



Sounds of Spain

||| This weekend we travel to the Iberian Peninsula via music from France, Russia, and – yes – Spain. Lush orchestral colorings abound in this program of music by Bizet, Chabrier, Falla, Ravel, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Enjoy!

EMMANUEL CHABRIER

Born 18 January 1841; Ambert, France
Died 13 September 1894; Paris, France

España

Composed: 1883

First performance: 4 November 1883; Paris, France

Last MSO performance: April 1998; Andreas Delfs, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 4 bassoons; 4 horns; 4 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle); 2 harps; strings

Approximate duration: 8 minutes

Though his primary output includes operas, songs, and piano music, the French composer Emmanuel Chabrier is best known for two orchestral works, *España* and *Joyeuse march*. Chabrier numbered among his friends the leading composers, writers, and painters of his day. One of his closest associates was Edouard Manet, who painted Chabrier's portrait in 1880. Chabrier himself collected Impressionist works of art long before they became fashionable.

During the latter half of 1882, Chabrier and his wife toured Spain, during which time he did research into the dance forms of the various regions. In a letter to a friend, Chabrier stated that when he returned home to Paris, he would compose an "extraordinary fantasia" that would rouse the audience to feverish excitement. And that is exactly what he did.

Chabrier built his sparkling orchestral rhapsody *España* on two characteristic Spanish dances – the voluptuous *malaguena* and the brisk *jota* – and added a lively theme of his own, first sounded by the trombones. The infectious rhythmic vitality, replete with shifting accentuations and polyrhythmic overlapping – lends a sense of *joie de vivre* to the piece. At the same time, its brilliantly hued orchestration is just as impressive, calling for out-of-the-way instruments such as cornets and basque tambourine and requiring colorful effects like *col legno*, where the strings play with the wood of their bows.

As Chabrier predicted, the work was an immediate hit, encored at its premiere, lauded by the audience, the critics, and fellow composers alike. Manuel de Falla thought no Spanish composer had succeeded in writing so genuine a rendition of the *jota*. Gustav Mahler, during his tenure at the New York Philharmonic, reportedly declared to his musicians that *España* was "the start of modern music." And in 1956, Perry Como had a No. 1 hit on the *Billboard* charts with "Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom)," whose melody appropriated Chabrier's music. For his part, the composer described *España* as "a piece in F and nothing more."

Recommended recording: Ernest Ansermet, L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (Decca) 

MANUEL DE FALLA

Born 23 November 1876; Cádiz, Spain

Died 14 November 1946; Alta Gracia, Argentina

Nights in the Gardens of Spain

Composed: 1915

First performance: 9 April 1916; Madrid, Spain

Last MSO performance: March 2016; Jun Märkl, conductor;
Ingrid Fliter, piano

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; English horn; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (cymbals, triangle); harp; celeste; strings

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Manuel de Falla is one of the few Spanish composers across the centuries to gain international renown. Though his music remained rooted in the folk music of his native country, he learned much from his French colleagues, particularly Debussy and Ravel. Their influence is immediately recognizable in *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. We might also detect a whiff of the Russian nationalists, particularly the instrumental colorings of Rimsky-Korsakov. Originally begun in 1909 as a set of three nocturnes for solo piano, Falla ultimately scored the work for piano and orchestra. Along with the ballets *El amor brujo* ("Love, the Magician") and *The Three Cornered Hat*, it remains one of his best-known works.

Nights in the Gardens of Spain began as a set of three nocturnes for piano solo. The year was 1909 and Falla was living in Paris at the time. After a close friend, the distinguished pianist Ricardo Viñes, advised him to score the music for piano and orchestra, Falla set the piece aside, only returning to it six years later, when he was again living in his native country. A fourth movement, tango, was originally planned, but this later became the Pantomime in *El amor brujo*.

The composer called this set of three evocative pieces "symphonic impressions." Though the piano solo is eloquent and sometimes virtuosic, it does not behave in the manner of a piano concerto. Instead, it is part of the overall texture, weaving its lines in and out of the orchestral fabric. The opening movement is set in the Generalife, the gardens surrounding the summer palace at the Alhambra. The elegant music depicts the elegant locale, and we hear echoes of a flamenco guitar. For Distant Dance, the sensual and dramatic second movement, the garden is unnamed. Above dizzily spinning figures, an assertive dance melody springs forth; as it grows louder, a second theme is introduced before all fades into the distance. In the Sierra de Cordoba, there's plenty of drama – as well as crystalline, guitar-inspired phrases and expressive romantic passages for piano and strings. As the music quickly fades, we're left with the nostalgic memory of an idyllic locale.

Recommended recording: Alicia de Larrocha; Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, London Philharmonic Orchestra (Decca) 

GEORGES BIZET

Born 25 October 1838; Paris, France

Died 3 June 1875; Bougival, France

Suite No. 1 from *Carmen*

Composed: 1873-74 (opera); 1882 (suite)

First performance: 3 March 1875; Paris, France (opera)

Last MSO performance: MSO premiere

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn); 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle); harp; strings

Approximate duration: 11 minutes

Georges Bizet was something of a musical prodigy. At age four, his mother – herself a talented pianist – taught him to read music even as she taught him the

alphabet. Soon after, he formed the habit of listening through the door while his father taught voice lessons. By age nine, young Georges had ingested all the musical instruction his parents had to offer, and was granted a special dispensation to enter the Paris Conservatoire. While there, he wrote his Symphony in C (1855) – at age 17 – and the following year he won the Prix de Rome, for his one-act operetta *Le Docteur Miracle* (1856).

Throughout his too-short life, Bizet composed songs, choral music, and piano music (an exceptional pianist, he could have had a concert career, had he chosen that path). We remember him today chiefly as an opera composer, and then only through two stage works, *The Pearl Fishers* and *Carmen*. At the time of their premieres, they were poorly received. *Carmen's* failure before the public cast Bizet into a deep depression, one that probably contributed to his early death, by heart attack, at age 36. Nowadays, *Carmen* is one of the most popular works in the operatic canon. With its eminently hummable tunes, its exotic setting (Seville, 1820), and its well-known story of love, lust, betrayal, and murder, it never fails to please.

In 1882, Bizet's close friend Ernest Guiraud (1837-1892) compiled the first of two suites of excerpts, retaining the composer's original orchestration. Suite No. 1 begins with music from the opera's prelude, sounding the ominous "fate" theme. The swirling Aragonaise is taken from the prelude to Act 4, as crowds arrive for a parade and a bullfight. The Intermezzo, with its lyrical woodwind solos, opens Act 3; the curtain rises on the smugglers' camp in a picturesque spot among rocks on a mountain. An orchestral arrangement of *Carmen's* Act 1 Seguidille follows; in it, she convinces Don José to set her free – she has been arrested for fighting with another woman and he has been tasked with taking her to jail – and to join her later at the tavern of her friend Lillas Pastia. Act 2 begins with Les dragons d'Alcala (The Dragoons of Alcala), as two gypsy girls dance before a crowd of soldiers in a smoke-filled tavern. Les Toréadors is the music that opens the opera, preceding the "fate" motif; those two themes will be heard again at the end of the opera, jarringly juxtaposed. Here, we also get a whiff of the bullfighter Escamillo's song, one of the best-known melodies in all opera. *En garde!*

Recommended recording: Leonard Slatkin, Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra (Telarc) 

NICOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Born 18 March 1844; Tikhvin, Russia

Died 21 June 1908; Lybensk, Russia

Capriccio espagnol, Opus 34

Composed: 1887

First performance: 31 October 1887; St. Petersburg, Russia

Last MSO performance: May 2004; Peter Oundjian, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes (1st doubling English horn); 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, castanets, cymbals, snare drum, tambourine, triangle); harp; strings

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

Most classical music enthusiasts know Rimsky-Korsakov primarily by three pieces: the *Capriccio espagnol*, the *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, and *Scheherazade*, all written within a span of less than two years (1887-88). Though the composer was only in his mid-40s, they became virtually his last essays in purely orchestral music, for in 1889 he decided to expend most of his creative energy writing opera.

Rimsky-Korsakov had piano lessons from age six and had composed some pieces for that instrument, but his heart was not set on music. His ambition was a naval career, in emulation of his much older brother Voin. Accordingly, he enrolled in the College of Naval Cadets in

St. Petersburg. There, he continued to take lessons and was a decent enough pianist and an earnest, if unschooled, composer. In December 1861, his piano teacher, Théodore Canille, introduced him to the composer Mily Balakirev. The still-teenaged Rimsky-Korsakov immediately fell under the spell of the fiery Balakirev, who encouraged the naval officer to pursue a career as a composer, though the latter had no formal training. He taught himself orchestration and, while still in the navy, completed a symphony, a tone poem, and an opera. (His autodidacticism was so thorough he later wrote a book, *The Principles of Orchestration*, which is still in use today.)

From the opening measures of *Capriccio espagnol*, Rimsky-Korsakov's mastery of orchestral color is apparent. Tailored for the 67 members of the St. Petersburg Imperial Opera Orchestra, the work is set in five movements, to be played without pause. Each is based on a Spanish melody. At the first rehearsal, the players offered enthusiastic applause after each section.

The work begins with an Alborado (morning song), a dance to celebrate the sunrise. Its tempo marking is *Vivo e strepitoso*, lively and resounding. The second movement is a set of variations. A nostalgic melody is introduced by the horns, then repeated by other instruments and sections of the orchestra. The third movement is like the first, but with different orchestration and set in a different key. The *Scena e canto gitano* (scene and gypsy song) opens with five cadenzas, played above percussion rolls: horns and trumpets; violin, flute, clarinet; harp. (We can assume Rimsky-Korsakov fashioned these for his favorite Imperial Orchestra musicians.)

A foot-tapping dance in triple time leads to the *Fandango asturiano*, a brisk dance from the Asturias region in northwestern Spain. A restatement of the opening alborado theme brings the work to its rousing conclusion.

Recommended recording: Neeme Järvi, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra
(Deutsche Grammophon) 

MAURICE RAVEL

Born 7 March 1875; Ciboure, France

Died 28 December 1937; Paris, France

Boléro

Composed: 1928

First performance: 22 November 1928 (as a ballet)

Last MSO performance: June 2014; Gilbert Varga, conductor
Instrumentation:
2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); piccolo; 2 oboes (2nd doubling oboe d'amore); English horn; 2 clarinets (2nd doubling E-flat clarinet); bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 4 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (cymbals, snare drum, tam tam, bass drum); harp; celeste; strings

Approximate duration: 13 minutes

Maurice Ravel was born in Cibourne, not far from France's border with Spain. His mother was from that country's Basque region and had grown up in Madrid. Thus, his preoccupation with things Spanish is a natural evolution, even though his family moved to the French capital while he was still a baby. His father was Swiss, and instilled in young Maurice an admiration for things meticulous and mechanical that found its way into his flawless music, a characteristic that prompted Stravinsky to label Ravel a "Swiss watchmaker."

Ravel's precision and fastidiousness is nowhere more apparent than in *Boléro*, his best-known work. It was commissioned by Ida Rubenstein – dancer, actress, art patron, and Belle Époque personality – as a ballet. Originally, she had asked Ravel to orchestrate six piano pieces from Albéniz's *Iberia*, but they ran into copyright restrictions. Though these were later waived, Ravel – after eschewing the idea of orchestrating one of his own piano pieces – chose to write an altogether new work.

In his biography of Ravel, Arbie Orenstein relates the story of how the composer, vacationing at St. Jean-de-Luz, went to the piano and played a melody with one finger to his friend Gustave Samazeuih. "Do you think this theme has an insistent quality?" he asked. "I'm going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can." And that is exactly what he did, for *Boléro* is a study in orchestral tone colors and a well-paced crescendo. Its hypnotic two-bar rhythmic pattern is sounded incessantly by the snare drum as various instruments take their turn at the melody Ravel so unceremoniously pounded out on the piano keys. As the piece progresses, the harmonic underpinning becomes thicker and louder until, toward the very end, the whole orchestra is playing. After nearly 15 minutes in C major, Ravel throws a harmonic curveball by shifting up to E major. C major is soon reestablished, however, and the whole orchestra takes up the snare drum's rhythm.

The ballet's scenario, as devised by Rubenstein and choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, is set in a Spanish tavern where people dance beneath a brass ceiling lamp. In response to the cheers to join in, a female dancer has leapt onto a long table. Her steps become more and more passionate. For his part, Ravel preferred a different setting for his "*danse lascive*," an open-air setting with a factory in the background, mirroring the music's mechanical personality. Despite *Boléro*'s popularity, the composer remained unimpressed with his creation. "Alas, it has no music," he opined.

Recommended recording: Pierre Boulez, New York Philharmonic (Sony) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.