

## Manuel de Falla: Spanish Traditionalist and European Impressionist

**FALLA, Manuel de:** Manuel de Falla ( b. 1876, d. 1946) was at first more famous overseas than in Spain, with his work being published in Paris and London, and supported by the Russian ballet (Istel 1926). Born in Cadiz in 1876, Falla was later resident in Granada after having studied in the Conservatorium at Madrid (Istel 1926), where he came under the influence of the composer and theoretician Felipe Pedrell, who also influenced Albeniz and Granados (Mayer-Serra 1943, p2). During his stay in Paris before World War I he was influenced and helped by a number of prominent composers including Debussy, Faure, Ravel and Paul Dukas (Townesley 1978). He also met Albéniz, Turina, and the Catalan pianist Ricardo Vines (Simon 2001). Along with Albéniz he also was introduced to the 'radical aesthetic circle' les Apaches, which included composers such as Maurice Delage, Florent Schmitt, Paul Ladmirault, Vines, Ravel and others (Hess 2001, p32). Falla was equally influenced by Europeanising and nationalising influences, including late romantic and impressionist influences alongside folk idioms (see Mayer-Serra 1943). His work thus goes beyond the 'picture postcards' of Spain approach that is sometimes used to label his more popular works (Hess 2001, pp1-3, p289).

His family context has been pithily described: -

Manuel Maria de los Dolores Falla y Matheu was born in Cadiz to a Valencian businessman and his Catalan wife. They were well off, and Manolito was, for instance, given an expensive marionette theater that he spurned for one he built himself. In it, he mounted plays about the imaginary city of Colon (Columbus) and Don Quixote. He got early piano lessons from his mother, with whom he soon played duets. He subsequently had several other teachers. A domestic of Moorish descent sang the cante jondo (a traditional Andalusian deep song of Arabic or Gypsy origin) around the house. (Simon 2001)

He apparently completed the Madrid conservatory's seven-year piano program in two years, and became a virtuoso pianist and a fine improver (see Mayer-Serra 1943, p6; Hess 2001, p15), but soon moved into the composition of piano pieces, chamber music (he would later on found the Baetic Chamber Orchestra), and then the famous opera *La Vida breve* in 1905, for which he received an award from the Spanish Academy of Fine Arts (Simon 2001). *La Vida breve*, with a libretto by Carlos Fernandez Shaw, was viewed as an 'exploration of *andalucismo*', including a rather sympathetic portrayal of gypsies and some touches of their 'deep song' or *cante jondo*, an approach also found in *El amor brujo* (Hess 2001, p30, p53). He wrote a harpsichord concerto (*Concerto for Harpsichord, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet and Cello*, written for the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska), and a number of fine piano works in *Pieces Espagnoles* (1906) which were influenced by the style of Isaac Albeniz (Istel 1926, p523). Prominent works included *Nights in Spanish Gardens* (for piano and orchestra), *El amor brujo* (later adapted in the 1986 Carlos Saura film), and the ballet the *Three Cornered Hat*. This last work, the *El Sombrero de tres picos* and known in its first version *El Corregidor y la Molinera* (and to the ballet world as *La tricorne*), was based on plot on the novelette of Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, and in part on earlier romance folk song concerning the Miller of Arcos (Hess 2001, p87). The

1919 production of the *Three-Cornered Hat* featured the scenery and costumes designed by Picasso.

Falla's work in general is rooted in a particular modernisation of the Spanish folk idiom, with colours from modern French and Russian composers alongside traditional Andalusian forms (Istel 1926, p500). Some of Falla's works were strongly influenced by folk, gypsy and flamenco idioms even when written in orchestral or piano formats. These influences included Andalusian, Asturian, Navarronese, Murcian (from the Southeast region of Spain), Castilian and Aragonese forms, as well as influences from early Spanish song books and the keyboard works of Scarlatti (Istel 1926, p504; Townsley 1978; Mayer-Serra 1943). The work *Fantasia Bética* (Baetica is Latin name for Andalusia) of 1919, originally dedicated to Artur Rubinstein, 'derives much from the agitated rhythms of the *sevillana*, the broad, ornate melody of *cante jondo*, and the wayward strumming of the guitar' (Mayer-Serra 1943, p4; see further Simon 2001).

Thus works such as the *Miller's Dance*, *The Corregidor's Dance*, the *Fisherman's Song*, *Chanson du Feu Follet* and *La Vida Breve* have been transcribed to become a standard part of the classical guitar repertoire, even when their original ballet or orchestral versions are less remembered by guitarists. Manuel de Falla's transcribed works have thus been played by Segovia, John Williams, Julian Bream, and others. This is not surprising since Falla himself was fond of using Spanish and flamenco folk idioms, as well as saturating himself in earlier Spanish music including the guitar works of Gaspar Sanz, a vihuela work (*El parnaso*) tabulated by Esteban Daza in 1576, as well as 16<sup>th</sup> century and medieval *cantiga* (Hess 2001, pp208-212, p290). The work of Sanz came to Falla's attention in the following way: -

. . . the musical encounter of Manuel de Falla with the world of Gaspar Sanz, whom this one knew thanks to Maestro Pedrell transcriptions, and to the transcriptions which went with a lecture by the musician Cecilio Roda in 1905, in a series of conferences organized by the Ateneo in Madrid in Commemoration of the third centenary of Quixote's edition. This would explain the presence of quotations and expressions from the "Instrucción" in the work by Falla, the Altarpiece of Cervantes Maese Pedro (1923), though which this Aragonese composer and guitarist's work is born again. (Casa de la Guitarra Española 1998)

The *Miller's Dance* has become one of the most well-known works in the modern repertoire. It concerns a miller who heads off the interest of the Corregidor (a local governor or magistrate) in his wife, and pays back the insult by masquerading as the governor and threatening to seduce that wife in turn. The miller, originally a hunchback in early versions of the story, was 'witty and kind-hearted', allowing him to triumph at the end of the comic construction (see the summary in Istel 1926; Hess 2001, pp115-116). The Dance has been described as having Andalusian rhythms and 'Moorish colourings' (Turina in Istel 1926, p516), and is a Farruca, marked as *poco vivo* (Townsley 1978), with accelerating modal runs that thereafter move into *rasgado* chord passages that are among the most direct flamenco citations in the classical guitar repertoire. It features 'functional ambiguity in the numerous Phrygian cadences and an episode in C Dorian', and contains 'a long mesmerizing coda' (Hess 2001, p121). This work has often been transcribed in diverse ways for solo guitar, but also exists in a duo guitar versions.

One piece that Falla did write specifically for the guitar, in part at the request of Miguel Llobet and also as part of an issue of *Revue musicale* (Paris) that was to be a commemorative issue for Debussy, was the *Homenage: Pièce de Guitare écrite pour "Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy"* (Purcell 1989). The tombeau was a piece which from the 17<sup>th</sup> century was dedicated to a greatly respected person, usually after their death (Duarte 1984). This work would also be transcribed within a longer orchestral version (approximately 16 minutes) with four parts, with this section having the added subtitle of *Elegia de la guitarra*, as well as existing in a piano version (Duarte 1984). The *Homenage* was once mistakenly described, in an otherwise worthwhile article, as a 'melodically rather insignificant worklet' (Istel 1926, p503), under-estimating its rhythmic and harmonic emphasis. Interestingly, though played by many prominent guitarists (including John Williams, Julian Bream, and Slava Grigoryan), this piece has not always been popular with contemporary audiences or advanced students. This is unfortunate, since the piece is both a profound tribute to Debussy, for whom de Falla felt an enormous debt, but also a serious effort to use guitaristic rhythmic and harmonic coloration to create a powerful and sombre piece with diverse references to both Spanish and French idioms. A concise analysis indicates its careful construction:

Falla's piece is a funeral dirge, a symbolic threnody, so frequent in Spanish poetry, influenced by the musical essence and spirit of his departed friend. Its harmony rests on the fundamental fourth of the typical - and so beautiful - chord of the guitar, E-A-D-G-B. Falla places a short rhythmic phrase on this fourth, a kind of muted and bitter lamentation which resounds like a knell throughout the piece. Several echoes of *Ibéria* [symphonic poem by Debussy] form the beginning of a theme, a brief motif in triplets marked by the characteristic chromaticism and the augmented second (bars 8-15). The special resources of the guitar are skilfully exploited through arpeggios, very open chords, glissando scales, *punteado* effects, and octave harmonics. (Suzanne Demarquez in Purcell 1989)

The work utilises the *habanera* rhythm, originally based on a Cuban dance form (*hananera* = Havana), and includes a wide range of tonalities closing on sombre, slow closing notes. Though not technically hard in terms of manual dexterity for the most part, the score indicates very detailed mood and tonal variations, as well as having great musical depth and intensity of feeling. It is also played at a fair pace (quarter-notes, crotchets, at 60) but generally with the mood of '*mesto e calmo*' (Duarte 1984; Falla 1989), though a few sections break into fast runs and rapid arpeggios with middle-line melodies articulated at the same time. Written over an intense two-week period, the work was published in early editions in 1920 (in *Revue musicale*), 1923, with a 'definitive' guitarist version fully edited by Miguel Llobet in 1926, and with a slightly re-edited version being released again in 1989 (Duarte 1984; Purcell 1989). The work was first performed on a harp-lute in early 1921 and in Miguel Llobet's tours of 1921-1922 (Purcell 1989). It was probably first recorded by Julio Martín Oyanguren circa 1936 and by Albert Harris in 1937 (Purcell 1989).

*Homenage: Pièce de Guitare écrite pour "Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy"* needs careful interpretation and great variation of tone, including strong melodic marking of central themes working across the second and third strings at relatively low volume, contrasting with strident triplets with normal double quavers that work across the lower three strings, interrupted by arpeggios and occasional harmonics. As noted by one its editors: -

This is a magical piece of music, one of the guitar's major (albeit brief) masterpieces, and it demands the closest attention we can give it - and the maximum respect for what its composer appears to have intended. (Duarte 1984, p36)

Alongside this work, Falla had also planned to write another piece especially for the guitar, *La Tertulia*, but this did not eventuate (Duarte 1984).

In general, Manuel de Falla sought to avoid repetition while retaining a unified artistic vision: -

"Every night, when I go to bed," once said Falla, 'new ideas and plans beset me, and with each of these ideas I might reconstitute my technique, but such reconstitution would only emphasize my individuality, only present it in a new aspect. To repeat one's self! - there lies the danger; old age, academicism. To renew one's self - that is the secret. Unity at the foundation, variety in the aspects.'" (in Istel 1926, p525).

The Spanish civil war placed Falla, along with many other composers, in a difficult position: -

The stormy climate of Spain in the '30s, leading up to the Civil War, was deeply upsetting to Falla, who could side with neither party and whose illness often kept him glued to his chair. In 1938, Franco appointed him head of the Academy of the Arts, but by the next year he and his ever-faithful sister left for Buenos Aires. It was there that his last finished orchestral work, *Homenajes* - partly orchestrations of earlier instrumental pieces - was created. . . .

Living out his last seven years in Argentina, mostly in a charming mountain villa he shared with Maria del Carmen, Falla worked fitfully on *Atlantida*, his hoped-for masterwork that remained unfinished despite his toiling over it for some 18 years. It is a setting of several cantos of an epic by the Catalan poet-priest Jacint Verdaguer (1875). A grandiose concoction that combines Hercules slaying giants, the sinking of Atlantis as punishment for apostasy, and the Catholic hero Columbus carrying the faith to the continent he discovered, the poem strikes me as a disaster. The parts used in Falla's oratorio, or "scenic cantata," reaffirm the composer's poor literary judgment. But they provided something as close to sacred music as the composer, in his exaggerated humility, dared undertake. (Simon 2001)

Manuel de Falla remained a humble, self-critical and careful artist who highly polished his limited output of works, and who remained an ardent Catholic. He did not live to complete the projected long religious cantata, *Atlantida*, based on the epic poem by the Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer (Hess 2001, p6, p277; Blom 1947). Manuel de Falla died in 1946, in the Argentine province of Cordoba, recognised as one of Spain's greatest composers (contra Blom 1947; see the better assessment in Simon 2001). Thereafter followed 'a battle for the appropriation of his memory and his work, as both Francoists and Republican exiles sought to enlist the great artist for their cause, even after his death' (Rein 2002, p5). His body was transferred for final burial in the crypt of the Cadiz cathedral, and he was honoured by the Pope with the title of 'Favored Son of the Church' (Rein 2002, p10). Though a composer working within a national idiom, he 'never came out publicly in favor of the Nationalists' crusade', and his work has since been positioned as part of the 'third Spain' which was unable to align with either side in the civil war (Rein 2002, p6; Hess 2001, p5).

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#### **Internet:**

Short profiles and sound samples will be found in the *BBC Music Profiles* webpage for Manuel de Falla at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/profiles/falla.shtml>

Resources links and a profile will be found in the *Classical Composers Database* at <http://www.classical-composers.org/cgi-bin/ccd.cgi?comp=falla>

An official *Manuel de Falla homepage* (in Spanish and English), including a list of works across all genres, can be found via <http://www.manueldefalla.com/>

Short examples of Manuel de Falla's work across several media can be found via YouTube, e.g. at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ftd8tIdiYq4> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZYL8wvvdII>