

Program Notes by Craig Doolin

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Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*

Maurice Ravel's music often reflects his interest in song and dance forms of the past, but these are often combined with the newest musical developments. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Ravel was a member of an unofficial group of artists called *Les Apaches*, a term used during the period in Paris for street hooligans, that was comprised of composers, painters, poets, and critics, including Manuel de Falla, Tristan Klingsor, and Igor Stravinsky. They found the name perfect for their no-prisoners approach to art.

In 1905 Ravel wrote a set of piano pieces entitled *Miroirs* (Mirrors), each movement of which is dedicated to a member of *Les Apaches*. The fifth of these, inscribed to the critic M. D. Calvocoressi, is entitled *Alborada del gracioso* (Morning Song of a Jester), and is one of the composer's first works to reflect a strong Spanish character. As a composer of Basque heritage, born in France just a few miles from the Spanish border, this was music from his soul. Ravel orchestrated the piece in 1918 for a ballet performance assembled by the illustrious Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev.

The work opens with an imitation of a guitar by pizzicato strings and harp. An exaggerated Spanish theme surfaces and grows into a climax for full orchestra. Ravel's skill at orchestration is on full display as the comparatively monochromatic voice of the piano original is transformed into an orchestra work of endless colors. A sedate middle section features a mournful bassoon solo that is overtaken by a return to the opening music, this time presented in an over-the-top version that ends with a playfully mocking orchestral laugh.

Falla, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*

During a seven-year sojourn in Paris beginning in 1907, Manuel de Falla became acquainted with the young lions of the musical world – Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky – and he intended to settle there, but the outbreak of World War I forced him to return to Spain in 1914. In 1909 Falla began a new work for the pianist Ricardo Viñes. Originally planned as a set of nocturnes, the piece took on a new life when Viñes and composer Isaac Albéniz suggested that it should be orchestrated. When Falla returned to Spain, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* had grown to its present form as a three-movement set of "symphonic impressions" inspired by different Spanish gardens. In fact, the French impressionistic influence is quite apparent in this work.

Although it is scored for solo piano and orchestra, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* is not a traditional concerto. The solo part, although difficult, is not the primary focus at all times.

Instead, both elements – the solo piano and orchestra – provide two intricate palettes of musical color that work together to produce a captivating work of scintillating beauty.

The first movement, *En el Generalife* (In the Generalife), evokes the garden of a fourteenth-century Moorish palace in Grenada, where cypresses and walnut trees rose above terraced gardens. Piano arpeggios throughout the movement waft over the lush orchestra texture in an atmospheric wash of color.

Although the second movement, *Danza lejana* (Distant Dance), names no specific garden, the effect is Moorish-flavored. Violas, English horn, and flutes set the exotic tone, but soon give way to the full orchestra. The soloist rises to the surface and presents a rhythmic theme of simple beauty. Oboes and English horn return with an extended version of the theme. As the movement ends, the music becomes more subdued and moves without pause into the finale.

En los jardines de la Sierra de Córdoba (In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba), depicts the dancing of gypsies at the feast of Corpus Christi. At the outset, the full orchestra erupts in a blaze of Andalusian dance music. The soloist has a much more virtuosic role and introduces much of the thematic material. Boisterous moments alternate with more lyrical interludes. Unlike most works featuring a soloist, this evocative and impressionist masterwork ends with a subdued and transcendent coda, in which the strings reach ever upward as they fade into the distance.

Debussy, La Puerto del vino

Claude Debussy's piano music is the cornerstone of his compositional output. His thirty publications for the instrument include nearly eighty individual pieces. Perhaps the most creative of these is the two books of *Préludes* consisting of twenty-four pieces between them.

From the second book of *Préludes*, "La puerta del vino (The Wine Gate)" is one of the most enigmatic. Unlike the other preludes, this one does not bear a title at the top of the page, but a postscript after the last measure reads "... la puerta del vino," implying that a destination is reached at the end. In this case, the location is the Moorish Wine Gate of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain – the site of political unrest and violence at the turn of the twentieth century. Interestingly, Debussy's immediate inspiration was a postcard from composer Manuel de Falla that bore an image of the gate.

Falla wrote that "Claude Debussy wrote Spanish music without knowing Spain, that is to say without knowing the land of Spain, which is a different matter. Debussy knew Spain from his reading, from pictures, from songs, and from dances with songs danced by true Spanish dancers." Debussy's Spain is one of imagination and fantasy – idealized, but correct in nearly all musical details. It is surprising that his only visit to that country at the time he composed this work had been a quick visit to a border town at which he attended a bullfight one afternoon.

British composer Colin Matthews' orchestration of "La puerta del vino" is a vivid depiction of the work. A habanera rhythm continues throughout the piece and Debussy's evocative

depiction of flamenco music is superimposed. The Moorish influence of the Alhambra finds its voice in the exotic melodic material. Suggestions of social unrest are found in the sharp dynamic contrasts. The final measures fade away as the Habanera rhythm recedes into the distance.

Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*

During the summer of 1873, the architect/artist Viktor Hartmann died suddenly from an aneurism at the age of thirty-nine. Hartmann's forgettable talents led to a series of mediocre works that momentarily captured the attention of a few major figures in the artistic community of St. Petersburg. In all fairness, Hartmann's work should have died with him.

In February of 1874, a memorial exhibition in St. Petersburg displayed over four hundred of the artist's works. Composer Modest Mussorgsky, a close friend of Hartmann, commemorated the exhibition in his solo piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The work was composed at the peak of Mussorgsky's career, before the composer's alcoholism tightened its grip leading to his death in 1881 at the young age of forty-two. *Pictures at an Exhibition* depicts eleven of Hartmann's creations, linked together by the *Promenade* theme, which represents the composer walking from one display to the next.

Although Mussorgsky never conceived of *Pictures at an Exhibition* as an orchestral work, several other composers soon saw the possibilities. Within a decade, Russian arrangers produced an orchestration, but it was French composer Maurice Ravel, whose masterful 1922 scoring illuminated the work's numerous nuances, who ensured the eternal popularity of this piece. Over a dozen arrangements exist, but it is Ravel's that is the standard by which others are judged.

Pictures at an Exhibition unfolds as follows:

Promenade – Mussorgsky used this short majestic melody (presented in Ravel's orchestration as a trumpet solo) as a linking theme connecting each of the movements. It recurs frequently in different settings between movements throughout the work.

Gnomus - Hartmann's wooden nutcracker in the guise of "a little gnome walking awkwardly on deformed legs" is the subject of the first picture. Ravel's skill as an orchestrator is so apparent that even the sound of cracking nuts is heard clearly.

The Old Castle - A troubadour sings in front of a castle in this watercolor from Hartmann's student years in Italy. A plaintive alto saxophone gives voice to the minstrel's serenade.

Tuileries: Dispute between Children at Play - The scene is a garden near the Seine River in Paris.

Bydlo (Cattle) - Hartmann drew a picture of oxen while visiting the remote Polish village of Sandomierz, but Mussorgsky again changed it slightly for his composition. In this

version, a rugged oxcart with huge wooden wheels slowly approaches, and then fades away in the distance.

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks – This movement is based on Hartmann's costume design for an 1871 St. Petersburg ballet in which children portray chicks "enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets."

Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuyle - This movement is sometimes subtitled *Two Polish Jews: One Rich, One Poor*. Ravel uses resolute unison strings to depict the rich man, while giving the poor Schmuyle's music to a whimpering muted trumpet.

The Market-place at Limoges (French market women quarreling) - Hartmann painted a scene of market women in the French city of Limoges haggling in the marketplace.

Catacombae (Sepulcrum Romanum) - This drawing depicts the artist gazing into the Parisian catacombs while holding a lantern. Several skulls are apparent. The second part of this movement is subtitled **Cum mortuis in lingua mortua** (*With the Dead in a Dead Language*). In his manuscript, Mussorgsky writes that "the creative impulse of the departed Hartmann leads me towards skulls, and calls to them - they begin to glow with a soft light."

The Hut on Hen's Legs: Baba-Yaga – Hartmann drew a carved clock representing a hut with the legs of a chicken. In Russian folklore, Baba-Yaga was a witch who rode through the forest and destroyed everything in her path. This movement proceeds without pause into the finale.

The Great Gate of Kiev - Hartmann drew plans for a ceremonial gate to honor Tsar Alexander II after his escape from an assassination attempt in 1886. In Mussorgsky's music we hear the Boyar victors as they enter Kiev in a solemn procession of triumph.