

Ottorino Respighi

(geb. Bologna, 9. Juli 1879 - gest. Rom, 18. April 1936)

Belkis, Regina di Saba

Coreografia in sette quadri di Claudio Guastalla (1931)

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Vorwort

Angesichts seiner herausragenden Meisterschaft in der Behandlung des modernen Orchesters und seiner eminenten Begabung als pittoresk-impressionistischer Ton-dichter (jener Eigenschaften, die auch die zahlreichen Skeptiker und Gegner des großen Komponisten bestätigen) ist es erstaunlich, wie verhältnismäßig wenig Ottorino Respighi fürs Ballett komponiert hat: 1918 die bis heute populäre *La Boutique fantasque* über Musik von Gioacchino Rossini, 1920 die *Sèvres de la vieille France* (Altfranzösisches Porzellan) über volkstümliche französische Weisen, 1924 *La pentola magica* (Der Zaubertopf) über russische Themen und 1928 *Gli uccelli* – das war die ganze Ausbeute bis zum Jahr 1931, als Respighi einen Auftrag des Teatro alla Scala erfüllte. Mit einem Libretto seines Dichter-Freunds Claudio Guastalla (1880-1948), des Literaturprofessors und Librettisten seiner Oper *Belfagor*, schrieb er sein einziges abendfüllendes Ballett (dessen Dauer im Ricordi-Katalog mit 80 Minuten angegeben wird): *Belkis, Regina di Saba*, den Besuch der Königin bei König Salomo schildernd. Eigentlich hatte Guastalla ein Opernlibretto über diesen biblischen Stoff geschrieben, doch fand sich kein Komponist, der bereit gewesen wäre, es zu vertonen.

Elsa Respighi berichtet in der Biographie ihres Mannes nur äußerst wenig zu *Belkis*, als sie über das Jahr 1931 schreibt: „Während des Frühjahrs und im Sommer war Respighi glücklich, zuhause in den ‚Pini‘ ungestört arbeiten zu können. Neben den beiden Opern *Maria Egiziaca* und *Fiamma* nahm er sich das Ballett *Belkis, Regina di Saba* vor, das Anfang nächsten Jahres an der Scala zur Aufführung gelangen sollte. Respighi hatte viele Jahre vorher schon geplant, das *Belkis*-Sujet als Ballett zu bearbeiten, und zu diesem Zweck seit langem hebräische und orientalische Melodien als thematisches Material gesammelt.“

Respighi nutzte diese Gelegenheit denn auch reichlich, um seine Assoziationen zu alter arabischer und hebräischer Musik lebendig werden zu lassen, was sich u.a. in einer gigantischen Besetzung niederschlug, die exotisches Instrumentarium, eine Backstage-Band, Chor und Sprecher einschließt. So war denn auch die Premiere in Mailand ein großes Ereignis, für welches Leonide Massine als Choreograph und Nicola Benois als Bühnen- und Kostümbildner verantwortlich zeichneten. Geschätzte tausend Aufführende waren an der Uraufführung am 23. Januar 1932 im Teatro alla Scala unter der musikalischen Leitung von Franco Ghione beteiligt. Die Reaktionen von Publikum und Kritikern waren enthusiastisch, doch nach elf Aufführungen war die teure Produktion durch.

In seiner unnachahmlichen Manier berichtete Nicolas Slonimsky darüber in seinem Kompendium *Music Since 1900*: „23. Januar 1932: *Belkis, Regina di Saba*, ‚choreographisches Spektakel mit musikalischen Illustrationen‘ von Ottorino Respighi, geschrieben in einem glänzend eklektischen Stil mit orientalistisch wogenden Arabesken, die die Königin von Saba charakterisieren, und pentatonischen Skalen, die das gemeine Volk darstellen, wird an der Scala in Mailand herausgebracht.“

Seither ist das Ballett *Belkis, Regina di Saba* nicht mehr auf die Bühne gekommen, und nur der Klavierauszug erschien als käufliches Material im Druck. Als er sah, dass *Belkis* kaum Chancen auf weitere Aufführungen haben würde, entschloss sich Respighi, zwei Orchestersuiten daraus für den Konzertsaal zu extrahieren. Eine davon, die 1935 bei Ricordi in Studienpartitur veröffentlicht wurde, konnte er 1934 noch vollenden, die zweite Suite hingegen nicht mehr. Das komplette Ballett wird hiermit erstmals, dank der freundlichen Bereitstellung der Vorlage durch den Verlag Ricordi, nicht nur im Studienformat, sondern überhaupt in einer käuflichen Partiturausgabe zugänglich gemacht.

Christoph Schlüren, 2009

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Preface

Given Ottorino Respighi's outstanding mastery in handling the modern orchestra and his superb gifts for impressionist tone-painting (the very qualities cited by the many detractors and adversaries of this great composer), it is astonishing how little he composed for the ballet. The ever-popular *La Boutique fantasque* on music by Gioacchino Rossini (1918), *Sèvres de la vieille France* ("Old French Porcelain") on French folk tunes (1920), *La pentola magica* ("The Magic Kettle") on Russian themes (1924), and *Gli uccelli* (1928): these were all he had to show by the year 1931, when La Scala in Milan commissioned him to compose what would become his only full-length ballet, *Belkis, Regina di Saba* (the Ricordi catalogue gives its duration as 80 minutes). The scenario, depicting the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon, was supplied by Respighi's poet-friend Claudio Guastalla (1880-1948), a professor of literature who also wrote the libretto to Respighi's opera *Belfagor*. In fact, Guastalla had written an opera libretto on the same biblical subject but could not find a composer willing to set it to music.

Elsa Respighi, in her biography of her husband (1931), has precious little to say about *Belkis*. It reads as follows: "During the spring and summer, Respighi worked on undisturbed at 'The Pines.' The two operas *Maria Egiziaca* and *Fiamma* were under way and there was also the ballet *Belkis, Regina di Saba*, which had to be ready for performance at La Scala early in the following year. Respighi had given this subject much thought for many years before he decided on a ballet and was now in possession of a great deal of thematic material (Hebrew melodies, oriental song-accompaniments, etc.)."

Respighi made ample use of the opportunity to revive his ties to ancient Arabic and Hebrew music. Among other things this left a mark on the gigantic size of the orchestra, which calls for exotic instruments, a backstage band, a chorus, and a narrator. The première in Milan thus became a major event, with Leonide Massine responsible for the choreography and Nicola Benois for the sets and costumes. An estimated one-thousand performers were involved in the première, which took place at La Scala on 23 January 1932 under the baton of Franco Ghione. The public and critics responded enthusiastically, but after eleven performances the expensive production had had its day. Nicolas Slominsky, in his inimitable way, recorded the event in *Music Since 1900*: "23 January 1932: *Belkis, regina di Saba*, 'choreographic spectacle with musical illustrations' by Ottorino Respighi, written in a resplendently eclectic style, with orientalistically undulant arabesques characterizing the Queen of Sheba and pentatonic scales depicting the populace, is produced at La Scala, in Milan."

Since then *Belkis, Regina di Saba* has never again been mounted on stage, and the only printed material available for purchase is the vocal score. Realizing that further performances of *Belkis* were practically impossible, Respighi decided to extract two orchestral suites from it for use in the concert hall. He was able to complete one of them in 1934, which was duly published by Ricordi in miniature score (1935), but the second suite remained unfinished. Thanks to the House of Ricordi, who kindly provided the production master, the present volume marks not only the first time the ballet has appeared in study format, but its very first appearance in a commercially available full score.

Translation: Bradford Robinson

For performance materials please contact the publisher Edizioni Ricordi, Milano.