

# *La vida breve (The Brief Life)*, Opera in Two Acts and Four Tableaux

MANUEL DE FALLA

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## **Born**

November 23, 1876, in Cádiz, Spain

## **Died**

November 14, 1946, in Alta Gracia, Argentina

## **Work composed**

August 24, 1904, through (at latest) March 31, 1905; libretto by Carlos Fernández Shaw (1865–1911), who did not live to see the work's premiere; dedicated to Mme. Ada Adiny-Milliet (a Wagnerian soprano) and to the memory of Carlos Fernández Shaw

## **World premiere**

April 1, 1913, in a French translation by Paul Milliet, at the Casino Municipal de Nice, M.J. Miranne, conductor, Lillian Grenville in the role of Salud; the first Spanish performance took place November 14, 1914, at the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid, Pablo Luna, conductor, Imaculada Egido as Salud

## **New York Philharmonic premiere**

Spanish Dance No. 1 from *La vida breve* was performed on October 29, 1952, Franco Autori, conductor

## **Most recent New York Philharmonic performance**

"Alli esta! Rivendo!" from *La vida breve* was performed on June 20, 1970, André Kostelanetz, conductor, Pilar Lorengar, soprano

## **Estimated duration**

ca. 105 minutes

As a teenager, Manuel de Falla y Matheu set his sights on becoming an author, but by the time he was 20 he acquired instead to a consuming passion for music. His youthful piano studies paid off, and he advanced quickly through conservatory instruction, graduating in 1899 from the Madrid Conservatory with a first prize in piano and a thorough education in harmony, counterpoint, and composition. Nonetheless, Falla's first steps in his chosen profession were far from dynamic. Unable to scrape together a living by composing serious music and not quite a good enough pianist to find acclaim in the recital hall, he turned to the closest enterprise that might prove commercially viable: the composition of *zarzuelas* (peculiarly Spanish stage works that might be described as a regional variation on operetta). He composed six between 1900 and 1904; only one reached the stage, and it left him no better off financially than before.

Still, those early experiences helped to clarify his goals, and they prepared him to realize his first certifiable masterpiece, *La vida breve (The Brief Life)*, a true opera, which he wrote in 1904–05. But plans to produce it fell through, and Falla, recognizing that Spain was too far off the beaten path of culture for his restless talent, left in 1907 for where the action was — Paris. He would remain there until 1914, associating closely with Dukas, Debussy, and Ravel. During those years Falla refined his craft as a musical Impressionist without sacrificing the Spanish flavor that lay at the root of his inspiration. The outbreak of World War I forced his return to Spain. This time Madrid proved more amenable to his talent. He arrived just in time to catch the Spanish premiere of *La vida breve*, a year

## In the Composer's Words



An image of a young Manuel de Falla

I had four aims in mind while making *La vida breve*.

1. To make a Spanish opera in dramatic form, something which I could find no example of in the entire history of Spanish lyrical theater.
2. To compose the music from a series of popular songs and dances.
3. To try, above and beyond all else, to evoke the feelings of fear and joy, of hope and torment, of life and death, of exultation and depression, all linked to certain personal images of place, moments, landscape, etc.
4. To notch up some money in order to carry on working.

— Manuel de Falla

after the work's world premiere, which had taken place in Nice, in a French translation — an ironic twist of fate for this quintessentially Spanish opera. Further stage works rich in Spanish flavor flowed from Falla's pen, beginning with *El amor brujo* (*Love, the Magician*; 1915); and in

1916 Falla heard the premiere of his first major symphonic work, *Noches en los jardines de España* (*Nights in the Gardens of Spain*). The ballet *El sombrero de tres picos* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*) followed in 1916–17, and the puppet opera *El retablo de Maese Pedro* (*Master Peter's Puppet Show*) in 1919–22, after which he would spend two decades working on his final stage work, the “scenic cantata” *Atlántida*; the latter was left incomplete upon his death in 1946 in Argentina, where he had been stranded since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

*La vida breve* was the 28-year-old composer's winning submission in a competition for new Spanish works announced by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando (Madrid) in 1904. Falla and his librettist, Carlos Fernández Shaw, wrote three prospective subjects on pieces of paper and left the decision to the chance of the draw. *La vida breve* was picked, and they completed it in seven months. (One of the other possibilities, *El sombrero de tres picos*, went onto the back burner, to be realized more than a decade later.)

In *La vida breve* we have a notable Spanish entry in the annals of *verismo* opera, with a characteristic plot involving failed love, disreputable behavior, and a violent death, all set “in contemporary times” against the realistic sounds of an evocative, somewhat gritty locale — in this case, El Albaicín, which was the predominantly Gypsy neighborhood of Granada.

Listening to Falla's remarkable score one cannot help thinking that this is music by someone who admired Puccini, and particularly by someone deeply familiar with *Tosca* (premiered four years earlier), which *La vida breve* apes in certain musical details. Its libretto does what it has to do competently — even if Salud, the spurned heroine, is the only character revealed in much depth, and her sudden dénouement is implausible. Still, it was a signal achievement, and Falla declared

in 1910: "What had been published before 1904 is worthless. ... *La vida breve* is the first work I can count on and perhaps the one I prefer."

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English

horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tam-tam, bass drum, anvils, cymbals, triangle, chimes, castanets, orchestra bells, snare drum, guitar, two harps, celesta, and strings, in addition to the cast.

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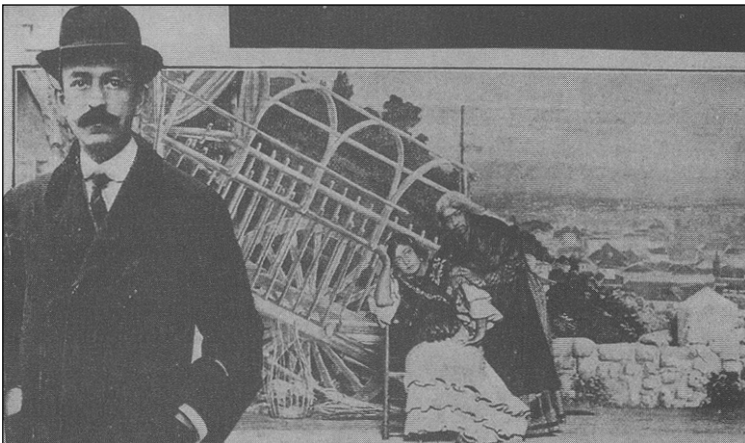
## The Story

**Act One, First Tableau** (The Courtyard of a Gypsy House in El Albaicín): Against the sounds of street vendors and a blacksmith's shop, Salud's grandmother tends a sick bird, which reminds her of her granddaughter, who is disconsolate at the absence of her boyfriend, Paco. Suddenly Paco arrives. Word has leaked out that he is about to marry another young woman, Carmela, but the grandmother protects Salud from the news.

**Act One, Second Tableau** (Intermezzo, A Panoramic View of Granada from the Sacro Monte): As day gives way to evening Paco and Salud stroll down the street and bid farewell, with Salud remaining unaware of Paco's impending wedding.

**Act Two, Third Tableau** (A Small Street in Granada): Guests dance at the festivities for the wedding of Paco and Carmela at the house that Carmela shares with her brother, Manuel. Salud happens upon the scene and is grief-stricken when she realizes what is happening. Her grandmother and uncle arrive, and Salud goes in to the festivities, accompanied by her uncle.

**Act Two, Fourth Tableau** (The Patio of the House of Carmela and Manuel, Where the Wedding Festivities Are Being Celebrated): Salud accuses Paco of deceiving and abandoning her, and demands that he kill her. When he refuses, she advances toward him and falls dead at his feet.



A composite image of Falla and a scene from *La vida breve* from November 1914