintegrating attack towards the classic style and its pedigree. The attack is geared in particular towards the functional and dynamic nature of the consolidated relations in the last three centuries between

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9 Tomasi, “La ‘Lauda’ per Siena,” 236.
the degrees of the scale (thus its distinctive trait is represented by the elision of the sensible) and the disposal of functional harmony.\textsuperscript{10}

Post-Impressionism, coupled with Neoclassicalism, according to Tomasi, is rooted in late nineteenth French musical developments where the conventional relationships between pitches and harmonic progressions were “disposed of” in favor of more “modal traditions.” It was developed as a reaction (“attack”) towards “classic style and its pedigree.” He goes on to suggest that Neoclassicalism, with its shades of Impressionism, was further nurtured by the “national Russian school” of musical composition, explaining why Tomasi occasionally uses “Franco-Russian” to describe the type of Impressionism he observes in Respighi’s compositions.\textsuperscript{11}

It will be useful to compare this with other definitions of Post-Impressionism, and to begin with Impressionism itself. According to Richard Langham Smith, musical Impressionism refers to early 20th-century French music that was similarly concerned with the representation of landscape or natural phenomena, particularly the water and light imagery dear to [painting] Impressionists, through subtle textures suffused with instrumental colour. . .The Impressionists’ use of brush-strokes or dots (‘pointillism’) is also reflected in the music of Debussy and Ravel, for example in Ravel’s ballet \textit{Daphnis et Chloé} (1912), in which static sections are built up from slow-moving harmonies arpeggiated with fast-moving ‘dots’ of sound, akin to the broad washes of colour in the paintings.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{11} Tomasi, “La ‘Lauda’ per Siena,” 252.
Here Impressionism in music is described as “representative” where, for example, arpeggiated rhythms can be understood as references to swift brush strokes on a canvas. Smith states that Impressionism is a kind of program music that derives its meaning from relations outside of itself, in most cases from scenes of nature (or from the act of representing scenes from nature in visual art).

Jann Palser, however, does not subordinate her definition of musical Impressionism entirely to the definition of Impressionism in art. Instead she seeks to describe Impressionist composers and their techniques more specifically in within the context of musical materials:

These composers’ attempt to explore the fleeting moment and the mystery of life led them to seek musical equivalents for water, fountains, fog, clouds and the night, and to substitute sequences of major 2nds, unresolved chords and other sound-colours for precise designs, solid, clear forms, and logical developments.\(^{13}\)

Like Smith, Palser defines musical Impressionism as a referential form of music, but she takes it further by suggesting that certain elements of impressionist music—“majors 2nds, unresolved chords, and other sound colours”—replace the precision and sometimes overwhelming rationality of 19\(^{th}\) century music.

Impressionism then, according to these definitions, essentially refers itself to elements of nature outside of the musical composition. How does musical Post-Impressionism differ in comparison? According to Palser,

musical Post-Impressionism embraces “line, colour and form from another perspective, and constructions that bring pleasure to the mind as well as the senses; this aesthetic resembles that of post-Impressionist painters like Gauguin and Matisse.”\textsuperscript{14} But specifically in relation to visual arts, the difference between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism was that Impressionism was based, in its strictest sense, on the objective recording of nature in terms of the fugitive effects of colour and light. The Post-Impressionists rejected this limited aim in favour of more ambitious expression, admitting their debt, however, to the pure, brilliant colours of Impressionism, its freedom from traditional subject matter, and its technique of defining form with short brushstrokes of broken colour.\textsuperscript{15}

Post-Impressionism can be understood as an embrace of Impressionist principles like the “fugitive effects of colour and light” while simultaneously rejecting the idea of nature as its chief subject matter. With these images and references in mind, I shall explore how the goals of Post-Impressionism are achieved within the framework of neoclassical techniques in Respighi’s \textit{Lauda}.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
**Ottorino Respighi: A Brief Biography**

Respighi's early music background is visible in his compositions, and much of his neoclassical development can be traced to his work as a transcriber and musicologist. Born on July 9, 1879 in Bologna, Italy, Ottorino Respighi had an early and expansive musical education that greatly influenced his future tastes and compositional style. He learned to play the violin and piano under the tutelage of his father, who was a piano teacher. In 1891 he enrolled at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, where he continued his violin and viola studies with Federico Sarti until 1901. It was at the Liceo where the eminent musicologist Torchi and the school's director, Martucci, taught young Respighi composition and exposed him to the early music that would fascinate him and permeate many of his neo-medieval and neo-baroque works. During the winter of his last year of high school and again in the winter of 1902-3, Respighi found himself in Russia where he was employed as a violist for a Russian orchestra. During these two winters Respighi took orchestration lessons from Rimsky-Korsakov; these lessons would have a significant influence on Respighi's compositional technique, especially in regards to his more impressionistic works like his tone poems.

Between 1902 and 1913 Respighi traveled between Italy and Germany frequently as he sought to develop his musical voice. In 1902 he briefly studied composition with Bruch in Berlin before returning to Bologna in 1903.

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where he again worked as an orchestral musician until 1908. In 1906 he began transcribing music from the Baroque and Classical periods; he was quite successful as a transcriber, with his transcription of Monteverdi’s *Lamento d’Arianna* for voice and orchestra garnering him notable acclaim and popularity. After his orchestral stint in Bologna he returned to Berlin in 1908, staying for more than a year; during this second trip to Berlin Respighi developed his compositional abilities more fully, resulting in the well-received *Semiràma* (1910), his first complete opera. That same year (1910) Respighi briefly became involved in the short-lived “lega dei Cinque,” an anti-establishment group of Italian composers consisting of Renzo Bossi, Pizzetti, Malipiero, and Bastianelli. The league, however, was his first and last political engagement in music, and after 1910 he never became involved in any major political activity—musical or otherwise—again.  

In Bologna he developed the foundation of his musical voice, but it was in Rome where Respighi enjoyed the fruits of success both from his compositions and his work positions. In 1913 he moved to Rome, assuming a teaching position at the Liceo Musicale di Santa Cecilia; it was at this Liceo that Respighi met the young Elsa Olivieri Sangiacomo, whom he would marry in 1919. In Rome he premiered *Fontane di Roma* (1915-6) to great success, and his reputation and economic position grew accordingly. A few years later in 1923 Respighi accepted the appointment to serve as director of the

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19 Waterhouse, et al., "Respighi, Ottorino."
Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia, but the time-consuming administrative position detracted from his composing, and three years later he resigned.\textsuperscript{20}

During the 1920s the writer and journalist Claudio Guastalla (1880-1948) encouraged Respighi to return to writing operas, and subsequently Guastella became the librettist for all of Respighi’s later operas.\textsuperscript{21} With his fame growing internationally, Respighi travelled more; abroad he conducted his own works or even played them himself as a solo pianist. His international fame reaped national recognition from Mussolini and the Italian fascist government; in 1932 he was awarded membership to the Reale Accademia d’Italia. Respighi however was not politically active, much less politically interested; though his music was admired by Mussolini he made no attempt nor displayed any interest in cultivating a deeper relationship with the regime.

Though inactive politically, Respighi maintained decisive ideas about how music should be defined and composed. Towards the end of his life, in 1932, he proclaimed his conservative beliefs on music by signing a manifesto (along with other Italian composers such as Pizzetti) that attacked the newer, more avant-garde music of the period and promoted a return to classical musical traditions—a position that, much to Respighi’s surprise, went contested by Mussolini when he declared support for the modernists. Heart problems for Respighi first diagnosed in 1931 became more pronounced by 1935. They ultimately caused his death on April 18, 1936 at the age of 56.

\textsuperscript{20} Nagley and Parker, "Respighi, Ottorino."
\textsuperscript{21} Waterhouse, et al., "Respighi, Ottorino."
**La Lauda per la Natività del Signore: Background and Analysis**

Respighi wrote the *Lauda* between 1928 and 1930 after he was commissioned by Count Guido Chigi Saracini to compose a work of “brief dimensions.” He used a text from the *Cantico della Natività di Iesu Cristo*, attributed to the 14th-century Umbrian friar Jacopone da Todi. The work premiered at the Chigi Saracini palace in Siena on November 22, 1930; it was directed by Respighi himself (with the chorus directed by Bonaventura Somma) and featured Laura Pasini as the Angel (soprano), his wife Elsa Respighi as Mary (mezzo-soprano), and Alfredo Sernicoli as the Pastor (tenor).

*La Lauda per la Natività del Signore* is a continuous cantata (without separate movements) composed for three soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor), mixed chorus, and a small instrumental ensemble. Though it has no formal movement divisions, the piece can be understood as compromising four sections:

CHART 1: Outline of Respighi’s *La Lauda per la Natività del Signore*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>REHEARSAL NUMBERS</th>
<th>PLOT SUMMARY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Angel announces and praises the birth of Jesus as the mixed Chorus describes the scene between Mary and her child in the manger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>6 - 12</td>
<td>The Pastor addresses the baby Jesus humbly as the male Chorus observes from afar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III</th>
<th>13 - 23</th>
<th>Mary addresses her son Jesus, praising His perfection and holiness; the mixed Chorus describes the scene again from a distance and praises His holiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>24 - 38</td>
<td>The mixed Chorus sings in jubilant praise of the Holy Son; Mary addresses the Chorus (assumed peasants and pastors) and urges them to worship Him and spread the word of His birth; the Angel re-enters and sings in praise of the Him; Mary reflects on her role as the mother of Jesus and thanks God for His gift; the Angel ends the piece, declaring that the Savior has finally been born</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each “section” is dominated by a particular part or group of parts, depending on the specific demands of the text. For example, the first section includes a Chorus and instrumental ensemble, but the Angel is the driving impetus of the section, and she also interacts with the Chorus and instrumental ensemble. The piece has little, if any, development. Sections are thematically unrelated, and the recapitulation of ideas is often only that: an exact or varied repetition of motives previously established in other sections or smaller parts within sections.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on a few sections (with the exception of the instrumentation and orchestration, which encompasses more than a single section), as some are more demonstrative of how Respighi works within the neoclassical framework than others. The Angel solo is a particular example of Respighi’s use of both Baroque-like motives and modes and how he manipulates modulations to achieve a sense of Impressionism while the
Pastor solo demonstrates how Respighi understands the Monteverdian arioso and how he incorporates Puccini-esque elements to create particular moods and tones.
I. Instrumentation and Orchestration

How does the instrumentation in the Lauda reconcile both pre-eighteenth century and Post-impressionistic techniques? For the instrumental ensemble of the Lauda, Respighi specifically asks for two flutes, an oboe, an English horn, two bassoons, a triangle, and a piano (four hands). According to Elsa Respighi, the composer believed that “music was always born for a specific instrument or group of instruments.” It seems likely, then, that Respighi would have chosen the instrumentation of the Lauda at a very early stage. Already the dominance of the wind section suggests a pastoral scene (an established practice even in Monteverdi’s day) which has been historically employed for Christmas stories.

However, the piano for four hands is a noticeable anomaly against the choir of winds. Tomasi argues that Lauda’s instrumental requirements, including the four-hands piano part, are sometimes deliberately anachronistic, and thus from the very beginning Respighi felt no interest in binding himself to the performative and compositional norms of Baroque style. He further contends that the use of the piano reflects a typically Respighian tendency to color his compositions along the lines of Impressionism. On a functional level it often doubles the instruments of voices, but it never assumes solo lines or much of an independent identity. By doubling the parts of the wind choir, the piano adds fullness and distinct colors to an otherwise conventional pastoral sound.

26 Tomasi, “La ‘Lauda’ per Siena,” 254.
The construction of the eight-piece instrumental ensemble (not including the vocalists) is similarly calculated; resembling a chamber group more than an orchestra, Respighi “strove for the utmost simplicity, stripping his music of all inessentials, reducing the orchestra to a minimum, and showing what could be achieved with the strictest economy of means.” The small-scale orchestra was a development of Impressionism that Respighi embraced eagerly. Debussy similarly strove for a more refined and limited assembly of instruments in his Prélude à ‘L’Après-midi d’un faune’ (1891-94) in order to achieve “imaginative re-creations of archaic pastoral melodies . . . to suggest the pastoral music of Greek antiquity”—goals not unlike those of Respighi.

For his orchestration, Respighi utilized the diversity of these instruments to create a large range of sounds, from the transparency of Baroque to the density of the late-Romantics. According to Manfred Bukofzer, Baroque orchestration was highly influenced by the practice of basso-continuo, and as a result, the orchestra was divided into “fundamental and ornamental instruments”: the former provided the harmonic stability while the latter improvised and embellished accordingly. This division was further reflected in the type of Baroque orchestration a composer chose to utilize.

Of the three types of Baroque orchestration (cumulative, continuo, and contrapuntal) that correspond to the three phases of Baroque (early, middle,
and high), the *Lauda*’s orchestration is mostly cumulative. Cumulative orchestration is defined by Bukofzer as “the almost unbelievable accumulation of fundamental and, to a lesser degree, also ornamental instruments” and was extremely common among composers during the early Baroque; however, no single musical line or instrument is dominant, there is not necessarily equality throughout the part-writing. In the *Lauda* this is well-illustrated in the Introduction of the piece in Section I:

**EXAMPLE I:**

**mm. 7-9 of the Introduction**

In this three-measure example we can see that the melody of the section is exchanged frequently between parts; because the instrumental entrances of the Introduction are staggered, the melody is usually reassigned to the appropriate incoming instrument. It is also clear that no single instrument maintains the melody for more than two measures.

Despite its faithfulness to the early Baroque “cumulative” framework, Respighi’s orchestration deviates considerably. The traditional basso-
continuo was a form of “musical shorthand” that “outlined a chordal accompaniment by a figured bass line, the realization of which was left to improvisation.” Thus rhythmic embellishments on the melody such as the third measure of Example I would not have been written and would have been improvised by the performer. Here Respighi disposes of the tradition of the *basso-continuo* by clearly delineating and writing out the variations on the melodies that the instruments should play.

Additionally in traditional cumulative orchestration the doubling of related instruments was not a common practice (except in France). Praetorius was adamant that composers should not double related instruments, as he believed successful cumulative orchestration sought to achieve “the greatest possible mixture of sonorities,” which could not be found in the doubling of instruments of the same type. Yet in the Introduction of the *Lauda* (in the second measure of Example I), the melody is played by both a flute (in the treble clef) and a bassoon (in the bass clef), two wind instruments; Respighi doubles related instruments consistently throughout the piece, not just the Introduction.

The doubling of related instruments seems to suggest that when Respighi doubled parts, he did so to achieve specific colors that could not be found within the framework of traditional cumulative orchestration. In fact this kind of doubling is not unlike that of Debussy in his own orchestrations. According to François Lesure and Roy Howat, “When Debussy doubles parts

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31 Ibid., 26.
32 Ibid., 381.
33 Ibid.
it is in order to create a particular colouring . . . he compared this kind of
collection to ‘various relationships which a single colour can produce’ in
painting.”34 It seems to suggest then that Respighi sought not only different
colors but subtle differences in shades of color.

34 François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, Claude," Grove Music Online,
II. Angel: Modes and Motives

The Angel solo in Section I is largely constructed of motive-based material that is cited frequently in both original form and in variations. In the second measure of the Introduction at the beginning of the Section I, we are introduced to the Motive 1 in 9/8 by the oboe:

EXAMPLE II: m. 2 of the Introduction

The motive is characterized by its dotted rhythms in 9/8 as it circles around the fifth degree scale of the E Mixolydian tonality. Respighi also offers a multitude of variations, both melodic and rhythmic, on the motive, such as in Example III (excerpted from the Flute line) and Example IV (excerpted from the English horn).

EXAMPLE III: m. 15 from Rehearsal 1

EXAMPLE IV: m. 10 from Rehearsal 1

In Example III the rhythm is elaborated into dotted eighth plus three sixteenth figures, increasing the sense of motion; the same applies for the grouping on the sixth beat of Example IV. Both variants of the motive have rhythmic patterns similar to those of many of Monteverdi’s more lively
madrigals, which sometimes feature dotted rhythms and running sixteenth notes.

The Angel solo (from Rehearsal 1 to Rehearsal 3) is also characterized by its use of modes. Though the solo begins in E Mixolydian, this section modulates frequently to other modes based on E, including E Phrygian and E Aeolian; only from the sixth measure before Rehearsal 3 does the solo begin to establish a regular harmonic progression based on an E minor tonality that modulates to F major in the measure before Rehearsal 3.

In Section I of the *Lauda* the motives provide the main impetus for the modal modulations. For example, in Example I, the shift from E Mixolydian to E Phrygian is brought upon by the motivic variation in the third measure by the oboe (see Example I, above.) Here we can see that on the very second note of the motive (the first sixteenth note of the first grouping on the first beat) the F# becomes an F natural; likewise, on the downbeat of the second grouping the C# becomes a C natural, and in the last note of the measure on the eighth note the original G# becomes a G natural. Respighi does likewise throughout the Angel solo for other modal modulations; for example, in the sixth measure before Rehearsal #2, the motivic variation (played by the woodwinds) sets off the modulation from E Phrygian to E Aeolian.

How are Respighi’s motives and modes both Baroque and modern? Like in the *Lauda*, during the Baroque the motive was the main catalyst for key changes. The motive introduced the essential notes that differentiated the previous key or tonality from the new one, maintaining continuity between the two keys. This can be witnessed, for example, in Bach’s high Baroque
Cantata No. 140 (“Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme”) in the fourth movement choral. With Example V, we see in the second and third measures below how the second motive (that help construct the choral’s main theme) were structured:

EXAMPLE V

These last two measures of Example V are characterized by running sixteenth notes that first descend and then ascend while simultaneously hovering around the tonic of the key, Eb major. There are few variations of this motive; in fact, the only variations are differentiated from the original by transposition, which we can see in Example VI:

EXAMPLE VI

Here the tenor sings a long quarter- and half-note line on the word “Hosianna!” against beginning of the second motive transposed down by a
minor third. Bach maintains a sense of continuity as the piece modulates from the original key and the new key by gradually altering the pitches in the motive, as opposed to changing all the crucial pitches on the same beat in the same chord. The effect is fluid, adding tonal color piece while simultaneously maintaining the momentum established by the running sixteenth notes.

In Respighi’s Angel the general momentum and fluidity within the aria are also maintained, but unlike in the Bach choral, the solo often lacks the seamless continuity from one mode to another, instead openly and suddenly “shifting” from one mode to the next. In Example VII, measures 7 through 9 (after Rehearsal 1), we can see in the third measure of the excerpt an abrupt modulation from E Mixolydian to the E Phrygian:

EXAMPLE VII

mm. 7 – 9 from Rehearsal 1
Immediately on the downbeat of the third measure two of the crucial pitches of the E Mixolydian tonality (C# and G#) are lowered by a half-step to C and G in the instrumental ensemble as well as in the Angel line, with the F# following closely behind in the successive sixteenth note of the downbeat by become an F.

These sort of “unforeseen” and abrupt modulations, however, have precedent in the works of Monteverdi. In his opera Orfeo (1607), the Act I chorus (“Lasciate i monti”) after the Ninfa’s solo provides an example of an abrupt modulation that is not driven by a motive nor an obvious succession of pivot chords:

[example on p. 27]
The chorus, originally in G major, sings tonal progression with a V-I cadence at the double bar line after the second measure of the excerpt. The voices then immediately resume, but this time in a new key, D minor. The D minor chord that immediately follows the G major cadence, however, is not diatonic within the G major tonality; thus there is no pivot chord that links the first key to the successive, rendering the modulation abrupt and “unprepared.”

Despite their history, Respighi’s jarring modulations are different from Monteverdi’s on several points. In the Angel’s solo of the Lauda they occur within a phrase, not before or after a cadence. Thus while Monteverdi’s modulations are not exactly foreseen, the cadence manages to provide a sense of closure that makes the abrupt modulation more palatable.

Additionally Monteverdi’s modulations are often from one key to another, not from one mode to another; Respighi’s modulations are in fact not tonal modulations in the conventional sense but rather variations on the same key that color the E tonality. This treatment of tonality can be traced to Impressionists like Debussy, who used contrasting modes to differentiate “diatonic stability versus chromatic instability” in pieces like La mer and Voiles.35 Lesure and Howat write that in Voiles Debussy uses “the outer whole-tone sections [that] surround a climactic pentatonic passage, which replaces the opening section’s notes C, D and E by the semitones in between (D♭ and E♭) leaving the other notes of the opening scale unaffected.”36

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
The use of motives or similarly thematic materials alongside modal modulations to explore the nuances of a key’s tonality also has precedent in Debussy and Fauré. For example, “[Debussy’s] L’isle joyeuse relates to this by contrasting various scales on A: major, whole-tone, Lydian, and a combination of Lydian and Mixolydian with sharpened fourth and flattened seventh, somewhat like an overtone series.”37 Likewise Respighi employed a similar technique with Mixolydian and Phrygian scales on E, enabling the listener to not only hear subtle differences in tonality but to also hear, perhaps to see, different perspectives of the same key.

37 Ibid.
III. Pastor Solo: Arioso and Chorus

Like in the Angel solo, the Pastor solo has a recurring motive that identifies and distinguishes it from other vocal parts.

EXAMPLE VII

\[ mm. 2-3 \text{ from Rehearsal 7} \]

The motive, which begins on the off-beat of the second beat, circles around the tonic of the key tonality, Bb. Respighi characterizes the \textit{fioritura} of the vocal line with off-beat emphases on dissonant notes of the given chords. Like in the example above, the Pastor sings over the D minor chord (played and hummed by the instrumental and choral ensemble), descending in crisp but legato eighth and sixteenth notes, occasionally tied to each other or embellished by grace notes or appoggiatura.

The tied eighth and sixteenth notes are especially important in contrast to the quick succession of descending sixteenth notes, as they emphasize the note and its relation to the chord in which it is played against. The most
notable of these tied notes, however, is the B♭₄ in the second-half of the second beat of the measure, held a sixteenth note into the third beat. The B♭ here is extremely dissonant over the sustained D minor chord, clashing by a half-step with the A in the chord.

Respighi’s Pastor solo is without question the most Monteverdian section in the *Lauda* in terms of derivative style and construction. According to Barrow, “the tenor solo imitates the *arioso* of Monteverdi, in which the simple syllabic style of recitative alternates with the flowery melismatic style of aria” and he cites ariosi from *L’incoronazione di Poppea* as examples of this. ³⁸

The Pastor’s *arioso* roots can be traced directly to Monteverdi’s own Pastor solo in his opera *Orfeo* (1907). For example, in the first measure of the Pastor’s solo in the Act I, Monteverdi’s Pastor sings a step-wise descending vocal line from D to the fourth below, A, in dotted eighth, sixteenth, and even thirty-second notes in common time over a D minor chord.

**EXAMPLE VIII**

Immediately after the third beat the Pastor sings two sixteenth notes on C, followed by a dotted sixteenth and a thirty-second note on Bb in the middle of the word “fortunato” (fortunate). Though the measure ends with the arrival at A, for a significant portion of the measure there is a deliberate dissonance with the consonant qualities of the D minor chord. This prolonged emphasis on the non-member notes (like C and Bb) of a D minor chord against a sustained (or, as it probably would have been, embellished) D minor chord itself creates tension and a desire for resolution that ultimately provides momentum into the next measures.

Despite the striking similarities between the two Pastor solos, Respighi’s arioso still strikes the ear as modern. The difference, however, is not found in the actual Pastor solo itself, but rather in the Chorus that supports it. For the unaccompanied Chorus during the Pastor solo on Rehearsal 7, Respighi asks the chorus members to sing sempre a bocca chiusa (always with a closed mouth)—in other words, a humming chorus. But the humming chorus is largely a product of the early twentieth century. Its history can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century when the Spanish composer Francisco Asenjo Barbieri used a humming chorus of women as a backdrop to a tenor solo in his zarzuela El secreto de una dama (1862).39

However, the coro a bocca chiusa and its popularity in modern compositions are derived largely from the efforts of an Italian composer who was an immediate predecessor to Respighi: the Verismo composer Giacomo

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Puccini. In his opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904), Puccini asks for a “coro a bocca chiusa” at the end of Act II as Butterfly waits for her love Pinkerton to return, with the chorus humming the theme from when Sharpless tried to tell Butterfly that Pinkerton no longer wanted her in his life anymore.40

By deliberately choosing a choir of wordless voices (as opposed to a choir of winds), Respighi not only adds a unique color to the haunting theme but also renders the situation even more sympathetic and tragic with this additional “human” element. Though Respighi’s humming chorus has less ominous overtones than Puccini’s, the *a capella* effect of the *coro a bocca chiusa* is equally sympathetic and “humanizing”: with only human voices and no instruments, the Pastor solo becomes less a display of vocal prowess and agility and more a humble yet ecstatic supplication to the Son of God.

Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated how Respighi utilizes the forms and techniques of Neoclassicalism as a means to explore musical Post-Impressionism in his cantata, *La Lauda per la Natività del Signore*. By including a piano for four hands among his instrumentation requirements, Respighi deliberately sought an instrumental palate that would evoke Impressionistic colors against the pre-eighteenth century idioms. His orchestration, which frequently featured the doubling of same-type instruments, reflected both the influence the Baroque *basso-continuo* as well as a desire to explore the aural colors that similar instruments would create when playing the exact same harmonic and melodic lines.

His solo sections also reflected an active interest in the variants and nuances of instrumental color and effect. In the Angel solo Respighi incorporated Baroque-like motives with Impressionistic-like modal modulations to explore “tonal variations” that had precedent in the works of Impressionist French composers like Debussy and Fauré. Meanwhile in the Pastor solo Respighi juxtaposed Monteverdian *arioso* with a Puccini-esque humming chorus to create not only a unique color but also to humanize the sometimes “unearthly” coloratura of the Pastor’s ornate vocal line.

Though Respighi had a profound knowledge and deft handling of pre-eighteenth century idioms, he actively chose to deviate from the established rules and utilize the idioms as a framework from which to explore Post-Impressionism in the *Lauda*. But this cantata is not reflective of all of Respighi’s compositional output; in fact, many of his more famous pieces,
such as the symphonic poem *Pines of Rome* (1923-5) and his songs for piano and voice like *Nebbie* (1921) and *Abbandono* (1909), are undeniably modern and directly influenced by the norms of Impressionism and Verismo.

But what the *Lauda* reflects more than anything is Respighi’s profound desire to find and develop a musical voice both unique and historically relevant during a time when avant-garde musical movements, local and abroad, questioned the very nature of music itself. By utilizing neoclassical idioms as a framework from which to explore the sonoric advances of musical Impressionism, Respighi redefined the boundaries of neoclassical style and revealed the untapped potential of antique musical developments from hundreds of years past. These creative decisions were by no means political or shocking, despite the way they challenged the norms of classical part-writing. Rather, they were personal, interior choices, and perhaps that is why his music remains so profoundly affecting in its own subtly subversive way.
References


