

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

España

Emmanuel Chabrier (1841—1894)

Written: 1883

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Eight minutes

“Ever since reaching the age of reason, I’ve cultivated gaiety: it’s the most beautiful of flowers, the one which makes you love life.” Those are the words of the composer Emmanuel Chabrier, who spent the better part of his adult life working a desk job for the French Ministry of the Interior. As a child, Chabrier demonstrated an astonishing penchant towards music. Ever the dutiful son, he chose instead to follow the dictates of his father and became a lawyer. Bureaucrat by day, Chabrier spent his evenings with the leading French *avant-garde* artists, composers, and authors. He even composed a few inconsequential pieces. Then, in 1880, he travelled to Germany where he saw Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* for the first time. When he got back to France, he promptly quit his job and became a full-time composer.

In 1883, Chabrier took his wife on a four-month journey to Spain. His letters home gave a vivid – and for the most part, unprintable – impression of the country and its inhabitants. “Since coming to Andalusia I haven’t seen a really ugly woman,” he wrote. “I won’t let on what these women display, but they display it beautifully ... they spend their time laughing, gesticulating, dancing, and drinking.” To another he wrote,

“In the evening we are forever in the *bailos flamencos*, both of us surrounded by *toreros* in town clothes, with black felt hats split down the middle, hip-length jackets, and tight trousers showing off sinewy legs and the shapeliest of buttocks. And the gypsies singing their *malagueñas* or dancing the tango, and the *manzanilla* which is passed from hand to hand and which everybody is obliged to drink.”

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

Chabrier immediately set his impressions of Spain to music by using two dances, the *malagueña* and the *jota*. At first, he wrote *España* for piano; then he scored it for orchestra. Lobbying the conductor Charles Lamoreaux he claimed, “my rhythms, my tunes will arouse the whole orchestra to a feverish pitch of excitement; and you too will feel obliged to hold [your assistant] in your arms, so voluptuous will be my melodies.” Lamoreaux must have been convinced, because he quickly premiered it with his orchestra. The piece was an instant hit and – in spite of the fact that he later wrote longer and weightier pieces – remained his most popular. These days, *España* is the *only* piece by Chabrier that most people recognize. (The main theme was even used – in a much-cheaper form – for the 1950s hit tune *Hot Diggity*). Chabrier composed for only ten more years before illness incapacitated him. Another composer once called him a “joking angel,” but Chabrier gives himself a better assessment:

“I am virtually self-taught. I belong to no school. I have more temperament than talent. There are many things that one must learn in youth which I shall never attain; but I live and breathe in music, I write as I feel, with more temperament than technique. But what's the difference? I think I am an honest and sincere man.”

The Three Cornered Hat, Suites 1 and 2

Manuel de Falla (1876 – 1946)

Written: 1918 – 1919

Movements: Eight

Style: Spanish Impressionism

Duration: 23 minutes

If you were into the arts at the beginning of the twentieth century, Paris was the place to be. Igor Stravinsky was there shaking up the classical music world at the same time that Pablo Picasso was shaking up the world of art. Gertrude Stein—“A rose is a rose”—from America was there. So was the Irishman James Joyce. In the middle of it all was the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev. He teamed up various artists to produce works for his company, the Ballet Russes. Many of the great works of the twentieth century were a result of those extraordinary collaborations.

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

As a young man, the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla wrote *zarzuelas*, a type of Spanish operetta. In 1907, he went to Paris to broaden his horizons and study the techniques of other great European composers. While there, he rubbed shoulders with the French impressionists Debussy and Ravel who, at the same time, were experimenting with the exoticism of Spanish music. Falla's studies in Paris enabled him to combine melodies and rhythms of his native Spain with the fantastic colors and harmonies of French impressionism.

Back in Spain, Falla wrote *The Three-Cornered Hat* as incidental music for a pantomime. He based it on the 1874 novel written by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. Serge Diaghilev saw the production and convinced Falla to rewrite it as a ballet—and enlisted Picasso for the sets and Léonide Massine for the choreography.

The humorous story is about a miller and his lovely young wife. At the beginning of the ballet, they are joyfully tending their grapes. The *Corregidor* (governor), wearing the sign of his office, a three-cornered hat, approaches. He flirts with the miller's wife, but his own wife's glare sets him on his way. Later he returns to flirt some more. This time, the miller hides while his wife dances a seductive *fandango*. Lunging forward for a kiss, the *Corregidor* falls into a bush. The miller appears, feigning alarm at the governor's intrusion, and then the happy couple sends the old man on his way.

That evening, the miller and his neighbors are celebrating St. John's night when the *Corregidor's* bodyguards come and arrest the miller. Unable to follow, the miller's wife retreats to her bedroom. She hears a song, sung in the distance, about how married couples should sleep with their doors locked because the devil isn't sleeping! The *Corregidor* heads for the miller's house, but in the darkness falls into some water. His cries bring the miller's wife. Indignant that she still refuses him, he draws a pistol. However, so does she. In the confusion, she drops it and runs away. The *Corregidor* goes into the miller's house, takes off his wet clothes, and climbs into the miller's bed.

Meanwhile, the miller has escaped. He comes home, finds the *Corregidor's* clothes, and in a fit

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

of rage exchanges them with his own clothes. He leaves a note: “I’m off to avenge myself. Your wife, too, is very handsome.” The *Corregidor* finds the note, puts on the miller’s clothes, and is promptly apprehended by his own bodyguards. The miller’s wife returns. She sees who she thinks is her husband, and attacks the bodyguard. The miller enters and sees his wife defending the *Corregidor*! Not to worry – this is ballet after all. All ends well as the couple is reunited and the *Corregidor* is tossed in a blanket.

The music extracted from the ballet for the suites from *The Three-Cornered hat* is as fun as the story. It combines traditional Spanish dances such as *seguidillas*, *fandangos*, and *faruccas* with orchestral writing that is some of the most colorful and masterful of the Spanish school.

Nights in the Gardens of Spain

Manuel de Falla (1876 – 1946)

Written: 1916

Movements: Three

Style: Impressionist

Duration: 26 minutes

Speaking proudly of the music of his native Spain, Manuel de Falla once said, “The excellence of natural Andalusian melody is revealed by the fact that it is the only music continuously and abundantly used by foreign composers.” After the French Maurice Ravel composed *Rhapsodie espagnole* in 1907 and Claude Debussy wrote *Iberia* one year later, it seems inevitable that the three great Spanish composers living in Paris, Isaac Albéniz, Joaquín Turina and Manuel de Falla, would feel compelled to offer their own impressions of their native land. As Turina wrote, “We were three Spaniards gathered together in that corner of Paris, and it was our duty to fight bravely for the national music of our country.” Falla’s contribution to the struggle was the remarkable *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. He wrote it in 1909 as a set of piano nocturnes and then the piano virtuoso Ricardo Viñes encouraged him to expand them into a larger composition for piano and orchestra. Falla completed it in its present form seven years later upon his return to Spain.

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

Nights in the Gardens of Spain is not a piano concerto and, in spite of the subtitle “symphonic impressions,” it is not a symphony either. Instead, the piano and orchestra together celebrate the Andalusian and Catalan music of Falla’s youth, often recalling the sound of the Spanish guitar or the gypsy *zambra* musicians. The first movement, entitled “In the Generalife,” depicts the jasmine-scented gardens in the Alhambra, the fourteenth-century Islamic palace outside Granada. The themes of this movement, first introduced in the orchestra, have a distinctly Oriental flavor, though liberally seasoned with pronounced Spanish rhythms. The piano seems to stand apart, as if reverently commenting on the wonderful history of this place.

Brilliant, rhythmic piano gestures and guitar-like strumming in the orchestra mark the second movement, “Distant Dance.” The final movement, “In the Gardens of the Mountains of Córdoba,” is a wild rustic dance that eventually gives way to a slower, amorous melody and fades away, exhausted, into the quiet of another Andalusian dawn.

“If these ‘symphonic impressions’ have achieved their object,” wrote Falla, “the mere enumeration of their titles should be a sufficient guide to the listener. Although in this work – as in all which have a legitimate claim to be considered as music – the composer has followed a definite design ... the end for which it was written is no other than to evoke places, sensations, and sentiments. The themes employed are abased (as in much of the composers’ earlier work) on the rhythms, modes, cadences, and ornamental figures which distinguish the popular music of Andalucía, though they are rarely used in their original form; and the orchestration frequently employs, and employs in a conventional manner, certain effects peculiar to the popular instruments used in those parts of Spain. The music has no pretensions to being descriptive; it is merely expressive. But something more than the sound of festivals and dances has inspired these ‘evocations of sound,’ for melancholy and mystery have their part also.”

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

Boléro

Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)

Written: 1928

Movements: One

Style: Impressionist

Duration: 13 minutes

“He’s mad!” a woman in the audience cried out. This was at the premiere of Maurice Ravel’s *Boléro*. Ravel heard the exclamation, smiled, and then commented that she understood the piece. As he himself said, “C’est une blague” (“It’s nonsense”). Two years later, Ravel explained his *Boléro* for London’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper:

“I am particularly desirous that there should be no misunderstanding about this work. It constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or anything more than, it actually does achieve. Before its first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting seventeen minutes and consisting wholly of ‘orchestral tissue without music’ – of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention except the plan and the manner of the execution. ... It is perhaps because of these peculiarities that no single composer likes the *Boléro* – and from their point of view, they are quite right. I have carried out exactly what I intended, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it.”

Ravel originally wrote *Boléro* for a ballet. The dancer and patron Ida Rubinstein asked Ravel to orchestrate some piano music of the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz. The project was well under way when Ravel discovered that Enrique Arbós had already orchestrated them and held the copyright. So, he decided to orchestrate one of his own pieces. It took about five months. The action of the ballet centers on a Gypsy woman (Ida Rubinstein) dancing the *Boléro*, alone on a tabletop, surrounded by men. As her movements become livelier, the men become more and more excited and begin pounding out a repetitious rhythm on the table. As the volume of the music

MasterWorks 1: España Program Notes

reaches its peak, and the harmony finally changes, the tension snaps; out come the knives and then there is a violent barroom brawl.

These days, you won't often see the ballet performed, but the music remains one of the most popular of the orchestral repertoire. In spite of its simple and repetitious form, it is a *tour-de-force*. The snare drum plays the same rhythm for the entire work while gradually getting louder and louder. Under this, there is a simple harmony using only two chords. The long melody has four parts. The first and second are simple and use notes only from the C Major scale (similar to the white keys on the piano). The third and fourth parts are more exotic and complex, have a wider range, and use colorfully inflected notes outside the scale. The whole melody gets played four times, with a shortened fifth start. The volume gets louder as the orchestral tone color becomes increasingly complex. After a while, the incessant rhythm, the repetitive harmony, and the intoxicating melody become almost hypnotic. Right at the climax of the crescendo, the harmony suddenly shifts to E Major. After one of the greatest catharses in all of music, the piece ends quickly.

©2009 John P. Varineau