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When in Rome – a Long-Delayed UK Premiere of Wolf-Ferrari's Violin Concerto

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Wagner, Wolf-Ferrari, Respighi, Mendelssohn: Francesca Dego (violin), City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Daniele Rustioni (conductor), Symphony Hall, Birmingham. 8.3.2017. (RBa)

Wagner – *Tristan and Isolde*: Prelude to Act I (1865)

Wolf-Ferrari – Violin Concerto (1943)

Respighi – *The Fountains of Rome* (1917)

Mendelssohn – Symphony No. 4 *Italian* (1833)

For most of us, Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876-1948) registers as an opera composer. He wrote *Susanna's Secret* and *Jewels of the Madonna* during the years 1906-1911. The operas themselves—and there are others—exist in complete recordings but rarely make it into the opera house. Suites and overtures from them do have some profile on record or radio broadcast. Serebrier, Nosedá and Marriner have recorded collections of Wolf-Ferrari bon-bons. In any event, it is a rare treat to hear his Violin Concerto, and this appears to be the UK premiere. It has been recorded before by Ulf Hoelscher (CPO), by Laura Marzadori (*Tactus*) and by Benjamin Schmid with another Wolf-Ferrari champion, conductor Friedrich Haider (Farao Classics).

The opening work, Wagner's succinct overture, was lingeringly delivered. Each phrase seemed set in a tautly drawn silence, encapsulated in a breath of its own. Conductor Rustioni, age 33, paid the most careful and attentive court to dynamics even if his podium manner is actively mobile and passionate. His trade is not in Boult-like minimal gestures.

The Wolf-Ferrari Violin Concerto concluded part I of the concert, receiving its UK premiere. Rustioni's wife, the violinist Francesca Dego, entered resplendent in a floor-length gown in silvery sable black. She and Rustioni had already, during the pre-concert talk, provided useful context about the concerto as a work of infatuation, written three years before the composer's death. Here, rather as Othmar Schoek (1886-1957) had done for Stefi Geyer (1888-1956), was a violin concerto by a composer suffering the torments of unrequited love. His amour in aspiration was Guila Bustabo, now a cult figure and dedicatee "con ammirazione". This extended work has some stylistic parallels with the songster Schoeck, as does the fact that Schoeck's much older work (1911-1912) can be heard in a [recording](#). A difficult to find recording exists of Bustabo in a Kempe-conducted 1971 performance of the Wolf-Ferrari.

Wolf-Ferrari's language is one of almost constantly passion-imbued florid *cantabile*. The composer, who stands between the poles of German and Italian parentage, leans towards the Italian side. There are some bluff *tarantella* moments in the finale. It matters not a whit now that this half-hour-plus concerto looks backwards to the nineteenth century. In three movements, its nostalgic *bel canto* will appeal to anyone who loves the violin concertos by Tchaikovsky, Glazunov or Korngold. The invention may not be quite as vital or memorable, and Rustioni had already remarked on the work's rhapsodic diffuse approach to musical structure, but it is a winning listen. The first movement opens in a whisper—rather like the Sibelius—to which Dego's violin soon engaged. She is in almost constant action throughout, with unsullied soaring ardour and meticulous yet feathery delicacy. There are some banal moments towards the end of Wolf-Ferrari's score but they are fleeting. The solo cadenza writing in the *Rondo* finale appears in two episodes. The performance of the Concerto was recorded by Deutsche Grammophon and looks set to appear in Autumn 2017 in harness with a Paganini concerto. No doubt

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Mira Wang, protege of the late virtuoso violinist Roman

the occasional cough will be patched out from rehearsals. If you are interested in Wolf-Ferrari, there is a website but unlike Othmar Schoeck, who basks in Chris Walton's magisterial study, there is no English language [biography](#). Generously, DeGo rewarded the audience's applause with one of Paganini's stunning Caprices: coruscation, gasps and delight in equal measure. I do hope that she will now look at the violin concertos by Pizzetti, Malipiero and Casella.

The Respighi tone poem—almost a century since the premiere—impressed with its trickling poetry. As the conductor noted during the pre-concert talk, this score starts and ends very quietly. Its triumphs on the night lay in delicacy and in unflashy self-possession. Parts parallel the rocking sun-dappled ostinato in Bax's *Tintagel* and, in its icy slow descents, the composer's teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov. A triumph in the work's many fragile confidences contrasted with massive climaxes that proved unimpressive. In large part they came across as a massive smear of sound, vitality aplenty but much of the detail scorched out. I have probably been spoilt by the gorgeous synthetics of artfully balanced hi-fi recordings—there is reality and there is audio fantasy. As with the lovingly drawn *Tristan* Prelude, I was left hoping that Rustioni will tackle Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*.

Mendelssohn had many connections with Birmingham, so it was good to hear his *Italian Symphony* in this context. Rustioni's eager ardour was well in evidence with the vibrant first movement starting as if someone had slammed a plug into an already live electricity socket. The orchestra, shrunk by several ranks after the gargantuan line-up for the Respighi, matched this faultlessly with a racing pulse. Rustioni physically has something of Muti about him, and it is not just the centre-parting. You do not find the febrile glowing extremes of the elder conductor but there is certainly an unrestrained emotional engagement there. The *Andante* was briskly taken, while Rustioni made much of the next movement's Mozartean ways. The fruitily burred *Saltarello* was unleashed with hardly a pause between movements. There were repeated calls to the podium and the ovation resounded in the great space that is Symphony Hall.

Rob Barnett



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