

PART III

**FROM IMAGE TO SOUND:
MUSIC ON WORKS OF VISUAL ART**

A Twentieth-Century Composer's Quattrocento Triptych

Musical Transmedializations of Visual Narratives

Among composers with a strong affinity for the visual arts, there are many who feel attracted towards multi-panel depictions of sacred or mythological content. They may choose to explore parallel representations of a single topic (Frank Martin's six musical images of the Passion of Christ), excerpts and holistic views of a visually rendered development (Bohuslav Martinů's three-movement composition on a chapel frescoed by Piero della Francesca), or compound arrangements created not by the original artist but by the composer (Ottorino Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano*).¹ I have decided to focus here on what I consider the most unusual case: that in which a transmedializing artist posits, through his compositional choices, a pictorial sequence from originally unconnected panels, then explores each panel as well as the inner relationship of the newly established sequence, and by doing so conveys to his listeners an unexpected overarching narrative.

Of the works listed above, Respighi's² is the only one reacting to depictions of mythological content. With this topic, the Italian composer stands in a rich tradition—one that found its most exuberant echo in the many musical responses to the paintings of Arnold Böcklin.³

¹The Swiss composer Frank Martin (1890-1974) wrote his *Polyptyche: six images de la passion du Christ* in 1973; the Czech Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) completed *The Frescos of Piero della Francesca* in 1955, while Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano* for chamber orchestra was written and premiered as early as 1927.

²For biographical sketches of the composer and his artist, and brief discussions of their aesthetics, please refer to the appendix: Respighi pp. 611-613, Botticelli pp. 588-589.

³Böcklin (1827-1901), a Swiss contemporary of the Symbolist poets who resurrected fauns and nymphs, inspired at least twenty compositions, all composed during the three decades between 1896 and 1925. His famous *Toteninsel* (Isle of the Dead) alone exists in eight musical transmedializations, of which the best known are those by the Swedish composer Andreas Hallén (1899), the Russian Serge Rakhmaninov (1907), and the German Max Reger (in *Vier Tondichtungen nach A. Böcklin*, 1913).

Respighi's Affinity to Botticelli

It was in the mid-1920s that the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi, until then known above all for his lush orchestral pictures glorifying the eternal city of Rome, first combined a new-found love for Gregorian chant with a continuing interest in programmatic representation. The resulting symphonic composition, *Vetrata di chiesa* (Church Windows, 1925) left Respighi with a desire to go further, and in 1927 he composed a work that blended even more convincingly his visual and his spiritual sensuality, the *Trittico botticelliano*. In many respects, *Vetrata di chiesa* is a precursor that paved the way for the more accomplished *Trittico botticelliano*. In the four movements of *Vetrata di chiesa* Respighi undertook musically to render imagined visual portrayals after the New Testament (The Flight to Egypt), the Old Testament (The Archangel Michael), and the hagiographies of medieval saints (The Morning Prayers of Saint Clare and Saint Gregory the Great); he was not yet attempting to transform extant works of art.

With *Trittico botticelliano*, Respighi took this blending of sources a step further while formalizing it into a symmetrical layout. He surrounded the New Testament vignette of the Adoration of the Magi with two depictions in which figures from the antique pantheon assume allegorical roles redefined in the context of Renaissance beliefs. The depictions in the three Botticelli works span a time frame from the mythological age of the Greco-Roman gods to the moment of the birth at Bethlehem—an embodiment, as it were, of the harmonization of ancient and Judeo-Christian thought in the sense Frances Yates sees it realized in Renaissance art.

The three Botticelli panels Respighi chose were not intended as components of any larger entity. While two of them originated as decorations for the same hall, the third owed its conception to entirely different circumstances. The much admired “*Adorazione dei Magi*” was the work with which the painter had initially attracted the attention and patronage of the powerful Medici family. Impressed by this masterpiece, the illustrious patrons of the arts then commissioned Botticelli to paint many works for their palaces. Reflecting their humanist philosophy,⁴ they preferred not biblical topics but mythological stories that allowed for

⁴In modern and more casual parlance, the term humanism is often used to describe an attitude centered in humans to the degree that excludes the divine and implies an agnostic world-view. In this and the following, I am employing the word in a Neoplatonic sense of Botticelli's contemporary Marsilio Ficino, according to whose theology human beings, originally divine, are aimed at once again becoming gods.

allegorical interpretations. Among these, the two famous paintings, *La primavera* (Spring) and *La nascita di Venere* (The Birth of Venus), came into being.⁵ Four and a half centuries later, Respighi decided musically to combine the two allegorical depictions with the biblical one into what he called his *Trittico botticelliano*.

Like the majority of artists in his time, Botticelli drew from a limited and well-known pool of sources when choosing the subject matter to be depicted. Besides occasional individual portraits, he painted scenes representing Old Testament stories, doctrinal images surrounding Christ's birth and passion, portrayals after early Christian legends, and allegories usually played out with the well-known characters of Greco-Roman mythology. It would have been very easy for the twentieth-century composer Respighi to combine for his triptych three biblical scenes or three mythological ones. Art historians have, in fact, made several suggestions for imaginary Botticellian "triptychs" involving *Spring* and *The Birth of Venus*. Arnolfo Ferruolo sees the two paintings in combination with *Mars and Venus* as "a circle of love and light,"⁶ while Umberto Baldini recognizes a tripartite sequence of *Spring*, *Pallas and the Centaur*, and *The Birth of Venus*.⁷ Conversely, the *Adoration* might have been combined with any other two of Botticelli's many New Testament images (*Annunciation*, *Madonna and Child*, *Pietà*) or, even more appropriately still, with one of his legendary scenes from early Christianity (*The Coronation of the Virgin* or *Madonna with John the Baptist*). Ottorino Respighi, however, chose differently.

What was it that, in Respighi's eyes, favored a combination not of any of the tripartite arrangements suggested by art historians like Ferruolo and Baldini, but of the two large Venus-centered canvasses with the (much smaller) *Adoration*? And in what way does Respighi's idiosyncratic grouping add to Botticelli's separate depictions an interpretive perspective that transcends the artist's individual messages? These two central questions will guide my reading of the paintings and the corresponding movements by Respighi.

⁵How independently even these two works were conceived can be seen from the fact that they are created on different surfaces: *La primavera* is painted on wood, while *La nascita di Venere* is done on canvas.

⁶According to Ferruolo, the pure light of *La nascita di Venere* is filtered in the trees of *La primavera*; also, love has its origin in *The Birth of Venus*, its climax in *Spring*, and finds its consummation in *Mars and Venus*. (See Arnolfo B. Ferruolo, "Botticelli's Mythologies, Ficino's 'de Amore', Poliziano's 'Stanze per la Giostra': Their Circle of Love," *The Art Bulletin* XXXVII (1955/1): 17-25.)

⁷See Umberto Baldini, *Primavera* (London: Sidwick and Jackson, 1984), pp. 88-89.

Botticelli's *Primavera*

In a study devoted to the phenomenon of ekphrasis, it is particularly exciting to discover that a work of visual art giving rise to a musical composition was itself inspired by a work of poetry. The pictorial design of Botticelli's *Primavera* is laid out in *Stanze per la Giostra di Giuliano* (stanzas for the great tournament gloriously won by Giuliano de' Medici), a long poem by Angelo Poliziano dated around 1475-1478. Poliziano, who was foremost in reviving antique narrations and weaving them into works worthy of a Neoplatonic framework, began writing this poem to celebrate the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Giuliano, whose romantic love to the famously beautiful Simonetta Vespucci was cut short by her tragic death at the age of 23, was later himself assassinated by conspirators, thus following his beloved to a very untimely death. Here is Julia Cartwright's prose summary of the poem's relevant passage.

Under a grove of orange-trees laden with golden fruit, encircled by a luxuriant growth of myrtle, the Queen of Love holds her Court. Tall of stature, and majestic in bearing, robed in draperies of white and gold, and carrying a red mantle on her arm, she advances to welcome the coming of Spring, a beauteous maiden who steps lightly over the grass, bearing a lapful of roses, which she scatters before her as she goes. Her fair hair is wreathed with blue cornflowers and daisies; her white robe is garlanded with long trails of fresh ivy and briar rose, and patterned over with flowers of every hue. Close on her footsteps follows the laughing nymph Flora, dropping rose-buds and anemones from her lips, as she flies from the ardent embrace of Zephyr, the blue-robed god who tries to seize her in his arms, exactly as described by Lorenzo in a passage of the "Selve d'Amore," which he has evidently borrowed from the Latin poet Lucretius. On the left, the Three Graces clad in white draperies of transparent gauze, dance with hands linked together and arms entwined, on the dewy lawn. Mercury, a stalwart youth wearing a winged helmet over his thick black locks and a red drapery round his strong limbs, goes before and scatters the clouds of Winter with the rod in his hands, all unconscious of the golden shaft which the little Cupid who hovers in the air above, is aiming at his heart.⁸

For Botticelli, the evocative portion in the work of Lorenzo de' Medici's court poet took the place of what in other cases would have been the patron's specifications. The artist's portrayal of the mythological figures is a visual reaction to a verbal representation of a scene—or the

⁸From Julia Cartwright, *Sandro Botticelli* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1903), pp. 31-32.



PLATE 16: Sandro Botticelli, *La Primavera* (Spring), Uffizi, Florence.

visualization of an imagined pictorial scene first composed in poetic language.

The setting in Botticelli's painting is a grove of orange trees. Intertwined branches rich with fruit fill the upper portion of the picture, while a meadow full of various flowers provides the counterbalance in the lower portion. Narrow openings between the tree trunks allow glimpses of bright blue sky. Almost exactly in the center, a few steps from the front margin of the painting and thus slightly raised, stands the figure of a young woman of gentle expression. A little cupid hovers above her in the air. On the horizontal plane, she is flanked by three figures on one side and four on the other; seen in three-dimensional space, she is somewhat removed from them all owing to her place further into the flowery meadow. The groups at the right and left are beautifully balanced. The three young women who form a circle with their linked hands correspond to only two women on the other side. These, however, are given more space as well as more pictorial weight, in the case of the one because of her pronounced carnal presence, in the case of the other because of her dress, which is generously adorned with flowers. Finally, at the extreme right and left we find two male figures, similarly wrapped in one large piece of silken cloth but otherwise very different from one another.

The identity of the mythological figures in *La primavera* has never been in dispute; they represent, from left to right, Mercury, the Three Graces, Venus (with the blindfolded, arrow-armed Cupid hovering above her head), Flora (goddess of flowers and spring), the earth nymph Chloris, and the west wind Zephyr. Among them, Venus and Mercury particularly received significant Neoplatonic interpretations. In 1478, a few years before the painting was created, Marsilio Ficino had announced the dual meaning to be associated with Venus. As he wrote to a young cousin of Lorenzo de' Medici whom he was tutoring, Venus represents Humanity; her soul and mind are Love and Charity. At about the same time Mercury, the messenger of the gods, came to be regarded as the patron of those who seek to penetrate the mysteries of the ancient world—the Hermetic philosophers, who were called after Mercury's Greek name, Hermes. Fittingly, he is seen here piercing some clouds with his staff.

Beyond such basics, however, the number of distinct interpretations of this painting, and the degree to which they differ in nuance if not in general gist, is truly intriguing. Here is a sampling of some of the allegorical readings offered in the literature on Botticelli:

- (1) Aby Warburg reads Botticelli's *Spring* as a visual interpretation of the above-mentioned poem by Angelo Poliziano. Zephyr pursues Chloris, possesses her and then marries her, granting her the power to turn whatever she touches into flowers. Next to her is the Hour of Spring (Flora = Chloris transformed by Zephyr), Venus at the center, the Three Graces, and Mercury. Warburg stresses the aspect of love, portrayed as both direct, physical, and uncomplicated (in the Zephyr-Chloris-Flora group) and indirect, sublime, and tragically separated (in the likeness Venus = Simonetta Vespucci and Mercury = Giuliano de' Medici). Warburg even allows for the possibility that one layer of the subject matter depicted was Simonetta's arrival in the next world.⁹
- (2) Erwin Panofsky adds an interesting facet for the significance of Mercury by observing that the god turns his back not only to the Three Graces next to him, but also to all other figures in the painting, showing scorn for everything the others have to offer: beauty, love, spring. To Panofsky, Mercury is the personification of Reason. As he lifts his staff to part the clouds that shut out the light from above, Reason chases the mist that obscures the soul's lower faculties.¹⁰
- (3) In 1945, Ernst Gombrich offers a more philosophical interpretation. Venus in the center of Botticelli's *Primavera*, he believes, represents *humanitas*, the humanist ideal that governed the thinking at the Medici court. The Three

⁹Aby Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli: "Geburt der Venus" und "Frühling"* (Hamburg and Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1893), pp. 1-20, 40-45. A few years after Warburg, Emil Jacobsen expands on the latter connotation. Zephyr is now seen as the angel of death who carries Simonetta to the underworld. (This reading was significantly influenced by the greenish coloring of Zephyr before the recent restoration, which shows the color as a luminous blue. Jacobsen argues that the green body and complexion suggest a state of decomposition associated with the angel of death.) In this scenario, the flower-covered Flora is Proserpina, the goddess of the Elysian fields, while Mercury stands for Psychopompus, the guide who accompanies the souls of the dead towards the netherworld. See Emil Jacobsen, "Allegoria della Primavera di Sandro Botticelli," in *Archivio Storico dell'Arte* (1897), pp. 321-340, and "Mercur als Psychopompus: Kleiner Nachtrag zu Botticellis Frühling," in *Preussisches Jahrbuch* 102, (10-12/1900), pp. 141-143. Edgar Wind, writing in 1958, offers yet another allegorical translation in a similar vein. For him, Venus is the soul, Cupid the soul's energy. The group to the right of the center represents Passion (Zephyr) transforming the fleeing Chastity (Chloris) into Beauty (Flora). Wind interprets the Three Graces as Chastity, Beauty, and Volition, thus both as an incarnation of Ficino's trinity and as an almost symmetrical correspondence to the figures on the right. Mercury, finally, is seen as leading the Graces; at the same time, however, he is also Psychopompus, guiding the soul (Venus). Mercury and Zephyr are thus complementary forces at the two rims of the painting: with Mercury we leave the world to contemplate eternity, with Zephyr we re-enter it. These, says Wind, are the two forces of love, of which Venus is the guardian and Cupid the agent. That which descends into the world as a breath of passion returns to heaven as a spirit of contemplation. See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (2nd edition New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 119-126.

¹⁰Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 191-202.

Graces are to be understood as embodiments of Liberty, Magnanimity, and Splendor. Together with Mercury (Reason), they represent the spiritual sphere, whereas the three characters on the opposite side of Venus embody the instinctual realm (from Zephyr as Passionate Love to Flora as Beauty).¹¹

- (4) Umberto Baldini believes that “the most likely explanation,” which he finds borne out by contemporary writings and modern research, is that “*Primavera* offers a synthesis of Neoplatonic doctrine. Zephyr, personifying human love and the life-giving power of nature, seizes Chloris, who is transformed into Flora. Venus, with the aid of Eros/Cupid, both kindles this carnal love and guides it, through a process of intellectual sublimation (the Graces), toward the goal of contemplation (Mercury).” Or, phrased differently, “Love, impelled to earth by Passion, is changed to beauty; Love is transmuted, or converted, to a higher plane in the dance of the Three Graces (Chastity, between Beauty and Pleasure, turns her back on worldly things); Love, guided by Mercury, returns to the highest, ideal sphere.”¹²
- (5) Mirella Levi d’Ancona¹³ in her interpretation focuses on the different levels of Love. She suggests that at the right, Zephyr has seduced Chloris; this is *Amor ferinus*, the lowest form of love, which shows man still resembling a beast. In the group to the left, the central of the Three Graces stands for *Amor humanus*. Finally, Mercury is turning his back to all that belongs to the earth, parting the clouds of ignorance with his staff to achieve divinity. As such, he

¹¹Ernst H. Gombrich, “Botticelli’s Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 7-60; also *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (2nd ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1978). Basing his reading on a letter of 1481 in which Marsilio Ficino explained to the Medici the significance of the Three Graces as the three interchangeable planets Mercury Jove, Phoebe Apollo (sun) and Venus, Gombrich concludes that this explication was intended as a tool of Neoplatonic education.

¹²Umberto Baldini, *Primavera*, pp. 90-92.

¹³Mirella Levi d’Ancona, *Botticelli’s Primavera: A Botanical Interpretation Including Astrology, Alchemy, and the Medici* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1983), and *Due quadri del Botticelli eseguiti per nascite in casa Medici: Nuova interpretazione della Primavera e della Nascita di Venere* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1992). Levi d’Ancona has been vital in stimulating discussion of political subtexts on the basis of the choice of flowers depicted. The fact that female names like Fioretta, Margarita, and many others are closely related to the names for some of the species that Botticelli brought to blossom on garments and around the feet of the individuals has spawned a wealth of hypotheses, in her own publications and many others inspired by her. Beyond the allusion in the botanical or popular names themselves, further clues are discovered in traditional associations and symbolism connected with these flowers, the months in which they bloom, etc. The variables potentially determined by this approach span from the questions which member of the Medici family commissioned the painting and when and for which occasion it was executed, all the way to the stories the painting may suggest regarding the patron’s secret or overt love interests or political ambitions.

represents *Amor divinus*. At the same time (and the coherence of the two interpretations is not entirely obvious to me), he is seen as Paris, judging who among the Three Graces is the most beautiful.¹⁴

The wealth of allegorical interpretations of the panel is dazzling. And yet, two focal ideas recur in various guises, the reading of the painting as a representation of Love (Warburg, Levi d'Ancona, Baldini) and as the ideal of a development from the instinctual to the spiritual realm, as a visual representation of Neoplatonic beliefs (Gombrich, Panofsky).

It seems, then, almost brazen to add another facet. Yet in the context of Respighi's triptych, where Venus in her central place will necessarily be compared with the Madonna who holds the corresponding place in *L'adorazione dei Magi*, a small detail seems significant to me. Immediately behind Venus, the otherwise fairly thick orange grove opens into a clearing. Instead of the trunks that form the background to all other figures, Venus is set against a backdrop of dark green foliage that follows the outlines of her head and upper body—in a manner reminiscent of some backdrops seen in thirteenth-century depictions of the Madonna, where the circular halo extends into a larger shadow around the person whose exalted presence is thus underscored. The fact that this halo is naturally created, as it were, and not a visual manifestation of supernatural origin, ties in beautifully with the specific significance given Venus in this painting. The embodiment of Love and idealistic *humanitas* is sanctified by nature.

Respighi's "Primavera"

The first movement of Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano*, marked *Allegro vivace*, is in E major. For the initial twelve measures we hear nothing but a high-pitched E-major triad. Extensive trills and subsequent ornamental figures around the fifth and third (B²/G#²) are complemented

¹⁴Finally, one interpretation that stands apart from all others should be mentioned just for completeness's sake. Charles Dempsey, writing about Botticelli's *Spring* in two studies, interprets the painting as a rustic calendar. This and similar readings of the painting are based on Poliziano's poem of Latin country life, *Rusticus*. The figures are considered to represent the months of agricultural activity (thus omitting winter), with Zephyr as February, Chloris as March, Flora as April, Venus as May, the Three Graces as June, July, and August, and Mercury as September. See Charles Dempsey, "'Mercurius Ver': The Sources of Botticelli's 'Primavera,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (1968): 251-273, and "Botticelli's Three Graces," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971): 326-330.

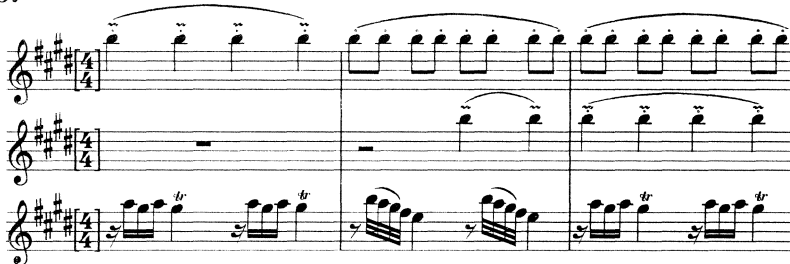
from m. 9 onwards by the same figurations on the E in the same register. At the same time, the trills are joined by a triple, fanfare-like ascending-fifth call in horn and piano. Both reviewers writing after the first performance and scholars commenting with the hindsight of decades have associated this beginning with sensual depictions of spring; they speak of “evocations of a forest animated with spring zephyrs”¹⁵ or believe to hear “truly spring-like, blossoming trills and twittering.”¹⁶ The iambic fanfares of the horn, later taken up by the trumpet, were easily taken to suggest hunting calls, further components of a naturalistic outdoor scene.

More significant in my eyes than the onomatopoeic implications of these components is the fact that the trills and figurations around the high B and G \sharp are strongly reminiscent of another musical composition entitled *Spring*: the first of Antonio Vivaldi’s four violin concertos collectively known as *Le quattro stagioni*. In the opening movement of Vivaldi’s op. 8,

a.



b.



EXAMPLE 31: Spring in Respighi and Vivaldi

Ottorino Respighi, “La primavera” (*Trittico botticelliano*, mvt. I), mm. 1-4
 Antonio Vivaldi, *La primavera* (*Le quattro stagioni*, concerto 1), mvt. I, mm. 14-16

¹⁵S. Musella, review of *Trittico botticelliano* in the *Bollettino bibliografico* of Milan, reprinted in *Musica d’oggi* (1928), p. 370.

¹⁶J.C.G. Waterhouse, *The Emergence of Modern Italian Music up to 1940*; Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1968, p. 567. Quoted in Piovano, “Metodologie ...,” p. 214.

no. 1, *La primavera*, the initial ritornello is followed, in the first exposed appearance of the solo violin, by a chain of trills on the same B², supported by a soloistically employed member of the second violins with figurations on and around G[♯] (ex. 31).¹⁷

Trills, of course, play a significant role all through Vivaldi's *Primavera*, and insofar as their sound evokes gentle winds and groves filled with birds happily chirping in a greeting of the warm season, the device is simply programmatic. The fact, however, that the twentieth-century composer very nearly quotes these features (along with the general mood) from the work his compatriot wrote about two hundred years earlier, and that he does so in the same key and register, constitutes a step from one paradigm to another: from Vivaldi's musical depiction of spring as a phenomenon of nature to Respighi's musical commentary on another work of art.¹⁸

Before I unravel further connections and references hidden in Respighi's composition, readers may wish to have a brief overview of how the movement is structured.

- The section I describe as "E major with trills and fanfares" (which I will call [a]; see pp. 1-2 in the Ricordi miniature score, ending before rehearsal number 1) concludes with an inverted G[♯]-major chord, a—deceptive, as it turns out—announcement of a turn to the relative minor, C[♯].
- After a very brief caesura and a sudden hush from *ff* to *mf* follows, still in E major and lavishly accompanied by trills and tremoli on the notes of the E-major triad, a bassoon melody ([b], RN 1; see ex. 32). This melody is subsequently imitated in stretto by oboe and horn. An ascending run in the violins leads to a new section.

¹⁷Cf. Antonio Vivaldi, *Le quattro stagioni: No. 1 "La primavera,"* movement I (*Allegro*), mm. 13-16 with Ottorino Respighi, *Trittico botticelliano*, movement I (*Allegro vivace*), mm. 1-12, further developed and enriched in mm. 13-25.

¹⁸Respighi's recourse in this work to artistic expressions of earlier centuries is by no means a single occurrence. His three suites, *Antiche arie e danze per il liuto*, are based on the transcriptions of Oscar Chilesotti, one of the pioneers of what Piovano calls "the nascent Italian historical musicology." (Attilio Piovano, "Metodologie compositive ...," p. 213.) In that work, Respighi explored musical and other artistic expressions of the centuries from the late Middle Ages to the Italian Baroque. His thorough acquaintance with the work of Botticelli and other artists of the Italian Renaissance may originate from the same context.



EXAMPLE 32: *Trittico botticelliano*, “La primavera,” bassoon motif [b]

- Still in the same key but now in six-eight time, the flutes, clarinets, and violins in unison present a two-bar component [c₁], which receives a two-bar answer [c₂] in a unison of the remaining winds and strings. The combination is repeated and then rounded off with a four-bar extension in the first instrumental group (RN 2, see ex. 33). The accompaniment consists of mordent-topped triads. Very gradually, these free themselves from the anchoring in repetitions of the E-major chord.



EXAMPLE 33: *Trittico botticelliano*, “La primavera,” motif [c], the troubadour song “A l’entradade del tens clar”

- Rhythmically related and supported by the same accompaniment pattern in a new timbral setting, the flutes, clarinets, celli, and piano then present a bridge to a component that will play a major role in the movement ([d], beginning five measures after RN 3; see ex. 34). Stretto entries following one another at a distance of at first two bars, then every bar, involve all instrumental groups.



EXAMPLE 34: *Trittico botticelliano*, “La primavera,” motif [d]

- The conclusion of this section is marked by a conspicuous motif in the low register. A unison formed by the piano’s bass in conjunction with violoncelli and double basses marks the transition from the so far uncontested E major to a new key. Having set the

modally tinted F major, the distinction established between them by tempo and meter is carried further into the phrase structure. The *Allegretto* consists of two three-bar phrases, each ending in a *fermata*, each in strictly homophonic texture, distinguished only in that the second phrase concludes on a D-minor chord. The *Vivo* section, by contrast, comprises three *fermata*-crowned phrases. The first is homophonic and repeats the turn to D minor; the central phrase and, to a lesser degree, the beginning of the third phrase show some polyphonic treatment before returning to the homorhythmic texture. (I refer to the material of the *Allegretto* segment as [f] and to that of the *Vivo* segment as [g]; see ex. 36.)

ob/clar/bsn

EXAMPLE 36: *Trittico botticelliano*, “La primavera,”
motifs [f] (*Allegretto*) and [g] (*Vivo*)

The alternating sections of this contrast within the movement are then developed. The first return of the *Allegretto* (at RN 6) appears as a varied repetition of its model: voices are exchanged, the woodwind trio is reinforced by strings and supported by a forth, pedal-note voice, and the phrase endings are ornamented with ascending scales in the celesta and violin trills under the *fermatas*. (The trills pick up the pitches heard in the material-[a]-quoting conclusion of the preceding section, thus creating yet another link to the “spring” coloring and Vivaldi reference of the movement’s beginning.) The return of the *Vivo* segment is even more strongly varied in color. The original trio register is split—flute and oboe play an octave higher than oboe and clarinet did before, celli and basses an octave lower than the earlier bassoon—and filled in with arpeggiating piano and harp, colored with additional celesta. Finally, in the second return of the *Allegro*, the *fermatas* of each phrase are substituted by imitating extensions.

- This concludes the presentation of new material. The remainder of the movement brings a retransition with [f] and [a] (RN 7), a juxtaposition of [a] and [b] (RN 8), a full-orchestra variation of [f] and [g], now in E major and *ff* (this begins eight measures

before RN 9 and ends with a powerful unison triplet and full-chord ritard), a free reminiscence of [c] material (RN 10 and 11), a polymetric juxtaposition of [a] and [f]/[g] (RN 12), and a closing segment that picks up and expands the movement's initial eight measures (RN 13).

Among several cadences with modal flavor in the course of the movement, the final turn towards harmonic closure is perhaps the most striking. Respighi approaches the tonic, under a high dominant pedal B, from the major triad on the flattened seventh degree, thus concluding his E-major composition with a Mixolydian cadence.

In an effort to explore the implications hidden in some of the motifs, one can take several very different approaches. One option of reading, which has a certain plausibility although I do not ultimately find it entirely persuasive, matches "figures" in Respighi's composition with figures in Botticelli's canvas. Were one to follow the various Botticelli scholars and concentrate above all on the identification and allegorical meaning of the characters depicted in *La primavera*, one might be tempted to perceive the seven components of the musical movement in relation to the seven components of the painting. What is presented in the music as one "color" ([a]) framing and repeatedly shining through six motifs ([b] to [g]) would then correspond in the painting to the setting (the orange grove and the shrubs and flowers around it) serving as a backdrop to six figures or groups (Zephyr, Chloris, Flora, Venus, the Graces, and Mercury). One could associate the two low-register motifs with the two male figures—perhaps the playful bassoon melody [b] with Zephyr and the commanding bass ascent [e] with Mercury—and find ways to argue for convincing connections between the other four musical components and the four female figures in the painting. Botticelli's curve-shaped pictorial layout with its near-symmetry (in which Zephyr/Chloris/Flora counterbalance, but do not entirely correspond with, the three Graces and Mercury) could then be matched with the curve-shaped structure and near-symmetry Respighi creates (in which the corresponding [a] material at the beginning and end in conjunction with the central *Allegretto/Vivo* contrast suggest a correspondence that is not entirely fulfilled in the intermittent sections, since RNs 8-12 are neither a mirror nor a recapitulation of RNs 1-4).

Without wanting to dismiss out of hand the basic validity of such a pairing of musical and visual elements, I would like to argue in favor of a more subtle reading, one that I find more intriguing insofar as it explicitly

addresses the question of transmedialization. The question how a musical composition can communicate its indebtedness to a work of visual art (beyond the reference-creating title) underlies, of course, all studies in this chapter. It is, however, particularly pertinent in the case of a title like “Primavera,” which is likely to draw the beholder’s attention to the season of spring and its natural phenomena and thus away from allegorical and philosophical aspects of a primary artistic representation. How can a composer, using musical means alone, imply that this music refers to a painting and its particulars—among them the bucolic atmosphere with the array of human figures—and the suggestion of an allegorical subtext?

When listening to the *Trittico botticelliano* one is inevitably struck by the extent of “color” Respighi employs. Found similarly in his programmatic tone paintings (the “Roman metatriptych”), this feature spells out very clearly that this music is not intended to narrate but to depict. Onomatopoeic devices such as the fanfare-like “hunting calls” are ultimately less striking than the remarkable consistency of musically suggested sparkles and a brightness throughout the composition. Trills, mordents, acciaccaturas, tremolos, and arpeggios seem to form a layer of their own. Alternating or in various combinations, these features pervade the entire movement; only the very first presentation of the contrasting *Allegretto/Vivo* material is momentarily devoid of any of these flourishes. Another kind of musical “hue” is created through the use of timbre, so consistent that the special shades seem worth listing here:

before RN1	piano (tremoli)
RN 1	bells, harp, and piano (tremoli and background sound cushion)
RN 2	celesta, harp, and piano (background)
RN 3	celesta, harp, piano (background), partially tinted with violin harmonics
RN 4	bells and harp used melodically (plus trumpet figures accompanying)
RN 5	woodwind trio
RN 6	celesta, harp, and piano (shading melodic material)
RN 8	celesta and piano (independent polyphonic layer)
RN 9	celesta, harp, and piano (shading melodic material)
RN 10	piano, intermittently plus celesta and harp (shading)
RN 11	celesta, harp, and piano (each shading different components)
RN 12	piano (tremoli), piano and harp (shading melodic components)

Thus only the very beginning, the very end, and the retransition in RN 7 are exempt from the timbral “painting”; but then these are sections lavishly ornamented by extended trills.

If we can, then, accept it as established that this music explicitly emphasizes colors over narrative, the next question will ask after the subject matter and style of the painting referred to. By taking his background material [a] almost literally from Vivaldi's *Primavera*, Respighi creates, for any typical member of a classical-music audience, an immediate allusion to the title wording and the spring-time atmosphere suggested in the famous violin concerto. Moreover, the hunting-call component introduced as a secondary voice and even more perhaps the bassoon motif [b] provide the perceptive listener with further clues regarding the atmosphere and general style of presentation. The bassoon motif is intriguing both in itself and with regard to its musical surroundings. The melody with its simple phrase structure, characteristic rhythm, and easily hummable tune suggests a popular song; Attilio Piovano stresses with regard to this motif that “it is impossible to know whether it was really composed by Respighi or whether we are dealing with a citation.”¹⁹ The fact that this sturdy motif, with its bucolic flavor and its self-assured volume (it is marked *f*), is set against a background of continuing string trills in *p*, high-register tremoli of harp and piano, and bell strokes, has prompted the Respighi scholar to describe it as “soaked in fairy-tale ingenuity.” The composer, Piovano believes, “created a dream-forlorn mood which makes the robust entry of the bassoon with its staccati and dotted rhythms stand out even more.”²⁰ Although Piovano does not explicitly attempt to relate his musical observations to the Botticelli painting, his wording is very evocative in the direction of one of the aspects of musical transmedialization. The allusion to popular tunes, the bucolic and slightly robust character, and the “fairy-tale” mood seem beautifully suited to suggest to the imaginative listener that the “painting” shows a rural scene, with figures that, like those in fairy tales, are known to all yet somewhat mythically removed from real life.

The next innuendo Respighi integrates into his composition is highly significant but may well demand more knowledge than most twentieth-

¹⁹Attilio Piovano, “Metodologie compositive e principali valenze stilistiche del ‘Trittico botticelliano’ di Ottorino Respighi,” in David Bryant, ed., *Il novecento musicale Italiano: tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1988) p. 216. All translations from Piovano's Italian are mine.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.

century listeners are likely to bring to a performance of their contemporaries. Motif [c], set apart in that its entry is emphasized by means of a change of meter, is a literal quotation of one of the most famous troubadour songs, a tune sung to the words “A l’entrade del tens clar.”²¹ As I see it, this quotation adds two facets to the given context. On the one hand, the text itself, which translates as “At the entry of fair weather,” identifies the song as a hymn to spring and thus further endorses the thematic designation set up by means of the basic Vivaldi reference. The celebratory character of this hymn to the April Queen is substantiated in the response (“antistrophe”). Originally sung to the words “E-y-a, E-y-a,” its role was not to add referential meaning but to affirm the joy felt by all who greeted the advent of the balmy season. The composer’s coloring is so extraordinary that it successfully directs our attention towards the “mood” and away from the search for further “message.”²² Furthermore, Respighi has placed this motif in harmonic surroundings of triads moving back and forth in parallel shifts. He thus manages to suggest a modal (archaicizing) context without entirely abandoning the underlying tonal mooring.

Finally, for those who do not merely associate the right words with the tune but also recognize it for its genre, the link with the troubadours adds a crucial interpretive element: that of ideal love. One is reminded of the interpretations given Botticelli’s *Primavera* by many of its scholars (Aby Warburg, Edgar Wind, Umberto Baldini, and Mirella Levi d’Ancona, among those I have mentioned), all of whom read the painting as expressing various aspects of the evolution from lower to higher forms of love. In the music, the suggestion of this transmutation towards a higher plane can again be traced in the choice of timbre. The refrain of the troubadour song (heard at Respighi’s RN 3) is the only passage in the movement that is colored, in both sections of the violins, by harmonics. It is as if the

²¹The source manuscript that contains this tune is the so-called *Chansonnier de St. Germain des Près*. Respighi’s reading corresponds with the modern transcription by Friedrich Gennrich, who includes it as no. 244 in his renowned treatise, *Der musikalische Nachlaß der Troubadours* (Darmstadt: [s.n.], 1958-1965). For further comments see also Piovano, “Metodologie compositiva ...,” p. 217, especially footnote 22.

²²While the strophe is scored simply, sounding in a unison of flute, clarinet, and violins in the very high register, the antistrophe is distinguished by a variety of different timbral shades. Oboe and bassoon presenting their octave parallel in *ff* are backed up with horn and trumpet creating the unique sound of *sordino*-dampened *ff*, and by strings among which the bowed violas and celli sound before the backdrop of *pizzicato* chords in the violins.

composer had wanted to add another, more literal marker to point to the “elevated” nature of the love to which he alludes here.

A final cue for a convincing ekphrastic relationship between Respighi's musical movement and Botticelli's painting is given in the conspicuous central *Allegretto/Vivo* sections with their multiple tempos, meters, irregular phrase structure, and simple, quasi-modal harmony. Both motifs [f] and [g] are strongly reminiscent of Renaissance dance tunes; in fact, Piovano believes that Respighi may here be citing a genuine Renaissance composition, although he does not identify it and I have not been able to find it either. There can be no doubt that the thematic material in the two contrasting sections possesses all the characteristic features found in music played during Botticelli's time at North Italian courts like that of the Medici in Florence. The transparency of the texture and the special timbre created by the woodwind trio are in themselves strongly evocative of instrumentation heard in those settings. Furthermore, the complex interrelationship of tempi and metrical units, manifest both within the refrain section as a continual hemiolic alternation²³ and in the transition to and from the alternating section,²⁴ presents another typical feature.

With regard to possible sources for the melodic contour and chordal setting, Gustave Reese's renowned study of Renaissance music points us to the Italian *frottola*, a late-15th-century form of secular, courtly music favored particularly in northern Italy. “The melodic line of the typical *frottola* has a small range and many repeated notes,” Reese observes. “The writing is normally chordal.”²⁵ What is more, among the five most popular opening patterns listed by Reese for the *frottola* are the two found in Respighi's “Primavera”:²⁶



this pattern, cast as an alternation of six-four and three-two time, compares with the incipit of Respighi's *Allegretto*;
this pattern, in simple duple time, is heard at the beginning of Respighi's *Vivo*.

²³Each phrase in the *Allegretto* consists of one six-four measure which is followed by one in three-two time and rounded off by a neutral bar with a single, fermata-prolonged dotted whole-note.

²⁴Respighi's tempo marking of dotted half-note = 96 for the *Allegretto* and half-note = 144 for the *Vivo* result in the concealed one-to-one proportion (half-note = half-note) so typical of Renaissance music.

²⁵Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (London: Dent, 1954), p. 159.

²⁶See Reese, *Music in the Renaissance*, p. 160.

To sum up, the seven components of thematic material and the layout of symmetry and hidden dissymmetry in Respighi's "Primavera" movement may be read, on the structural level, as alluding to the details and structure of Botticelli's depiction. Perhaps more importantly, the details of the composition embody features and components that refer to the painterly mode of depiction, to Renaissance style,²⁷ to bucolic and/or forest-related scenery, to "spring" (in the Vivaldi quotation as well as in the tune whose text is known as a praise of the advent of spring), and to ideal love (through the genre of the troubadour song). Whether or not we follow Piovano's lead that certain elements of the accompaniment suggest a fairy-tale or mythic coloring, this music is successful in conveying its subject matter: a painting of Renaissance style portraying graceful dance and bucolic playfulness in a representation of ideal love.

Botticelli's *Adorazione dei Magi*

To appreciate fully the center piece of Respighi's "triptych," it helps to compare the message of that version of Botticelli's *L'adorazione dei Magi* which is now in the Uffizi with a few of the other realizations of the theme he painted throughout his life.²⁸ As Julia Cartwright observes,

²⁷Respighi, preparing his composition with readings about Botticelli and his period, no doubt spent some time studying Angelo Poliziano, the humanist at Lorenzo de' Medici's court on whose poems the two paintings are based. As Claude Palisca writes in *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), Poliziano was, like his fellow Neoplatonists Vittorino da Feltre, Marsilio Ficino, and Giorgio Valla, deeply interested in music. Reviving views expressed in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* as well as in Aristotle's *Politics*, these quattrocento philosophers believed that music has power over human feelings and morals. Such power, they held, was the stronger the more music was kept "natural" and free from the artificiality of the "unorderly" polyphony rampant in Flemish and French Renaissance forms. Palisca (pp. 15-16) concludes that "the crusade against scholasticism has its counterpart in the campaign against abstract polyphony."

²⁸Among the famous depictions of the scene are, in approximate chronological order, the panel in London's National Gallery (estimated to have been painted shortly after 1470, possibly in collaboration with Filippino); the tondo in the same collection, probably finished about 1474; the Uffizi *Adorazione*, painted most probably in 1476-77; and the long panel now in the National Gallery in Washington, dating from around 1481-82. (For more details and arguments on dating, see Roberto Salvini, *All the Paintings of Botticelli*, 3 volumes). In addition, Wilhelm von Bode (*Sandro Botticelli* [Berlin: Propyläen, 1921], pp. 48-50) mentions an *Adoration of the Magi* owned by the gallery of the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia, which he interprets as a preparatory study for the Uffizi version.

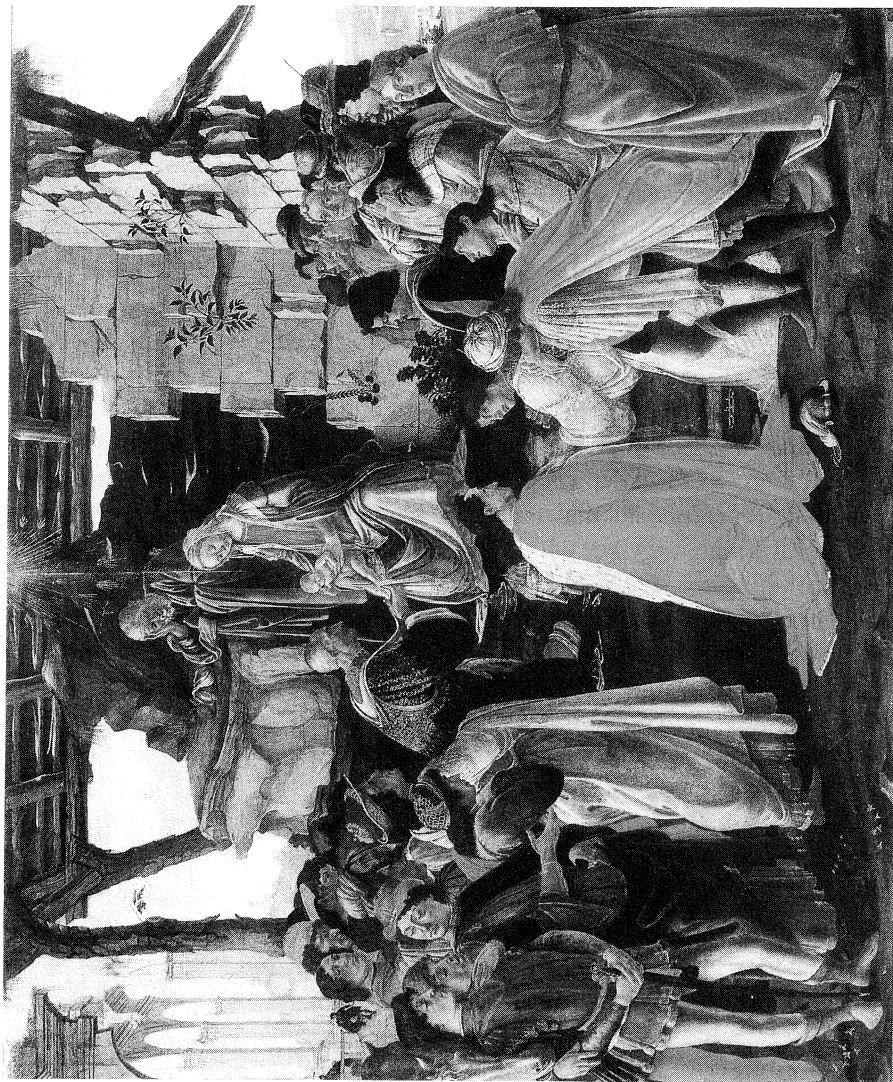


PLATE 17: Sandro Botticelli, *L'adorazione dei Magi* (The Adoration of the Magi), Uffizi, Florence.

Sometimes he places the scene in a rocky wilderness, sometimes in the heart of a pine-forest. In some instances he introduces Roman arches and monuments or wide landscapes with mountains and sea-shore. In the Uffizi altarpiece the legend of the Three Kings becomes an apotheosis of the house of Medici; in a later work it is used as an opportunity for celebrating Savonarola's dream of the New Jerusalem on earth. Last of all, it is transformed into a mystic vision of the Celestial Country, where bright-hued seraphs dance and sing on the clouds of heaven, and angels welcome martyred saints to their embraces.²⁸

The version Respighi chose is the one for which Botticelli became famous. Painted for an eccentric Florentine merchant, Gasparre dal Lama, it was originally placed on an altar in a chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Today it is exhibited—with *La primavera* and *La nascita di Venere* among others—in the Botticelli room in Florence's most distinguished museum.

While Botticelli's teacher Fra Filippo Lippi when painting the Adoration had focused on an interpretation of the scene as a popular festival, Sandro depicts a solemn occasion in which noblemen express their reverence to the new-born king. The arrangement consists of the child which, together with Mary and Joseph, is raised above the assembled worshippers. The Madonna is the slender child-woman so characteristic for the era, holding an infant that, also typical for this time, is unproportionately small. Joseph, leaning his head on the hand holding his staff, appears as an affable older *pater familias*. The scene is set in a shabby shed. Scarcely covered by a wooden roof, the structure leans, to the right, against the remnants of an ancient wall and, in the background, against a rock. On both sides of this dilapidated abode there is a view out over the surrounding landscape. On the left we see the ruins of once grandiose arches.

The assembly of noblemen is elegantly attired. Three of the younger men towards the left stand out owing to their court apparel; the others appear in travel gear. Most of the men cluster in two groups to both sides of a few steps that lead up to the holy family. The middle foreground is taken up by the three Magi, the oldest of whom is approaching the child with presents. In this illustrious company there is, it seems, no room for ox and ass, the customary props of the adoration scene at Bethlehem. In their stead we see a proud peacock spreading its splendid tail over the rough-hewn wall on the upper right.

²⁸Julia Cartwright, *Sandro Botticelli*, pp. 24-25.

Interpretations have focused either on comparing this representation of the well-known scene with other depictions (by the same or another artist), or on investigating the choice of pictorial details and reading them as expressive of Botticelli's faith and philosophy in general. As the fifteenth-century art critic Vasari was the first to notice, the depiction celebrates not so much a religiously momentous, singular event, but the beauty and nobility of human beings, their splendid individual characterization, their distinguished expressions. Lorenzo de' Medici—himself a gifted poet and learned man of letters—agreed with the philosophers, historians, and scholars of the flourishing humanism who regarded art as essential to the celebration of the individual. "Man's response is to *humanitas* alone," Marsilio Ficino wrote to his pupil, Lorenzo's young cousin. The fact that Botticelli, with this *Adorazione dei Magi* as his entry ticket, was welcomed into the inner circle around the erudite and idealistic Florentine ruler shows that his depiction of *humanitas* in this panel must have matched that group's view of enlightened humanism.

The success this painting had in Florentine society provided the basis for much of what Botticelli created during subsequent years. The admission to the circle around "the Magnificent" provided the artist with specific guidance for his further development. Both Ficino, whose thoughts were based on Plato and the Epicureans, and the Neoplatonic philosopher, Pico della Mirandola, emphasized the dignity of man as the highest good. The translations of the mythological tales from Greek and Latin into Italian by Lorenzo's court poet, Angelo Poliziano, made available to the artists of his time a treasure trove of stories whose characters were waiting to take up their roles in allegorical contexts befitting the new world-view.

Drawing on this background, Rab Hatfield believes that much more than yet another depiction of a Christian scene, Botticelli's realization of the traditional theme is highly allegorical—in a way that is exceedingly relevant within the humanist context of the Medici court and its favorite Neoplatonic imagery. Hatfield shows that at the time of the Medici-endorsed humanism in Florence, the Epiphany was perceived as having important political overtones as well as doctrinal significance beyond that of the "adoration." On a first level, the Magi were looked upon as emblematic representatives of the Medici, who had adopted them as patrons of their family around 1440.²⁹ The Medici regularly took part in the so-called Festa de' Magi, a pageant performed in Florence with the

²⁹Rab Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi "Adoration,"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 72-73.

participation of key members of the nobility. On a second level, the “kings from afar” who had come to acknowledge the new-born child and Savior—the first to believe in the new message—were Gentiles. They were the foremost disciples of the Christian faith, as well as the personifications of devotion.³⁰ On a third level, the ceremonious presentation of gifts is reminiscent of the long-held custom by which the wealthier members of a congregation would bring offerings for this day, combining their tribute to God with aid for the poor and support for the Church.³¹

For today’s viewers, the ceremoniousness of the setting in Botticelli’s *Adoration* seems stunning. The three Magi, all placed in the center of the depiction, are on their knees—even the two younger ones who are still far from the child. The posture links this scene to liturgical worship, suggesting an illustrious congregation expecting Holy Communion. Several scholars of Renaissance art have drawn attention to Botticelli’s unusual decision to place the madonna-and-child group onto a raised platform in the center of the picture, rather than at humble ground level to one side as was commonly done by other artists. This may imply an underlying symbolism by which the infant transcends into the Eucharist. In this light, the platform is transformed into the altar on which the liturgy unfolds.

Many of the details in Botticelli’s depiction support an allegorical interpretation. The decaying wall against which is erected the shed in which the scene takes place symbolizes most probably the state of the (Old-Testament-based) religion upon whose foundations the new faith rests. Some scholars see the ruined walls more specifically as the remainder of the Tabernacle of David; one remembers that Bethlehem was the city of David. Such symbolism in connection with the adoration of the new-born infant is not at all far-fetched. The second chapter of the gospel of Luke—the source text for the events around Christ’s birth—is explicit in stressing the juxtaposition of “ruin” and “resurrection” in this context:

³⁰Hatfield, *Botticelli’s Uffizi “Adoration,”* p. 33-35.

³¹One detail is particularly telling here. The oldest Magus holds the Christ Child’s feet with the end of the veil that goes over his shoulder. The gesture is thus strongly reminiscent of one occurring in the ceremony of the benediction of the sacrament, where the priest covers his hands “when holding the foot of the monstrance containing the Eucharist, the body of Christ, for the adoration of the faithful.” For a fuller account of this subtext see Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 4th edition revised by David G. Wilkins (New York: Abrams, 1994), p. 328.

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall [= ruin] and rising again [= resurrection] of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against. (Luke 2:34)

Botticelli's depiction includes ample pictorial reference to this fall and rising again through Christ. In the center of the painting, the signs of ruin are prominent. From there to the right, there are several manifest symbols of renewal. Hatfield points to three that are iconologically supported: the fresh twig sprouting from the trunk against which the shed leans, the shoot of laurel in the decaying wall, and the peacock at the extreme right allude to the new life growing miraculously from a dead wood, to the infant who is destined to be crowned as king, and to the resurrection after death. At the extreme left of the picture, the ruined arches, which could suggest part of an ancient temple, add a further dimension to this aspect of revitalization. This classical edifice, although in a sorrow state of dilapidation, still gives an impression of formal dignity. Their meaning becomes even clearer in the context of the Magi as "Gentiles." The word, usually understood merely to designate non-Jews, also bears a wider reference to socially and intellectually exalted people; Hatfield reminds us of the etymology of the word "gentility," which has always described social graces. The temple ruins may thus stand for the ancient Greek culture which, having crumbled earlier, is now being renewed under the leadership of the wealthy nobility led, in Florence, by the Medici. As reminders of the glories of a bygone civilization, the culture of the Gentiles, these ravaged arches next to the scene portraying the Magi/Gentiles/Medici venerating the birth of Christianity thus establish a connection to the Medici/Gentiles revering, in their Neoplatonism, the rebirth of Greek culture.

Respighi's "Adorazione dei Magi"

The central movement of Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano* is rooted in C# minor. It shares with the preceding movement both certain structural features and the specification of its contents by way of musical allusion.

The opening of the movement is highly unusual. In an *Andante lento*, where a lulling twelve-eight time creates a singular impression of stasis, the unaccompanied bassoon presents a languishing pastoral cantilena:



EXAMPLE 37: *Trittico botticelliano*, “L’adorazione dei magi,”
bassoon cantilena in bars. 1-4

The response in the oboe, which the bassoon joins as a counterpoint, is accompanied by a single protracted pedal-note C# in the horn. The atmosphere is melancholy and suffused with a distinct oriental flavor. This impression continues in the third segment of the first section (see RN 14), which comprises three flute arabesques over empty fifths (horn/oboe = C#/G#) and soft pizzicati in the strings. As the contemporary accounts of the composer’s widow and friends reveal, critics writing about performances of the *Trittico* regularly claimed to recognize in this tripartite, orientaling section the musical representation of the three Magi. Attilio Piovano, who also stresses the allusion to oriental vocalizing, goes further when he interprets the combination of the siciliano rhythm with the mournful color of a slow and legato-playing bassoon as the topos of the dirge or elegy.³² The Respighi scholar thinks it possible that the composer recreated in his melopoeia the songs of the oriental liturgy which he is known to have studied avidly during the decade preceding the composition of the *Trittico*.³³

The same, slightly more flowing tempo that was established for the flute’s three arabesques and the same empty fifth (now in the low strings) underlie the introduction of one of the movement’s significant themes. In a unison separated by two octaves and in a coloring reminiscent of organ timbre, flute and bassoon present a quotation of the late-Gregorian hymn, “Veni veni Emmanuel” (see ex. 38).

³²On this see also Attilio Piovano, “Metodologie compositive...,” p. 223.

³³As a life-long friend of Respighi’s, the Russian physician Jakob Wachmann, confirms, the composer spent much time during the years 1915-1916 in the library of the abbey of Grottaferrata studying its rich holdings of ancient codex manuscripts. Mentioned in A. Piovano, “Metodologie compositive...,” p. 224. Wachmann also tells about Respighi’s profound interest in the liturgical chants of the Greek orthodox church, which he researched in the Biblioteca Gogol in the Russian embassy in Rome. Elsa Respighi confirms that her late husband repeatedly attended Greek orthodox services in the church of Grottaferrata. (See Elsa Respighi, *Ottorino Respighi, dati biografici ordinati*, pp. 75-76.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of four staves: a vocal line at the top, followed by flute/bassoon, clarinet, and violoncello/bass. The second system consists of four staves: oboe, flute, clarinet, and bassoon. The music is in G# major and features complex time signatures, including 15/8 and 12/8. Dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) are present. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and iambic rhythms, and includes performance instructions like *flute/bassoon*, *clarinet*, *violin/viola*, *violoncello/bass*, *oboe*, *flute*, *clarinet*, and *bassoon*.

EXAMPLE 38: *Trittico botticelliano*, “L’adorazione dei Magi,”
the Gregorian hymn, “Veni veni Emmanuel”

Interpolated between the hymn’s two phrases we hear the clarinet with a reminiscence of the flute arabesque, and after the second phrase, a homophonic insert, played by the woodwind-quartet in distinct iambic rhythm. Frequent subtle changes in the meter recreate the fluidity and rhythmic freedom of liturgical psalmody. The nineteen measures that follow develop the hymn and its inserts in various combinations.

An altogether different section is launched at RN 17 with a change of tempo (from *Andante più mosso* to *Moderato*), tonality (from a section ending in an F#-major chord to a new beginning in G# minor), and meter (from a compound triple time notated as twelve-eight to a complex five-

four). A three-octave parallel of the first violins (playing in their lowest register and thus suggesting a “dark” color), celli, and double basses posits an ornamented curve that ascends from and descends back towards G#. This two-bar figure is repeated eight times, albeit with variations in mode of attack and volume; it sustains the entire section as a kind of *passacaglia* ostinato. Among the components juxtaposed successively for one or several repetitions of the ostinato figure are a dominant pedal-note (D#),³⁴ a highly coloristic play on parallel empty fifths in celesta, harp, and piano (ornamented with multiple acciaccatura groups and reinforced by similarly embellishing triangle patterns), a flute-bassoon unison timbrally reminiscent of the Gregorian hymn, a rhythmically very free oboe cantilena, and flute flourishes even more expansive than those in the first section. Piovano calls this section the most exotic of the movement, recognizing in it a quasi-moorish flair.³⁵ In terms of allusions to other musics, one is reminded of the deliberately oriental coloring employed by Respighi’s early teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, in his *Shéhérazade*.

The following section (from RN 18) recasts the previous key, G# minor, enharmonically as A♭ major. The unchanged keynote is reaffirmed with a tonic pedal through twenty-one of the section’s twenty-three measures. Over this static harmony, a solo violin plays a richly ornamented arabesque in *p dolce espressivo*; close inspection unveils it as nothing other than an embellished descent through the notes of tonic and dominant (A♭²-E♭²-A♭¹-E♭¹). This arabesque, which is later imitated in the flute before it returns to the violin, thus prolongs the coloristic empty fifths heard just before in celesta, harp, and piano. So do the accompanying interval patterns in clarinet, celesta, and harp, and only the occasional C reveals that we are now in the major mode. Before the flute begins its imitation of the solo violin, oboe and horn enter with contrapuntal figures that also play in orientaling embellishments around A♭ and E♭. Among multiple protracted trills, the solo-violin theme is then heard two more times before this section concludes and the music reinstates the tempo and some fragments of the initial *Andante lento*.

This quasi-recapitulation is prefaced in the violas with reminiscences of the rhythmic figures from the initial bassoon elegy. And sure enough, the bassoon itself, awaited by the listeners, soon re-enters. However, it

³⁴See bassoon, horn, violin II, and viola. The D# is stable for four bars, creates its own dynamically active one-bar ascents for another four bars, disappears for a while, only to return later for four bars of an even slightly richer variation.

³⁵Attilio Piovano, “Metodologie compositive...,” p. 227.

does so not with the anticipated recurrence of its opening melody but with a new thematic element. This tune, thus psychologically emphasized, turns out to be a version of the very popular Italian Christmas carol, "Tu scendi dalle stelle" (You descend from the stars).



EXAMPLE 39: *Trittico botticelliano*, "L'adorazione dei magi,"
bassoon quotation of "Tu scendi dalle stelle" in RN 20 (return of *Andante lento*)

The lyrics are:

Tu scendi dalle stelle, o Re del cielo	You descend from the stars, o King of Heaven,
E vieni in una grotta al freddo e al gelo.	And come to a cave to cold and ice.
O bambino mio divino,	O my divine Child,
Io ti vedo qui tremar, o Dio beato.	I see you trembling here, o blissful God.
Ma quanto te costò, l'avermi amato.	But how much it cost you to have loved me.
A te che sei del mondo il creatore,	You, who are the creator of the world,
Mancano panni e fuoco, o mio signore.	Lack clothes and fire, o my Lord.
Caro eletto pargoletto,	Dear chosen little boy
Quanto questa povertà più m'innamora:	How this poverty makes me love you more:
Giacché ti fece amore povero ancora.	Since love made you poorer and poorer.

This melody, while popular to this day, has its origins many centuries ago.³⁶ By using the very well-known tune, Respighi provides for the identification of the subject matter of this movement a cue that is as unambiguous (and less learned) than the Vivaldi quotation in the first movement. At the same time, he adds originality by composing an original counterpoint and avoiding the most predictable melodic formulas, thus

³⁶As Giorgio Pestelli points out, the tune appears prominently in a *Pastorale* by Domenico Scarlatti. (Giorgio Pestelli, *Le Sonate di Domenico Scarlatti* [Torino: Giappichelli, 1967], pp. 204-205.) The *Pastorale* in question is numbered as *L s 3* in Alessandro Longo's Ricordi edition, *Opere complete per clavicembalo di Domenico Scarlatti*, and appears there as an easily identifiable paraphrase in the central section, mm. 18-35. Pestelli believes that the melody originates from the Abruzzi region of southern Italy and that it probably has ancient roots. He also remarks that the same tune can be found as a required component in most Pastorals of the time (he mentions specifically works by Zipoli and Pasquini), and that the carol built on it with the words "Tu scendi dalle stelle" should be considered "the Italian symbol of Christmas." For more details on the use of this melody in concert pieces see also Benedetto Croce, "La vita religiosa a Napoli nel 1700," in *Uomini e cose della vecchia Italia II* (Bari: Laterza 1943), p. 124.

allowing the popular component to blend harmoniously into his orchestral piece. A little later, as the Christmas tune passes on to the oboe and the pedal to the movement's (still enharmonically redefined) keynote D_b, the bassoon juxtaposes a contrapuntal line that is a very close quotation of the movement's opening line. This is answered, after the conclusion of the Christmas carol, by the oboe with an equally close reminiscence of its line in measures 5-8, and with a transposition of the three flute arabesques. The composer closes the movement with a verbatim quotation of the bassoon opening and a brief coda in vanishing dynamics.

On the structural level, Respighi thus employs some devices that resemble those used in the first movement. Of the five sections, the first and the last make use of the same material, creating a suggestion of symmetry. This is counter-balanced, however, by dissymmetrical aspects, among them the introduction of significant new material in the final section and the dual return of the (single) opening phrase. Similarly, Botticelli's painting, *The Adoration of the Magi*, suggests at first glance a symmetry that is subtly broken in many details.

Appreciating Respighi's composition explicitly in the light of the Renaissance painting to which it owes its title, we discover that reference is created by means of an intriguing combination of meaning-carrying components. (1) The *passacaglia*-like section, placed at the center of the movement, appears particularly appropriate if we dare to interpret the "continual repetition and variation" as a symbol for the annual return and ever-different celebration of the Christian festival. The extravagant amount of musical decorativeness in this section supports this reading. (2) The two adjacent sections turn from the celebratory aspect to the Child at the center of the event. The words of the Gregorian hymn, "Come, come, Emmanuel," speak of the expectation and hope with which humankind yearns for the coming of the Savior, while the sweetly expressive solo violin melody in the fourth section seems to concentrate on the Child itself. (3) The orientализing and archaicizing features in all sections shift the focus from the (contemporary and timeless) festival to the original event and its temporal and spatial remoteness. The timbral allusions to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Shéhérazade* specify the locality as the Near Orient. (4) The insert of the homophonic woodwind-quartet—one of the components employed to contrast with the Gregorian hymn—serves as a link to the equally homophonic woodwind-trio theme in the first movement and, by way of this reminiscence of the Renaissance dance tune, adds a direct implication regarding the period and style of the painting to

which the music refers.³⁷ (5) Whether or not we wish to count the three components of the opening and reprise sections as rather literal manifestations of the three Magi, there can be no doubt that the liturgical flavor of the musical material creates a suggestion of worship that captures what, as Hatfield in particular has shown, Botticelli's *Adoration* is about.³⁸

As in "La primavera," the composer thus creates a multitude of musical references to the style and topic, details and symbolic meanings of Botticelli's painting. More than anything else, the blending, at the return to the tonic in the final section, of the bassoon's melancholy opening line that is so strongly evocative of oriental liturgy with the simple, timeless, very Italian Christmas tune strikes me as an ingenious musical equivalent to Botticelli's *Adoration*, in which characters who are distinctly Italian take the place of the ancient oriental Magi in worshipping the birth of the Jesus Child.

Botticelli's *Nascita di Venere*

This brings me to the painting to which the composer's third movement refers, which is also open to various readings. *La nascita di Venere* is in many regards related to *La primavera*. Again there is a young woman slightly off center. Her backdrop is the sea and the sky above it; her feet rest on a conch shell which serves as a barge carrying her across the water. Her tilted head as well as the posture of her body and left arm are very similar to that of the Venus portrayed in *Primavera*, but her hair is unrestrained and her body naked, barely covered with one hand and a

³⁷Vincenzo Terenzio, writing in a concert review about the *Trittico botticelliano*, goes even further in likening Respighi's style at the opening of this movement with Botticelli's style. In his "Appunti su Respighi" (see *La Rassegna musicale*, 1956, pp. 30-31) he observes that the reference to Botticelli's painting "might have induced the musician to a certain coloristic opulence. Instead he surprises us here by capturing that melancholy grace of Botticelli's art in a few figures and above all in the tranquil scenic background, [...] evoking a pastoral and ingenuous atmosphere [...] in which he captures tones of a vague contemplative sweetness."

³⁸Piovano, in a matching that appears to me not entirely convincing, prefers to see the three Magi characterized in what he counts as only three sections within the movement. Reminding us that the popular legend spawned from the biblical mention of the Magi in the gospel of Saint Matthew specified their origin as, respectively, Asia, Africa, and Europe, he somewhat simplistically associates the orientalizing beginning as well as the Gregorian hymn with the Asian, the exotic-moorish *Moderato* section with the African, and the section with the solo-violin theme as well as the Christmas carol with the European sage. See Attilio Piovano, "Metodologie compositive...", p. 231, fn. 35.



PLATE 18: Sandro Botticelli, *La nascita di Venere* (The Birth of Venus), Uffizi, Florence.

strand of her long tresses. Once again the central figure is flanked by groups at both sides. On the viewer's left, two tightly embraced figures, wrapped in fabric reminiscent of Zephyr's cloth in *La primavera* and surrounded by airborne flowers, are apparently aloft with the help of their imposingly large wings. At the right, a woman clad in a flower-covered dress reminds us of Flora, and even the trees behind her, while without fruit, establish a link to the orange grove in the other painting.

The oldest version of the legend of the Birth of Venus goes back to Homer's second *Hymn to Aphrodite* in the ninth century BC. From verse 3 onwards we are told that the powerful wind Zephyr carried Aphrodite on the waves of a rolling sea and among crests of foam to the island of Cyprus; the Hours, the daughters of Zeus,³⁹ received her with joy and gave her immortal garments. In the eighth century BC, Hesiod gave a more complete account in his *Teogonia* (The Birth of the Gods). Verses 187-210, entitled "Aphrodite," tell how Chronos (Time) severed the sexual organ of his father Uranus (Sky) and threw it into the ocean.⁴⁰ There it floated for several days, forming around it white foam. From this foam arose the young goddess, who was called Aphrodite, the one who is born from the foam of the sea (*afros* in Greek). Later Latin poets invented the conch shell in which Venus/Aphrodite was carried ashore, and many subsequent bards further fleshed out the story that brought onto earth the most beautiful female any eye had ever seen.

As with Botticelli's *Primavera*, the most probable influence on the composition of *La nascita di Venere* is found in a poetic passage by Lorenzo de' Medici's court poet, Poliziano. In the first book of the same "Stanze cominciate per la Giostra del Magnifico Giuliano di Piero de'

³⁹The daughters of Zeus and Themis were known as the Hours [*horai*]. Their name does not refer to the segments of the day, as one might expect, but to the seasons of the year. (Flora in *La primavera* was also known as the "Hour of Spring.") The number of Hours was not fixed, as is the number of seasons in our temperate zones, but varied between two and four, the prevalence being for three: Spring, Summer, and Winter. Hesiod was the first to accord the *horai* ethical significance when he referred to them by the names Eumonia (Law and Order), Dice (Justice), and Eirene (Peace). The Hours served as guardians over the gods' travels; it may be in this function that they came to play a role in welcoming Venus's arrival on the shore.

⁴⁰According to the creation myth of the Greeks, Uranus was the first male, born without a father of Gaia (Earth), who had herself sprung from Chaos. From the later sexual union of Gaia and her son arose the Titans. Uranus subsequently became envious of his and Gaia's children and attempted to push them back into Gaia's womb as soon as they were born. Gaia, groaning in pain, gave her son Chronos a sickle asking him to avenge his mother's sorrow by mutilating his father.

Medici,” Poliziano speaks of the sad fate of Uranus, the god who was castrated by his son, and then proceeds to describe Venus as she is blown towards the shore, holding her hair with the right hand and covering her breast with the left. (Botticelli reversed the hands.) Instead of the three Hours, there is now only one, who approaches Venus with a cloak covered with stars and daisies (marguerites). Poliziano also informs Botticelli in describing not one but two winds: Zephyr, already familiar from *Primavera*, is now joined by a winged female. This is Aura, a wind blowing, like Zephyr, in the spring. Poliziano specifies that Aura resembles Venus enough to pass as her sister; in this, too, Botticelli followed the poet (see the reproduction of Botticelli’s *Nascita di Venere* above, in which Aura appears as a slightly less spectacular relative of Venus).⁴¹

Ultimately thus, it is the woman on the shore who poses the greatest riddle. As many Botticelli scholars have observed, she is visibly pregnant. Levi d’Ancona concludes that the story hides an allegory of the three stages of fertility: the union of two figures (the winds Zephyr and Aura who blow Venus ashore), maternity (the Hour who receives Venus), and the resulting arrival of the goddess of fertility and birth herself in the center.⁴² A Neoplatonic interpretation, drawing on Hesiod’s tale of the castrated Sky (Uranus), might read the painting as an allegory showing that ideal Love/Beauty—which, ever since Marsilio Ficino, also stands for *humanitas*—is born from the union of spirit (wind) and matter (Uranus’s semen).

Respighi’s “Nascita di Venere”

The third movement of the *Trittico* connects back to the first in two ways. While the return of the key of E major is a means of musical closure so common that it cannot be invested with any meaning pointing to Botticelli, the fact that the all-pervading accompaniment pattern of

⁴¹Mirella Levi d’Ancona believes that the shadow thrown by the conch shell into the water, extending far too much to the left of the painting to be credible, represents the severed penis of Uranus or rather, the hazy cloud of blood surrounding it and veiling its actual form. See *Due Quadri del Botticelli*, pp. 54-55.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 57. Levi d’Ancona also claims (p. 58) that the flowers painted on the cloak the Hour offers Venus are marguerites; that the painting was therefore almost certainly commissioned on occasion of the birth of Maria Margherita dei Medici in 1484; and that the reason why the conch shell was not the species described by Poliziano but a scallop shell is that the Latin word for pearl was, again, “margarita.”

Respighi's "Nascita di Venere" movement features another quotation from Vivaldi's *Primavera* is conspicuous. The allusion is this time to the initial measures of the second movement in Vivaldi's concerto, which are recalled here both rhythmically and in regard to their harmonic profile. It seems safe to conclude that Respighi intends to call the listener's attention to the inner connection of the two Venus-centered paintings: their related mythological and allegorical background and their shared protagonists (besides Venus herself also the springtime-suggesting Zephyr).

a.

vi.I Allegro moderato
vi.II

EXAMPLE 40: Remembrance
of Venus, Spring, and Birth:

Respighi, *Trittico botticelliano*
"La nascita di Venere," m. 1;

Vivaldi, *La primavera*, mvt. II, m. 1

b.

vi.I Largo e pianissimo sempre
vi.II
vi.II

The movement's dominant melodic material evolves on a more subtle level of extra-musical suggestiveness.

After the great motivic variety in the two preceding movements, "La nascita di Venere" surprises listeners with the fact that a single, ongoing and internally developed melodic line spans the entire piece. There are changes in instrumentation that coincide with modifications in tempo and thus imply structural sections; but contrast is kept to a minimum thanks to the homogeneity of the thematic material and the consistency of the metric organization.

The melodic cantilena exhibits one significant feature: it interprets the six beats within each measure alternatively as compound triple and simple triple time (3 + 3 vs. 2 + 2 + 2; see ex. 41). This hemiolic ambiguity occurs not only horizontally, in a change from one bar to the next within the same instrumental group, but also as a vertical juxtaposition, whereby a segment of the melodic line that is heard as metrically defined in one way is superimposed over a metrically differing segment of the Vivaldi accompaniment.

The frequent hemiolic redefinition within measures with six beats is, of course, a characteristic well known in Renaissance music; as mentioned earlier, the same trait appears in the *Allegretto* portion of the Renaissance dance material in the first movement of Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano*. Here as there, the predominant phrasal unit contains three measures. We are dealing, then, with yet another parameter linking the two musical movements that refer to the two mythological Botticelli paintings.

vc +
cel/
hrp

meter, mel: n n 3/2 n n 3/2 6/4 n n n
meter, acc: 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4

vc +
cel/
hrp

meter, mel: n n 3/2 6/4 n n n 3/2 6/4 n n n n
meter, acc: 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4 3/2 3/2 6/4 6/4 6/4 3/2

hr +
cel/
hrp

meter, mel: n 3/2 n 3/2
meter, acc: 6/4 3/2 6/4 3/2

bsn

meter, mel: n 3/2 3/2 n 6/4 3/2 6/4 n n n
meter, acc: 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4

vl
vla
vc

meter, mel: n n 3/2 n n 3/2 n n 3/2 6/4 n n
meter, acc: 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 6/4

fl
vl
vla
vc

meter, mel: n n 3/2 6/4 n n n 3/2 6/4 n
meter, acc: 6/4 6/4 3/2 3/2 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4

hr
vl
vla
vc

meter, mel: n 3/2 n 3/2
meter, acc: 6/4 3/2 6/4 3/2

all
ww
+
strgs

meter, mel: 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 3/2 6/4 n n
meter, acc: n n n n n n n n n n n n

vc

meter, mel: n n 3/2 n n 3/2 6/4 6/4 n n n n n n
meter, acc: 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 6/4 3/2 6/4 n n n n n n

EXAMPLE 41: the melodic cantilena in “La nascita di Venere”

(n = metrically neutral; 6/4 = six-four [compound triple], 3/2 = three-two [simple triple] time)

In addition to the Vivaldi-related pattern and the continuous melodic line, both of which wander through various voices of the ensemble but are associated primarily with the strings, harp, and celesta, there is a third level of thematic activity whose main proponents are the woodwind instruments. The three components that make up this level are

- a three-bar flute arabesque with decorative figurations; this first component, heard four times in the course of the piece, adds to the metric ambiguity by integrating a new kind of hemiola: a three-two group that spans from the middle of the second bar to the middle of the third and thus deflates the downbeat shared by the regular $\frac{6}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{2}$ patterns;
- a clarinet flourish, consisting of a concave curve (a lingering downbeat leading into a swift chromatic descent and re-ascent) followed by a varied sequence; this second component, which appears only twice, is indicated as *ppp* and marked *come un soffio* (like a breath);
- a two-bar motif and its varied sequence which, in four-octave unison texture, recreates the basic hemiolic ambivalence of the movement by linking one $\frac{6}{4}$ measure with a subsequent bar in $\frac{3}{2}$ time; this third component is modified in its second and third appearance, where the phrase length is expanded to three measures each.

The third component, then, reinforces the “Renaissance” element, while the first shifts a basic premise to a different reality, as it were. (It is tempting but probably not very useful to speculate which of the two motifs may refer to the Venus in the conch shell Botticelli painted and which to the Hour with the flower-adorned cloak that expects her on the shore.) The second motif is quite obviously intended to create a musical allusion to the breath with which Zephyr, who affects both Venus-centered scenes, blows the new-born goddess to her destiny.

To my mind, however, the most stunning aspects of this movement are not located in any of the parameters of the thematic material. Instead, they are found in the harmonic development and the correlation of expressive means. The E-major tonality with which this movement purports—through its beginning and closing, primarily—to harken back to Respighi’s (and Botticelli’s) “Primavera” proves extraordinarily inconstant. It reigns for exactly three bars at the outset of the movement before giving way to twenty bars of pedal-note-supported C# minor. A bridge

employing chords in the vicinity of E major leads, in what amounts to a sudden harmonic shift, to a section in the Mixolydian mode on E \flat . This scale and tonal character, prepared already as a passing allusion in the final cadence of “La primavera,” is more than just another archaicizing feature peculiar to a composer in love with Gregorian chants. As Respighi no doubt knew, 16th-century Italian music theorists classified the Mixolydian mode as “proud and cheerful.”⁴³ We must assume that the association with these affective qualities is meant to add another facet to the musical reference to this painting about the birth of the Venus.

Both the transition from the original E-major/C \sharp -minor context to E \flat Mixolydian and the resulting tonal effect are stunning. The C \sharp with which one segment of the continuous melodic line ends⁴⁴ is picked up (as D \flat) to form the beginning of another line.⁴⁵ This D \flat , the minor seventh over E \flat , remains for eight bars the center of the melodic line until the strings, reappropriating the theme, yield to the pull of the modal tonic E \flat . An eleven-bar bass pedal on E \flat is followed by ten bars during which the harmony locks abruptly into a C⁷ chord, partially in its first inversion with E in the bass. From here, Respighi shifts, without any preparation other than the suggestion that the bass E is being redefined, back to the original E major. This return to the home key lasts for only two bars; then the music, in a contracted repetition of the movement’s opening, turns once again to C \sharp minor, this time for fourteen measures. The quasi recapitulation, suggested in the return of the original material in the original instrumentation and key, abandons E major for the third time in the piece after a mere three bars, to regain it only for the closing measures.

While the shifts towards E \flat and back are startling, those to and from the relative minor mode are no less unusual in that not one of them is supported by a full cadential progression. The uncommon uniformity of the thematic material throughout the movement in combination with these unusual shifts enhances the impression that the composer is pointedly placing different aspects of the same reality side by side.

⁴³See Nicola Vicentino, who in 1555 called the Mixolydian mode “very cheerful and somewhat proud” (*L’antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica*). Half a century later, Scipione Cerreto confirmed this when, on pp. 104-105 of his *Della prattica musica vocale et strumentale* (1601), he described the Mixolydian mode as “much prouder than the other modes, and even more cheerful.” (English translation quoted in Tim Carter, *Music in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy* [London: Batsford, 1992], pp. 54-55.)

⁴⁴See horn, celesta, and harp, pp. 55-56, up to RN 25.

⁴⁵See the bassoon, beginning at RN 25.

In terms of the expressive means employed, the sudden shift to a mode on the lower adjacent semitone of the keynote raises the tempo from *Allegro moderato* to *Un poco animato*. Eight bars later, the point of harmonic compliance—when the tension between the melodically highlighted D_b and the underlying triad $E_b/G/B_b$ is resolved as the cantilena joins its surroundings—is marked by a further quickening of the tempo (*Più mosso*). The following section is drawn together by a protracted, 38-bar-long crescendo that swells to the point of explosion. The ongoing dynamic increase is bolstered by a further acceleration of the pace, building momentum that finally breaks off dramatically in a between-bar caesura. During the powerful surge, Respighi simplifies the texture to a mere two-part juxtaposition: a variation of the Vivaldi-related figure in celesta, harp, and piano sounds against a five-octave unison of the cantilena in all winds and strings. This stripping away of all aspects that might decorate, soften, or flesh out the essential message, along with the almost complete stasis of the harmonic motion during this extended stretch of music, endows the build-up with the force of a natural eruption. The coda brings an abrupt return to the initial *pp*, the Vivaldi-related figure, and the incipit of the cantilena in the original violoncello timbre. A single reminiscence of the “Renaissance” motif, followed by diminishing arpeggios and an augmented version of the Vivaldi figure, concludes the composition.

In his third musical canvas, Ottorino Respighi thus conveys a number of complementary messages. The suggestion is once more of a painting. This painting, the music seems to impart on the thematic level, is related to “La primavera” and its subject matter, Venus and ideal love. It is cast in an adapted Renaissance style. One of its components or characters is to be perceived as a soft wind breathing into the main action; another component or character is highly decorative. Beyond these facets of pictorial content, listeners are told with the help of harmonic and expressive aspects that the composer perceives in the painting—and explores in his music—a shift from one aspect of reality to another. Respighi interprets this shift as a dramatic outburst the result of which is not destruction but calm beauty. Could this be the composer’s way of portraying the birth of the Goddess of Love and Beauty?

Summary: Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano*

What additional message does Ottorino Respighi convey to us by arranging the three Botticelli paintings as a triptych? There is, first, the question: what holds these paintings of very different size and subject matter together, beyond the fact that they are seen, by today's pilgrims to the Uffizi museum, in a single room?

A number of details establish the link, at first glance elusive, between the Bethlehemite scene in the center of Respighi's composition and the two allegories surrounding it. One is circumstantial; as Botticelli scholars have shown in great detail, most of the characters are portraits of members of the leading noble families, especially the three branches of Medici who were so singularly instrumental in encouraging and enabling, sponsoring and suggesting the major works of art created in their era.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Without wanting to take sides in the apparently ongoing discussion over the identification of historical persons depicted in the three Botticelli panels, let me repeat just some of the suggestions here. Most Botticelli scholars seem to agree that *The Adoration of the Magi* contains portraits of Cosimo de' Medici, the grandfather of Botticelli's benefactor Lorenzo the Magnificent, as the oldest Magus kneeling closest to the holy family, and of his two sons, Piero and Giovanni, as the other two Magi. (The artist succeeded in making the second and third magi look different enough in age to conform with the tradition that regards the Magi as the representatives of the three generations of man.) The majority of commentaries also follows Heinrich Ulmann in believing that Lorenzo de' Medici himself is portrayed at the far left in the front row, with a sword. Hatfield, while acknowledging the family likeness, disagrees. On the basis of the young nobleman's overly proud, somewhat undignified posture he argues convincingly that this must instead be Lorenzo's younger brother Giuliano, then nineteen years old. The man embracing this figure may be Angelo Poliziano, and Baldini recognizes the man next to the young Medici as the philosopher Pico della Mirandola. The elegant young nobleman who stands out with his jet-black hair in the second row within the group to the right is, for Hatfield, the twenty-four-year-old head of the Medici family, Lorenzo the Magnificent; for all who had followed Ulmann's identification of Lorenzo on the other side of the painting, this is, then, his younger brother Giuliano. Whether the last figure to the right is a self-portrait of Sandro, as many believe, has recently been debated. With regard to the two mythological paintings, Wilhelm von Bode has pointed out that the Venus in both *La primavera* and *La nascita di Venere* is modeled after Simonetta Vespucci, the young lover of Lorenzo's brother Giuliano, whose tragic death at age 23 made her the preferred object of idealized poetry and painting. Aby Warburg also believes that Venus is a portrayal of Simonetta; he further recognizes Giuliano de' Medici in the Mercury of Botticelli's *Primavera*. (See Umberto Baldini, *Primavera*; Wilhelm von Bode, *Sandro Botticelli*; Rab Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi "Adoration": A Study in Pictorial Content*; Heinrich Ulmann, *Sandro Botticelli* [Munich 1893]; Aby Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli: "Geburt der Venus" und "Frühling"*.)

The second link, related to the first, is philosophical and panegyric. The three kings who were the first to hear the message of the new-born Savior have often been taken as the epitome of enlightened rulers capable of combining far-sightedness with generosity, mutual tolerance and respect with humility towards the chosen—qualities many artists saw embodied in the house of Medici. The allusion must have appeared obvious to contemporary appreciators of the panels, who could have been expected to make the connection between the Magi around the manger and the “Magi” in Florence, the wise nobles who adored and facilitated the gifted artists of their time. The topic of the central movement in the musical triptych thus presented an ideal vehicle for bowing to the Medici patrons without appearing too subservient. Allegorical paintings, on the other hand, not only allowed a similar kind of tribute, but were also open to even more imaginative presentations since the means symbolically to suggest various virtues and enlightened attitudes were less prescribed than in the biblical scene.

I am most interested in a third dimension created as a result of the composer's arrangement of Botticelli's panels. Two questions seem pertinent here. Do any or all three of the panels acquire through their combination in a triptych an additional subtextual layer that is absent, or so low in profile as to remain imperceptible, for viewers of the single panels? And does the form of the triptych, with its historically evolved implications, enhance, expose, or add further dimensions?

In his important study, *Das Triptychon als Pathosformel*, Klaus Lankheit follows the development of the pictorial form and genre from its original, exclusively sacred context to our days. As he lays out with myriad examples from around 1400 to 1950, the choice of the tripartite layout, always featuring symmetrical wings and usually a clearly emphasized center, lost its archetypal destination in the course of the general secularization of art. Yet instead of fading away and eventually dying out, the frame, emptied of its traditionally expected content, became available for what Lankheit calls “the sacralization of the profane.”⁴⁷ Klee and Kandinsky in their work at the Bauhaus undertook similar analyses; as Klee stated it, “pictorial formats move as essentials to the foreground.”⁴⁸ The horizontally extended format of the whole, or so these artists

⁴⁷Klaus Lankheit, *Das Triptychon als Pathosformel* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1959), p. 5.

⁴⁸Paul Klee, *Das bildnerische Denken: Schriften zur Form- und Gestaltungslehre* (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1956), p. 47.

believed, communicates dignity, in contrast to other typical pictorial shapes like the more emotionally tense vertical oblong and the explicitly harmonious oval. Furthermore, Lankheit observes, even where the central panel is not emphasized by greater width (often twice that of the wings, reflecting the fact that these were originally designed to fold in over the central panel), the symmetrical composition with three component parts favors “subordinating power” emanating from the center. Most importantly, in the course of the renaissance of the triptych in the art of the nineteenth century, the central panel assumes not only the subordinating power endorsed by the layout as such, but appropriates the symbolism characteristic for the corresponding central element in the Christian altarpiece. Aby Warburg was the first to describe such an art-historical phenomenon as a “pathos formula.”

It seems of great importance that among the earliest examples that embody this separation of the triptych from its sacred purpose are a group of works from the Italian Renaissance that glorified humanist values like *Justitia*, *Fortuna*, *Natura*, etc. In 1421, commissioned by the Magistrato del Propio of Venice, Jacopo del Fiore painted an enormous three-panel work. Framed by the archangels Michael and Gabriel (i.e., representatives of the biblical realm), the central panel shows the crowned Goddess of Justice with sword and scales, flanked by two lions. The allegorical embodiment of one of the Neoplatonic virtues seems to be taking up the space traditionally reserved for the Madonna or Christ. Significantly, as the traditional form is newly filled, the transformation of meaning develops literally under the protection (and thus the endorsement?) of the archangels. If *Justitia* were nothing other than a virtue serving mankind in general, the transition, while eminently desacralizing, could be considered to remain at least in the realm of the exalted. However, as Lankheit reminds us, in early Renaissance Venice this particular goddess was unequivocally the symbol of worldly power; this attribution is confirmed by the lions, another emblem of human force. In the “sacred” frame of the triptych, the allegorical “virtue” thus served as a disguise for often vicious domination. A little later in the same vein, Lucas Cranach created several versions of the “princely” variety of the triptych. The rulers of Saxony were portrayed in a style formerly reserved for saints. In all these cases, the layout of the depiction, so strongly reminiscent of altarpieces, is used to transfer sacred power and pathos onto the worldly authority.⁴⁹

⁴⁹For more details on this evolution see Klaus Lankheit, *Das Triptychon ...*, pp. 28-35.

Respighi knew his Italian art well and even more (as we know from his impressive library) his history of religion. When he arranged three Botticelli paintings as two wings flanking a center and candidly entitled the whole “triptych,” he was doing more than choosing pictorial stimuli for a three-movement composition. Both as the ideal visual arrangement of the Renaissance and as a liturgically determined form with explicitly emphasized center, the layout of the “subordinating triptych” adds further interpretive nuances to how we are to interpret the combination of the three Botticelli paintings. The grouping reverses that commissioned from Jacopo del Fiore for Venice. As Respighi would have it, the Christian image subordinates humanist allegories.

Within the highly significant frame of what the composer presents as a triptych, the subtextual connection between the allegorical paintings with scenes centering in Venus and the allegorically layered *Adoration of the Magi* is supported in the syncretistic theology of Marsilio Ficino and his followers. The “Gentiles” of Greek antiquity, Ficino claimed, could not have known about Christ; nonetheless, they developed an admirable natural philosophy and religion that communicated many of the same truths—albeit in different guises. Botticelli’s altarpiece may thus be seen as an allegory of the Church, with the new-born infant prefiguring the body of the Church. The infant and with it the new faith rise among the supporting if decaying walls of the Old-Testament faith. “As Ficino saw them,” Hatfield argues, “the Magi were not the flamboyant kings envisioned during the later Middle Ages, but ‘philosopher-rulers’ with an understanding of ‘natural’ laws.”⁵⁰ The Medici, accustomed to playing the roles of these philosopher kings in the annual pageant and thus appropriately modeled in Botticelli’s portrayal, mirrored themselves in these “wise heathens.” What appears, for any innocent viewer, as an unambiguously Christian scene thus doubles as a pictorial confirmation of what Ficino had declared with regard to Cosimo de’ Medici: that he was someone who admirably realized the Platonic models of virtue.

The composition of the three panels when imagined as a triptych is intriguing. (See fig. 4 for a juxtaposition of the three paintings in accordance with their actual measurements,⁵¹ and fig. 5 for a scaled version

⁵⁰Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi "Adoration,"* p. 95.

⁵¹In real-life scale, the altarpiece, which measures 3'8" x 4'5", is much smaller than the two imposing mythological depictions: *Spring* with 6'8" x 10'4" and *The Birth of Venus* with 5'9" x 9'2". But, as Lankheit would argue, its position in the center of a triptych imbues it with an emphasis and a sacrality that makes up for what it lacks in size.

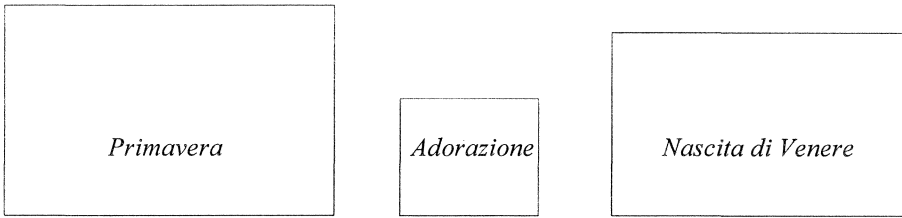


FIGURE 4: Botticelli's three paintings in real-life proportion

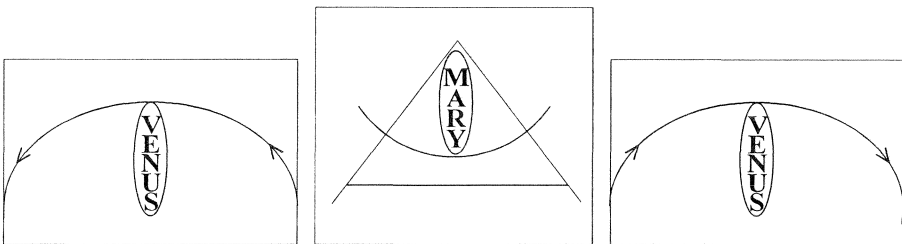


FIGURE 5: Structural forces in the imagined, scaled triptych

that renders the relative significance and also shows the compositional details mentioned above.) *La primavera* and *La nascita di Venere* are both laid out as an arch, with Venus in the heightened center; in *L'adorazione dei Magi*, the corresponding place is taken up by the Madonna. In *Primavera* almost all readings mentioned above presuppose that the eye of the beholder moves from Zephyr at the right-hand margin towards Venus and on to the Graces, ending with Mercury at the extreme left. In symmetrical correspondence, the narrative sequence in *La nascita di Venere* guides the gaze from the left margin (where Zephyr and Aura blow towards Venus) to the right, where Venus is anticipated to go ashore next to the Hour who expects her. By contrast, *L'adorazione dei Magi* is supremely centered. The composition hinges on a triangle that culminates in the Madonna while its two sides run, at the left through the body of the old Magus and across the arms of two of the bystanders to the man who gestures to the young nobleman with the sword, and at the right down to the onrushing figure behind the youngest of the three Magi.⁵² The triangle's slightly

⁵²Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi "Adoration,"* p. 109-110.

raised third side runs horizontally through the line of onlookers that is closest to the viewer; the gap between the two groups is successfully bridged by the second Magus. A final detail in the structural play emerging from the imagined triptych (in its re-scaled proportions) emerges from all those who “adore” as onlookers: their heads form a concave curve that bisects the triangle, placing Mary in its center. This curve in turn, when joined to the two convex ones in the flanking panels, confers further subtle emphasis on Mary over her sister images in Venus. “*Venus humanitas* is a fair nymph, of heavenly birth and dear to God above all things,” Ficino stated and thus attempted to build a bridge between the Greco-Roman pantheon and an optimistic Christianity.

The three paintings Ottorino Respighi combined to a “triptych” may well have conveyed to him intrinsically related messages. The most literal is that of the Medici as Magi, shown in a depiction that celebrates them as the harbingers of the revitalization of faith as well as the renewers of the wisdom of the ancients. The message couched in this philosophic-religious imagery is a combination, in true Renaissance spirit, of Platonic and Christian elements. Salvation through divine grace coexists with self-transformation and, by implication, the hope for self-salvation. Finally, all three depictions are concerned, albeit in very different ways, with perfect love and the birth of such love into this world; in all three, this love implies a subtext of spiritual promise.

Music, of course, evolves in time; it does not allow us to experience a central unit first and last, much less motions leading symmetrically away from this center. Respighi’s composition does not present a musical result of a reading, but makes itself available as a vehicle for a fresh appreciation of Botticelli’s paintings. The music, in its individual movements, relates to and “tells” the story of the individual scenes; in its overarching form as a triptych, it also elevates the scenes and their allegorical meaning to a new dimension.

