

Gabrielle Haigh visits Respighi's circle in debut CD with pianist Randall Fusco

by Daniel Hathaway



There are myriad paths to follow — both musical and literary — when curating an art song recital. For her impressive debut solo CD, soprano Gabriella Haigh chose to visit repertoire reflecting musical relationships that swirled around the 19th-century Italian composer Ottorino Respighi.

That idea was born when Haigh discovered that Respighi's wife, Elsa (née Olivieri-Sangiaco), who outlived him by some 60 years — she died at 102 — was both his pupil and a composer herself.

“This revelation led to the idea of performing a recital featuring art songs composed by Respighi's most influential teachers, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Giuseppe Martucci, by his students Vittorio Rieti and Elsa Respighi, and of course several of his own,” Haigh wrote in her album notes.

Merely recording some of Respighi's solo vocal music would be interesting enough in itself — he's most widely known for his brilliant orchestral tone poems and the *Ancient Airs and Dances* — but extending the circle introduces us to the music of Giuseppe Martucci (“the Italian Brahms”), and of his students. Elsa Respighi and Vittorio Rieti are hardly household names, although Rieti looks intriguing, having been born in Egypt, having become a U.S. Citizen in 1944, and having taught at the Peabody Conservatory.

Gabriella Haigh, a member of the Northeast Ohio Haigh musical dynasty who has performed with Apollo's Fire, is well-qualified to bring both excellent vocal qualities

and a high level of scholarship to the Circolo Respighi project. She holds degrees from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the University of Cambridge, where she served as a soloist and choral scholar in the Choir of Clare College. Haigh's extra-musical interests include the study of languages, classical history and philosophy, and lyric poetry.



She and her colleague, pianist Randall Fusco, present these 23 pieces with sensitivity and penetrating understanding. Although there are few stylistic surprises, it's interesting to hear what a collection of composers and poets were up to in Italy in the early years of the 20th century. Most of the songs are about the natural world, and Haigh and Fusco's performances of Ottorino's settings are lovely and atmospheric.

Elsa's *Quattro Liriche dai Rubaiyat* reflect the era's fascination with Medieval Arabic poetry — while getting its meaning as wrong as the Victorians did — and make some attempts at musical exoticism in the piano part. Her *Tre Canzoni Spagnole*, another side excursion into a different culture, brings three Spanish poets into the mix. Vittorio Rieti's *La Crise* is just fascinatingly weird.

Haigh has provided extensive notes on the repertory, printed in the informative program booklet. These include her thoughts on arranging these pieces into a meaningful arc, “placing songs by Respighi's teachers at the beginning and end, with

his students' songs clustered in the middle, and his own forming bridges between the others.”

Comparing the current period of disease, political upheaval, and social change to the tumultuous times in which these composers lived, Haigh writes: “This may be the reason so many of the songs here are focused on other times and places, real or imagined — when times are hard, escapism is powerful.”

Il Circolo Respighi was recorded in November 2020 at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, in Belvedere, California. The disc was produced, engineered, edited and mastered by David v.R. Bowles, of Swineshead Productions, LLC.

In addition to the usual purchase options, the album is available for streaming on [Spotify](#) and [Apple Music](#).

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