

Flint Symphony Orchestra
2023 – 2024 Season
Masterworks 5: Journey to Spain
April 13, 2024

Manuel de Falla: "Ritual Fire Dance" from *El amor brujo*

Aided by Thomas Edison's early wax cylinder recorders, many young composers at the turn of the 20th century took an active part in collecting and preserving music from their countries' oral traditions. Béla Bartók and Zóltan Kodály in eastern Europe, Ralph Vaughan Williams and his friend Gustav Holst in England, and the uncompromising American maverick Charles Ives were all influenced by the style of these folk tunes and assimilated that style into the music they produced for the concert hall, deepening and enriching their own musical language.

In Spain, Manuel de Falla inhaled the aromas of Spanish folk and popular music (Andalusian flamenco, zarzuela, and the traditional *gitanía* music of Spain's nomadic Roma population) and exhaled those influences in music that combined them with the harmonic, melodic and orchestral innovations of Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Born in Cadiz, Falla began his musical studies in piano and composition in his hometown and later honed his skills at the Royal Conservatory in Madrid. He moved to Paris in 1907, where he met Stravinsky, Paul Dukas, Pablo Picasso, the impresario Sergei Diaghilev and other artists and composers of the Parisian avant-garde. With the outbreak of war in 1914, Falla returned to Madrid.

The famous flamenco performer Pastora Imperio approached Falla to ask him to write a *gitanería* (a Romani-style mini-musical) for her cabaret act that would feature her talents as both a singer and a dancer. Pastora had her mother, Rosario la Mejorana, sing for Falla and his lyricist, Gregorio Martínez Sierra, in order to give them some idea of the traditional spirit that she had in mind. Her mother's singing was so passionate and persuasive that Falla and Sierra decided to expand the nightclub act into a ballet, *El amor brujo* (Love, the Magician), scored for small instrumental ensemble.

The initial performances of the work in 1915 were unsuccessful (though they did nothing to tarnish Pastora Imperio's popularity). Falla began the process of revising the work for more traditional concert forces as well as tightening up both the drama and the music. Over the next decade, Falla created no fewer than nine revised versions of the work, with the final version only two-thirds of the length of the original.

The plot of the ballet revolves around a supernatural love triangle: the young gypsy girl Candelas attracts the attention of the handsome Carmelo and wants to requite his love, but the jealous ghost of her first lover haunts her and continually interferes with their courtship. Candelas' attempts to break the spell are all to no avail. Carmelo, growing frustrated with the specter's interference, persuades his beautiful young friend Lucía to try to seduce the ghost and draw him away from Candelas until she and Carmelo can kiss. When they do, the ghost is finally exorcised, and the spell is broken.

The *Ritual Fire Dance* is arguably the most famous excerpt from the work. Quiet, ominous trills in the low woodwinds are joined by a rhythmic ostinato in piano, basses, and timpani, which introduces a

sinuous, flamenco-style melody in the oboe. Repetitions of this melody throughout the orchestra are interrupted by stentorian blasts from the horns. The tempo and energy of the dance rise to a fever pitch before brusque chords imitating the violent strumming of a guitar, bring the piece to a fiery conclusion.

Joaquin Rodrigo: *Concierto de Aranjuez* for Guitar and Orchestra

Every artist responds to injustice, war, and violence in a different way. Beethoven violently slashed his pen through his dedication to Napoléon Bonaparte on the title page of his “Eroica” Symphony when Bonaparte declared himself Emperor. Dmitri Shostakovich depicted the mechanized terror of the Nazi invasion of his country with a pompously vulgar and repetitive march in his “Leningrad” Symphony. Pablo Picasso responded to the senseless bombing of innocent civilians by Franco’s forces (aided by the the Italian Air Force and the German Luftwaffe) in his native Spain by painting the stark and moving “Guernica.”

Other musicians react to the cruelty and inhumanity of the world by creating their own oasis from violent conflict and asking us to join them in it. Such is the case with Joaquín Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez*, written during the Spanish Civil War and on the cusp of the Second World War. Rodrigo had been studying in Paris and had taught in France and Germany when his scholarship was cut off at the start of the Spanish Civil War. With the victory of Franco’s forces in 1939, Rodrigo and his wife returned to Spain.

While in Paris, Rodrigo had written several works which had yet to be performed. One of these was the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, dedicated to the Spanish guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza, the soloist for the premiere in Barcelona in 1940. One of the critics present at the first performance recognized the importance of Rodrigo’s work to Spanish music: “...it is impossible to find another Spanish work with such exciting picturesque qualities and formal perfection. For the first time in the history of our music, the picturesque and the classical are fused, reciprocally mitigating and enlivening each other.” The concerto takes its inspiration from the 16th -century Palacio Real de Aranjuez, the summer palace of the Bourbon monarchy, and specifically the palace’s spectacular gardens. The concerto is not overtly pictorial, but rather attempts to evoke the moods of the gardens – the textures, sounds and smells. Rodrigo recognized this when he wrote:

...in its notes one may fancy seeing the ghost of Goya, held in thrall by melancholia. Its music seems to revive the essence of an 18th century court where the aristocratic blended with the popular element, and one could say that in its themes there lingers on the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds, and the gushing of fountains, although any more specific description is absent. It is a synthesis of the classical and the popular in point of form and sentiment, dreams hidden beneath the foliage of the park surrounding the baroque palace, and only wants to be as nimble as a butterfly and as controlled as a verónica (a maneuver a bullfighter performs with his cape).

At the time of the premiere, Spain was adjusting to the new Franco regime. Artists of all kinds, including composers, had to create works that at least appeared to celebrate the victory of the new government. The Franco regime may have taken *Concierto de Aranjuez* as a compliment, as though Rodrigo were comparing the Spanish Nationalists to the noble leaders of the Golden Age. Others may have seen it as a

less flattering comparison – Rodrigo underlining the oppression of the new dictatorship by contrasting it with a far more prosperous and civilized era of Spanish history.

Speculation about the origin and meaning of the exquisite *Adagio* began shortly after the premiere. Rodrigo himself said nothing about this ravishingly beautiful but sorrowful movement. Many thought it was a lament for the victims of the 1937 bombing of Guerníca. Rodrigo's wife, Victoria, stated in her autobiography that this movement depicted both the joy of the newly married couple's honeymoon and the unbearable anguish of the miscarriage of their first child. Yet in one of his letters, Rodrigo mentions that the whole of the last two movements came to him in his Paris studio in November 1938, a full six months before the miscarriage.

The work is in three movements. Spanish dance is present from the opening bars, with the soloist introducing an ostinato of strummed guitar chords alternating between a feeling of two beats and three beats. This rhythmic figure pervades the entire movement, evoking the spirit of flamenco. While Rodrigo never directly quotes Spanish folk music, it inspires both his melody and harmony.

The *Adagio* also opens with strummed guitar chords, over which the English horn floats a lament full of both yearning and regret. The soloist elaborates on this melody and engages in dialogue with other instruments in the orchestra, leading to the guitar cadenza at the heart of the movement. The intensity of the cadenza builds to a passionate climax, followed by the full orchestra responding in equal ardor with a fully scored version of the opening melody. Its grief spent, the movement slowly ebbs into gentle harmonics in both the strings and the guitar.

The third movement returns to the lively dancing of the opening movement, again alternating between duple and triple meters. The textures are light, with echoes of Baroque dances pervading the entire movement, dispelling the sorrowful shades of the *Adagio*. While the solo guitar's virtuosity is on full display, the work finishes quietly, as though the dancers and musicians have decided to gracefully conclude the festivities.

Maurice Ravel: Works inspired by Spain

Though we label Maurice Ravel as a French composer, he was born in the Basque region of southern France, only eleven miles from the Spanish border. His mother was Basque, but she spent most of her early life in Madrid. Ravel recalled one of his earliest memories was of his mother singing Spanish folk songs to him. At age thirteen he made the acquaintance of the renowned Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, who remained a lifelong friend and became one of the foremost interpreters of Ravel's piano music. He also had a long acquaintance with the great Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, who wrote to a friend about his impressions of the Spanish colors of Ravel's music:

But how was I to account for the subtly genuine Spanishness of Ravel, knowing, because he had told me so, that the only link he had with my country was to have been born near the border! The mystery was soon explained: Ravel's was a Spain he had felt in an idealized way through his mother. She was a lady of exquisite conversation. She spoke fluent Spanish, which I enjoyed so much when she evoked the years of her youth, spent in Madrid, an epoch earlier than mine, but traces of its habits that were familiar to me still remained. Then I understood with what

fascination her son must have listened to these memories that were undoubtedly intensified by the additional force all reminiscence gets from the song or dance theme inseparably connected with it.

These Spanish-influenced pieces run through Ravel's entire career, and the four pieces on tonight's program are among the most enduring of his orchestral works.

Maurice Ravel: *Alborada del gracioso*

Like many of Ravel's orchestral works, *Alborada del gracioso* began as a piano work, published as part of the suite *Miroirs* in 1905. The title translates roughly as "Morning Song of the Jester," but Ravel was disinclined to provide a translation. In a response to a question about the title, he wrote:

I understand your bafflement over how to translate the title 'Alborada del gracioso.' That is precisely why I decided not to translate it. The fact is that the gracioso of Spanish comedy is a rather special character and one which, so far as I know, is not found in any other theatrical tradition. We do have an equivalent, though, in the French theater: Beaumarchais' Figaro. But he's more philosophical, less well-meaning than his Spanish ancestor.

The crisp and scintillating rhythms of flamenco provide rhythmic drive to the outer sections of *Alborada del gracioso*. Ravel toys with rhythmic pulses of two beats and three beats, with the clatter of castanets adding to the Spanish atmosphere. A more meditative middle section features a melancholy bassoon soliloquy answered by the ethereal textures of string harmonics and harp. A brief sensual climax precedes the return of the opening material, now reorchestrated and leading to the final orchestral frenzy, leaving us with the impression that our jester might be a subtle but passionate Spanish cousin to Stravinsky's Petrouchka.

Maurice Ravel: *Rapsodie Espagnol*

In 1907, Ravel wrote three Spanish-themed works, his farcical one-act opera *L'Heure Espagnole*, a brief work for bass voice and piano called *Vocalise – Étude en forme de habanera*, and his first published orchestral work, the *Rapsodie Espagnol*.

Though the entire work was finished in the remarkable span just thirty days, Ravel had drawn upon an earlier work, his *Habanera* for two pianos of 1895, as the basis for the *Rapsodie's* third movement. The orchestration was completed shortly thereafter and the work received its world premiere on March 15, 1908 in Paris under the baton of Édouard Colonne.

Manuel de Falla was among the first to hear the work and he found it to be an authentic expression of the Spanish character:

This 'Hispanization' is not achieved merely by drawing upon popular 'folk' sources (except in the jota in 'Feria'), but rather through the free use of the modal rhythms and melodies and

ornamental figures of our 'popular' music, none of which has altered in any way the natural style of the composer.

Each movement of the *Rapsodie* is a brief symphonic poem, a symphonic postcard of Spanish music. The opening *Prélude a la nuit* (Prelude to the night) begins with an ethereal descending four-note figure in the violins which subsequently passes to other sections of the orchestra. Woodwinds comment with two-note melodic fragments that expand into a sinuous melody, reminiscent of a slow, sensual Spanish dance. Two brief surges demonstrate that this Spanish night contains passion as well as mystery, but after brief cadenzas for clarinet and bassoon the music gradually dissolves back into the darkness from which it began. The *Malagueña* opens with a texture much like a flamenco guitar, over which woodwinds swirl and bubble. The orchestra settles into an energetic fandango, but the night music of the first movement returns before the movement evaporates in a quiet flourish of woodwinds. The *Habanera* is an uneasy meditation on its underlying rhythm, its repeated ostinato clothed in a wide and subtle palette of orchestral colors. The concluding *Feria* (Festival) begins in the same nervous quiet atmosphere as the *Malagueña* before breaking into a full-blown *jota*, dancing ecstatically and spurred on by chortling horns and exuberant castanets. A brief slow section returns us to the sensual world of the *Habanera* and further evocation of the *Prélude*, with the descending figures decorated with eerie string glissandos. The dance whirls faster and faster, but stops for a single unexpected moment of suspense before sweeping into the joyous final cadence.

Maurice Ravel: *Pavane pour une infante défunte*

In his early years in Paris, Ravel became a frequent visitor to the salon of the Princesse de Polignac, (born as Winnaretta Singer, heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune). A renowned patron of the arts, the princess held regular concerts at her residence, where the music room could comfortably seat 250 people. She commissioned works from many of the twentieth century's most famous composers, including Stravinsky, Fauré, Satie, Tailleferre, Poulenc and Weill. Originally written in 1899, the work was first performed as a piano piece in 1902 with the orchestral version following in 1910.

As with *Alborada del gracioso*, translation of *Pavane pour une infante défunte* proves somewhat problematic. Usually rendered in English as "Pavane for a Dead Princess," it might be better translated as a "Pavane for a Princess from Bygone Days," *défunte* being closer to "defunct" than "dead." With the pavane being a Renaissance dance form, the latter translation is probably more apt. Ravel was asked about this title as well, and he responded that he chose it largely because he liked the sound of the words. He also mentioned that he imagined a princess like those painted by Diego Velázquez dancing to the *Pavane*.

Like Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, Ravel's *Pavane* became so popular that the composer began to despise it, upset that a work so atypical of his style overshadowed his other music. Despite his aversion, Ravel recorded a piano roll of the *Pavane* in 1922. The work's classical poise touched with a hint of melancholy has made it one of Ravel's most familiar and most beloved works.

Maurice Ravel: *Boléro*

Like Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Ravel's *Boléro* has taken on a life of its own in our popular culture. In addition to providing a soundtrack for Dudley Moore's midlife crisis in Blake Edwards' 1979 movie *10*, *Boléro* underscored the fantastical animation of the "Evolution" episode in Bruno Bozzetto's madcap *Fantasia* parody *Allegro non troppo* and left an indelible impression on a worldwide audience in Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's gold medal performance in pairs figure skating at the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo.

Boléro sprang to life from the idea of dance and movement, and was originally intended as a ballet. Before leaving for a concert tour of the United States in early 1928, Maurice Ravel promised to write a new work for the dancer Ida Rubinstein and her company for the upcoming fall season. While on vacation at Saint-Jean-de-Luz that summer, he played a rather innocuous melody for his guest, the music critic Gustave Samazeuilh. "Don't you think this theme has a certain insistent quality?" Ravel inquired. "I'm going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can." That project bore the working title *Fandango*, but Ravel felt that it did not fit the character of the music and changed it to *Boléro*. The first performance in November 1928 at the Paris Opera was a huge success. Once Rubinstein's performance rights expired, the work took on a second life in the concert hall, where it is heard the most often today.

Ravel was as surprised as anyone that *Boléro* became such a resounding audience favorite. He considered it more a compositional exercise than an attempt at artistic expression. His later explanation of the work is more dismissive than informative:

"I am particularly anxious that there should be no misunderstanding as to my Boléro. It is an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and it should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or anything more than, it actually does achieve. Before the first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece...consisting wholly of orchestral texture without music—of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention except in the plan and the manner of the execution. The themes are impersonal—folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind. Whatever may have been said to the contrary, the orchestral treatment is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.... I have done exactly what I have set out to do, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it."

The construction of the work is very simple. A single snare drum taps out a two-measure bolero rhythm, which will continue through the entire 16-minute length of the work. The solo flute enters with a sinuous melody in two parts. This melody is repeated, unaltered and unmodulated, by solo instruments and then with groups of instruments. Strings gradually switch from pizzicato to arco, and divide into harmony parts within each section, creating an increasingly lush string texture. With each change in instrumentation, the volume builds imperceptibly. *Boléro* remains obstinately in C major, until, just at the climax, the tonality shifts from C major to an even brighter E major for eight measures. The orchestra relentlessly pounds out the snare drum rhythm in the final bars, embellished with wild glissandi in the trombones and saxophones before the brutal, snarling final chords.