Program Notes
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By Chris Morrison

The classical music of Spain – distinct from, but influenced by, the many traditional styles of the country like flamenco and jota – has proved a fascination for composers from outside the country. Especially during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the attractions of Spanish rhythms and melodies proved irresistible to a host of famous composers. Tonight we celebrate some of the greatest of these Spanish-flavored works.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)
***Capriccio espagnol*, Op. 34**

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov originally chose a naval career. But music, in which he was largely self-educated, lured him away, and by his mid-twenties he was teaching at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He became a hugely influential teacher, working with the likes of Igor Stravinsky, Ottorino Respighi, and Sergei Prokofiev, and authored one of the authoritative textbooks on the art of orchestration. A member of the "Mighty Five" of Russian music, Rimsky-Korsakov was fascinated with Russian folklore and exoticism, evident in his best-known work, *Sheherazade* (1888), and in many of his fifteen operas, like *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1899-1900, and the source of one of the most famous two minutes in music, "The Flight of the Bumble Bee.").

While employing Russian folk themes and rhythms was second nature to Rimsky-Korsakov, in the late 1880s he became attracted to Spanish music, and started sketching out a piece for violin and orchestra. But eventually the idea formed of a showpiece for the entire orchestra, and in 1887 the *Capriccio espagnol* was born. The first performance, led by Rimsky-Korsakov on November 12, 1887 in St. Petersburg, was such a success that the entire work had to be repeated.

The *Capriccio* opens with a brief "Alborada," or "Morning Song," which creates a lively, almost parade-like atmosphere, before a short, ethereal cadenza for the solo violin. Over the slow, regular movement of the strings, French horns sound the theme that becomes the basis of the "Variazioni" second movement, in which the melody is elaborated on by the strings, English horn and other winds, and then more passionately by the strings and the rest of the orchestra. A short reprise of the "Alborada" follows, this time with a different arrangement and violin solo. A drum roll, a fanfare for the brass, and a cadenza for the violin introduce the fourth movement, "Scene and Gypsy Song." Drums and pizzicato strings (said to be imitating the strumming of guitars) take up the rhythm as other instruments – flute, clarinet, oboe, and harp – take their solo turns. The "Gypsy Song," a passionate dance in triple time, then takes over, leading without pause into the fiery concluding "Fandango Asturiano." Propelled by cymbals and castanets, this movement brilliantly shows off the resources of the orchestra, and a high-speed return of the "Alborada" theme brings the *Capriccio* to an exciting close.

Édouard Lalo (1823-1892)
***Symphonie espagnole*, Op. 21**

Édouard Lalo grew up in a family that rather looked down on the musical life. He was allowed to study at the Lille Conservatory, though, and decided to run away at age 16 to try to make music his life. After struggling for a number of years as a string player and teacher, he helped form the Armingaud Quartet, in which he played viola and then second violin, all the while slowly making a reputation as a composer of chamber music. It wasn't until the 1870s, as Lalo entered his fifties, that his music really started to attract attention. One of the reasons for this was the great Spanish violinist-composer Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908). World-renowned as a virtuoso, Sarasate took up Lalo's Violin Concerto in F major with great success, so much so that Lalo decided to write another work for the violinist, in which he would pay tribute to their mutual Spanish heritage (Lalo was said to have Spanish blood via both sides of the family).

Sarasate might well have worked with Lalo on the solo part of the *Symphonie espagnole*, the writing was so well-suited to the violinist's light touch, scintillating passagework, and singing tone. Composed in 1874, the work was given its first performance in Paris on February 7, 1875, with Sarasate the soloist and Éduoard Colonne conducting. It was very well received, and perfectly timed to take advantage of the vogue for Spanish music that was soon to spread throughout Europe. (Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, which was to take the musical world by storm, had its premiere just one month after Lalo's *Symphonie* was introduced.)

The first movement of the *Symphonie espagnole* opens with an imperious gesture from the orchestra (based on a typically Spanish 2/4 with 6/8 rhythm). The violin soloist takes up this music and develops it for a time before introducing a second, gentler theme. Throughout the movement the soloist, rarely silent, is given ample opportunity to exhibit both virtuosity and lyricism. Bright pizzicato strings and rhythmic punctuations accompany the nimble play of the soloist in the outer sections of the second movement, a triple meter dance related to the seguidilla of southern Spain. This music frames a more serious central section that alternates slower and faster tempos. Once routinely omitted from performance, the third movement Intermezzo is probably the most challenging for the soloist, with very fast passagework and sudden changes of register. The insouciant rhythm, and to some extent the melodic material, here recalls the famous "Habanera" from Bizet's *Carmen* (but Lalo came first!)

The fourth movement Andante opens seriously, with the unusually dark coloration of clarinets, bassoons, brass, cellos and basses. This leads into the passionate, melancholy song of the soloist. Alberto Bachmann, in the *Encyclopedia of the Violin* (cited by Michael Steinberg in *The Concerto*), says that the violin here "seems to evoke that Berber Africa where the Moors of Spain took refuge after having been driven from their terrestrial paradise in Grenada." An immediate contrast is provided by the light bell-like chords in the high woodwinds and harp that open the concluding Rondo. This evolves into a repeating ostinato, over which the soloist presents the lively main theme. While there are some contrasting episodes, notably a slinky habanera-like section towards the end, this movement is almost entirely lively and playful, with all sorts of pizzicati, glissandi, trills, and arpeggios for the busy soloist.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Rapsodie espagnole

Maurice Ravel came by his love of Spanish music from the cradle. He was born in Ciboure, near the Spanish border in the Pyrénées, to a Basque mother who grew up in Madrid and loved to sing Spanish songs throughout her life. Ravel's independent nature often put him at odds with the conservatism of the French musical establishment. One of the severe disappointments of his life was his failure to win the prestigious Prix de Rome. The last of his five losses in 1905 led to a great scandal, dubbed by Paris's newspapers the "Ravel Affair." While he would have appreciated the opportunity to study in Italy that came with the prize, the scandal seemed to spur on his artistic energies, and led to one of his most productive periods of composition.

This included the "Spanish year" of 1907 that produced most of the colorful comic opera *L'Heure espagnole* (*The Spanish Hour*) and the original version for piano four hands of his *Rapsodie espagnole*, which he orchestrated the following year and which became his first published work for orchestra. The *Rapsodie* in its orchestral garb was first performed in Paris on March 15, 1908, conducted by Édouard Colonne. The reception was mixed. One of the naysayers was none other than Édouard Lalo, an often crusty critic, who called the work "laborious and pedantic." Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, however, loved it, calling Ravel "more Spanish than the Spanish themselves."

In the opening "Prélude à la nuit," a quiet descending four-note pattern in the muted violins and violas sets the mood. Wisps of color – string tremolos, woodwind chords, short cadenzas for clarinets and bassoons – create a diaphanous texture in music that Ravel described as "voluptuously drowsy and ecstatic." An ostinato figure in the basses, played pizzicato, opens the "Malagueña," originally a courting dance from the city of Málaga. Soon the dance breaks out in full splendor. A muted trumpet sounds, accompanied by the tambourine and echoed by the violins. The mood calms with a short English horn solo and a brief reminiscence of the four-note pattern from the first movement.

The third movement is an arrangement of Ravel's first significant composition, the "Habanera" for two pianos of 1895. The subtitle that Ravel put into the original autograph score captures the seductive, languorous sway of this music: "Au pays parfumé que le soleil caresse" ("In the fragrant land that the Sun caresses"). The finale, "Feria," starts quietly and delicately. But the lower strings hint at the outburst to come as the dance bursts forth with color and energy. The celebration is briefly interrupted by a languid episode for English horn and oboe, followed by yet another memory of the first movement's opening phrase. But the energy quickly builds again, leading to a frenzied conclusion.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Boléro

Ravel never believed that his *Boléro* could be a success in the concert hall. Referring to it as "a piece lasting seventeen minutes and consisting wholly of orchestral tissue without music – of one long, very gradual crescendo," he felt that the music couldn't hold an audience's attention separate from the ballet for which it was written. It's safe to say he has been proved wrong! In fact, *Boléro* was a massive hit from its very first concert performance, which Ravel conducted in Paris with the Lamoureux Orchestra on January 11, 1930. It immediately became a mainstay in concert halls and on the radio, was heard all over the world played by jazz bands and pianists, and showed up in movies scores and on Broadway. By now *Boléro* has become one of the most popular orchestral works of all time.

Its success topped off a particularly gratifying stretch in Ravel's career. At the end of 1927, Ravel embarked on a very successful 25-city tour of the United States, where he played piano, conducted orchestras, and hobnobbed with new acquaintances like George Gershwin and Mary Pickford. Before he left for this tour, he had promised the famous dancer Ida Rubinstein that, on his return, he would orchestrate some pieces from Isaac Albéniz's piano suite *Iberia* for a new Spanish ballet.

Once back in France, Ravel started work on this project. But he quickly found out that the conductor Enrique Arbós had already orchestrated some of the same Albéniz works, and that new arrangements would be an infringement of copyright! Ravel was angry, but had no choice but to change course and write his own music for Rubinstein's ballet. He became entranced by a new tune he'd created, with what he called an "insistent quality," and decided to write a work in which he would "repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can." Originally called *Fandango*, the work soon acquired a new title, derived from a popular Spanish dance form – *Boléro*.

The ballet, choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska and danced by Rubinstein and her troupe, was first produced at the Paris Opéra on November 22, 1928. In an Andalusian inn, several male gypsies are standing about. Rubinstein enters, dancing slowly and seductively at first, then with greater abandon as the music continues to build. She climbs onto a table and dances even more energetically, the gypsies gathering around and taking up the dance as well. At a particular moment in the music (when the key changes briefly from C major to E major), knives are drawn and a fight breaks out. The dance continues, though, and by the end everyone collapses, exhausted.

Boléro begins with snare drums quietly tapping out a repeated two measure rhythm that other instruments gradually join. There are two main melodies, each of which is performed twice (AABB), then the pattern repeats with gradually increasing instrumentation and volume. First solo instruments are heard: flute, clarinet, bassoon. Then it's combinations – trumpet and flute, then piccolo, horn, and celesta, later oboe, oboe d'amore, English horn, and clarinets – and eventually just about every instrument in the orchestra is highlighted. The music builds and builds, then reaches that moment mentioned above when the cycle is briefly broken and the key changes. But it's soon back to C major for the exciting conclusion.