

Concert 5

April 27, 2019

Suite No. 1 from *Carmen*—Georges Bizet

Georges Bizet was a genuine musical prodigy, whose talent was early and widely recognized, who studied with the best teachers and composers in France, who perhaps was the close equal of Liszt as a pianist, who won the *Prix de Rome*, and who composed perhaps the most popular opera of all time. And yet--his career was a checkered one, full of missteps, works that were never finished, works that were finished and not performed, betrayals and failures with the French operatic establishment, and an early death. He planned, started, or substantially worked on some thirty operas, but finished only about five, of which only two achieved success. His musical legacy was a story of lost manuscripts, poor or no scholarly attention, bad editions, and general neglect. Today, the American musical public knows his work almost entirely through his immortal opera *Carmen*, and to a lesser degree, the opera *The Pearl Fishers*, as well as his orchestral suites of incidental music from the play, *L'Arlésienne*. The situation is only somewhat better in Europe--even in his native France. While he did compose a substantial body of work, it was admittedly irregular in quality, and certainly in reception. Moreover, to survive financially, he was reduced to spending much of his musical life arranging the music of other composers.

But there is *Carmen*. It clearly is one of the greatest operas of the nineteenth century, and takes a place of honor among all in the genre. After all the failures, disappointments, and false starts, Bizet hit pay dirt with this one. He worked on it during 1873-4, and its première took place at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in March of 1875. It was not an easy birth. The orchestra complained about the difficulty of the score ("unplayable"); the singers said the orchestra was too loud; the women in the chorus resented having to smoke and fight on stage. And more. But, the opera was a success, owing perhaps as much to its perceived scandalous nature as anything. And poor Bizet died shortly after two heart attacks in May at the age of thirty-six.

Now, of course, everyone appreciates Bizet's colorful, but relatively light, orchestration, and his real ear for tonal color that well suits the opera's Spanish setting. Even the master of orchestration himself, Richard Strauss, recommended students of the subject to *Carmen*, not to Wagner. Its evocation of Spain is matchless, and its realism on the stage made operatic history. The two suites extracted from the score by his friend, Ernest Guiraud, quickly entered into the standard repertoire for orchestra, and have remained so.

Suite No. 1 is comprised of six excerpts. The first, the "Prélude" from Act I, ominously sets the stage with its fate motive, featuring the color of the sinister, extremely low cornet. The "Aragonaise," the entr'acte to Act IV, features exotic percussion, woodwind solos, and gentle arabesques. The "Intermezzo," the entr'acte to Act III, is a delicate solo for flute and harp, whose tranquility is belied by the tragedy to come. Following is the "Séguedille" from Act I, where Carmen, jailed for slashing a co-worker's face, tries to seduce her captor, Don José, and effect her escape. Seductive, it is. "Les Dragons d'Acala" is the en'tracte before Act II, a pompous little military march for dragoons—not dragons--led by the bassoons. And finally the evergreen "Les Toréadors," from the prelude and the procession of the toreadors from Act IV ends the suite.

Bizet lived only one year longer than Mozart. But, Mozart left behind more masterpieces than any dozen geniuses should be allowed. Bizet finally found the voice of his genius just before he died. The mind reels with the possibilities if he, as did Verdi, had lived another half century.

***Fantasia para un gentilhombre*-- Joaquín Rodrigo**

For composers not of the ranks of the immortals it is rare to have the privilege to create the one composition that--almost alone of their works—seems to take on a life of its own, and becomes cherished by the whole world. We can think of Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, for example, and perhaps Alford's *Colonel Bogey March*, for another. Certainly, Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* for solo guitar and orchestra falls into this category.

Rodrigo lived a long life as an honored and distinguished composer, but he will always be remembered for this one composition. He composed many other works, of course, and during his lifetime he became one of the most distinguished composers that Spain has ever produced, along with Albéniz, Falla, Granados, and Turina. Born in Valencia, he contracted diphtheria when he was three years old and permanently lost his eyesight. He studied piano and violin early, and then advanced subjects at the conservatory in Valencia. In 1927 he moved to Paris where he became a composition student of Paul Dukas. He also studied musicology, which prepared him for his career in Spain as a professor of music history, as well as that of a music critic. He and his wife lived in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland until the events leading up to World War II forced their return to Spain, where they settled permanently in Madrid. For the rest of his life he was active as a composer, and was showered in honors and recognition. His musical style is steeped in traditional Spanish harmonic and melodic elements, and deep evocations of Spanish cultural elements. His education in Paris exposed him to Ravel, and the sophisticated subtleties of his own style reflect this. There is a sheen and beauty to his music that stems directly from his melding of French and Spanish characteristics.

After the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, surely his next most well known composition is the *Fantasia para un gentilhombre*, also a concerto for guitar and orchestra. In this case, it was commissioned by and dedicated to the esteemed virtuoso, Andrés Segovia—who is the “gentleman” in the title. Composed in 1954, it followed the earlier masterpiece in the genre by fifteen years. Much of the material in this concerto is based upon dances by Gaspar Sanz, a seventeenth-century Spanish composer and guitarist. The four movements vary considerably: The first movement is a sunny, bucolic setting of a *villano* (dance song), while the second is a meditative *españolito* that features a brief fanfare for the cavalry of Naples (the Spanish ruled there during the seventeenth century). The third movement—“Danza de las hachas”—is a virile dance in which torches or candlesticks are carried by the dancers. Finally, the last movement is a traditional *canario*, a fast dance in triple metre.

This gentle and ingratiating concerto is yet again compelling evidence of the authenticity of the individual voice in art, often to the exclusion of the mainstream musical style of the rest of the world. It is eloquent testimony that it is still possible to create moments of beauty in a modern world of confrontational art.

***Capriccio espagnole*, op. 34—Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's career stood in the very center of Russian musical life of the second half of the nineteenth century. His first career was in the Russian navy, but he soon garnered success in music. Known primarily for his fifteen operas, he was instrumental in the rising importance of that genre in Russia. In addition to his fame and influence as a composer, he was also head of the conservatory in St. Petersburg--his statue dominates the little park directly across the street from the conservatory and the famed Mariinsky Theatre. In the West, of course, we know him primarily for his symphonic overtures and the tone poem, *Scheherazade*. His ability as an orchestrator and teacher of orchestration is one of his many legacies--Igor

Stravinsky was one of his students. In fact, much of the marvelous musical atmosphere that audiences adore in Stravinsky's early ballets, the *Rite of Spring*, *Firebird*, and *Petrouchka*, leads directly back to Rimsky-Korsakov and the orchestral style of his operas. And it is of no small interest that there are sections in Debussy's *La Mer* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Cloé* that seem lifted right out of *Scheherazade*. A fascination with the exotic, with non-Western subject matter was a prime characteristic of Romanticism, and Russian music of the late nineteenth century is exemplary of this predilection.

Capriccio espagnole (1887) dates from the time of his ever-popular *Scheherazade* and *Russian Easter Overture*, and is just as infused with exotic and ethnic musical color as the latter works. While based upon indigenous Spanish themes, *Capriccio espagnole* is much more than a simple suite of orchestrated folk tunes. The composer was adamant about that, and the marvelous orchestral effects and completely integrated structure are clear evidence of the originality of the composer's vision. There are five sections, beginning with *Alborada*, a dance celebrating the rising sun that features florid solos by the clarinet and violin. The horn section begins the second section, *Variazioni*, with a rather doleful melody, quickly taken up by the strings, followed by the English horn and more iterations thereafter. The third section is basically a reprise of the opening, but with a master of the orchestra like Rimsky-Korsakov at the helm, the colors are all redone. A *Scena e canto Gitano* (scene and Gypsy song) follows, with various sections of the orchestra, beginning with the trumpets, playing their own recitative-like passages. From time to time, the composer directs the strings to imitate the sounds of a guitar. An elegant dance leads without pause into the closing section, *Fandango asturiano*. The *fandango* is a vigorous dance, usually accompanied by guitars and castanets, and in this case, representative of the area of Asturias, located in northwest Spain, on the Bay of Biscay. A return to the music of the opening and a frenetic dash to the end tops off yet another masterpiece of Spanish music written by a non-Spaniard.

Tango in D, op. 165, no. 2—Isaac Albéniz/Arnold

Isaac Albéniz was in the forefront of Spain's composers during the nineteenth century, and was responsible for the surging interest and respect for the art music of the country during that time. A child prodigy, his peripatetic travels took him all over Europe, as well as to the Americas. But, his primary focus was in Madrid, Barcelona, and Paris. Early on, he concentrated on music for the piano, especially of the pleasant, short, salon genre, but during his lifetime was active in works for the stage, as well. While he is inextricably connected with Spanish nationalism, and is, in some ways, often considered the most "Spanish" of Spanish composers, he eschewed authentic indigenous folk material. Rather, he crafted a style that is original, but infused with the harmonies, colors, and rhythms of his native country.

The Tango in D was written in 1890 as part of a larger suite for piano solo, *España*, and is one of the most performed of his many popular pieces. Like so many of his compositions that were originally for piano, and later became warhorses of the transcribed guitar repertoire, the Tango in D has been arranged by many for orchestra, as well. But, there are tangos, and then there are tangos. While the fiery Argentine tango that literally heaves with intensity, sultry passion, and steam is often considered the paradigm of the dance, there are other interpretations, to be sure. This one is a beautiful evocation of the sophisticated, languorous version that one might encounter at a tea dance in a European luxury hotel. Think of potted palms, the novels of Stefan Zweig, and maybe the "The Grand Budapest Hotel."

***Huapango*—José Pablo Moncayo**

Today, Moncayo is revered as one of the leading exponents of Mexican nationalism in musical style, important in the first half of the twentieth century. While his name is not as familiar to US audiences as perhaps that of Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas, he played an important part in the musical life of Mexico until his premature death in 1958 at the age of 45. In addition to his activities as a composer, he also played percussion and piano with symphony orchestras, and was a well-respected and active conductor until his death. He entered the National Conservatory of Mexico in 1929 and received a thorough formal education in music, becoming, along with three of his compatriots, a protégé of Chávez. Turning to musical composition early on, he premiered some of his compositions by 1931, subsequently joined several symphony orchestras, and finally took the baton as a conductor in 1936 at the age of twenty-four. He went on to attend the prestigious Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts on scholarship in 1941. There he met such luminaries as Aaron Copland, Serge Koussevitzky, and the young Leonard Bernstein.

About that time his well-known and most performed composition, *Huapango*, received its first performance. It is based upon popular themes from the Mexican state of Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico. Chávez had sent Moncayo there to collect music indigenous to the area, and the orchestra fantasy based upon some of those themes was the result. A *huapango* is a Mexican folk dance and musical style, played by a small group of instrumentalists, a violin and two different sizes of guitars. And, of course, the varying rhythms of the traditional *huapango* match the complex dance steps of the dancers.

Moncayo, like all good composers, demonstrates a formidable mastery of making much of little material. The challenge here is especially large in pulling together a medley of pre-existing tunes, and making coherent whole of them. His sparkling and imaginative orchestration keeps the interest up—its light and colorful palette is strongly redolent of much French music, and why not, so much great Hispanic music was written by Frenchmen, it seems. The lilting, galloping rhythm, with familiar Mexican syncopations, unstintingly carries us through a series of charming solos until a softer and slower middle section, initially carried by the woodwinds, provides some contrast. After a bit, the tempo kicks up again, and an exciting, breezy drive to conclusion ensues.

***Conga del Fuego Nuevo*—Arturo Marquez**

A native of the Mexican state of Sonora, Márquez is known for his adroit incorporation of Mexican musical forms and styles into his compositions. One of Mexico's eminent contemporary composers, he is widely popular with Latin Americans for the accessibility and attractiveness of his compositions. Educated at the Conservatorio Nacional in Mexico, he went on to graduate study in California and Paris. Recipient of an impressive list of honors, his recent works include a commission from the San Antonio Symphony, a cello concerto, and a homage to Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary. His father was a traditional mariachi musician, but early on, like so many young composers, the son composed in the latest, modern styles, often in the usual dissonant and obscure manner. But, he later gravitated to a personal idiom that made full use of traditional Mexican urban music—but not necessarily “folk” music.

“Conga” refers to groups of musicians, to a kind of drum, and to a specific dance, as well. All are popular in Latin-American countries, most especially in the street carnivals of Havana

and Santiago de Cuba. These musical groups are part of the *camparsas* that parade down the streets in jubilant, often riotous carnival celebrations. We are all familiar with those in Rio de Janeiro (where they are called carnival blocks) and in New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama (where they are called krewes). The term, “conga” has a long and somewhat ambiguous history, but it certainly stems from the belief that the dance, itself, was taken to Cuba by black slaves from the West Indies.

The dance is characterized by a strong pulse on the beat for three beats, followed by a syncopated “thump” just before the fourth beat. In the late 1930s and 1940s the US seemed obsessed by the congo: think of Desi Arnaz, Xavier Cugat, the nightclub conga lines in RKO musicals, and even Warner Brothers cartoons. Americans were mesmerized by the screen sophisticates dancing to one-two-three-kick! Today, not so much. But, Marquez has taken this somewhat passé dance and infused it with new life in a sophisticated symphonic guise. Lyrical melodies seem to “float” above the welter of syncopated rhythms churned out by the large battery of Latin percussion. Who could resist?

--Wm. E. Runyan

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