

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Alborada del gracioso (Dawn Song of the Jester)

Maurice Ravel

The Spanish composer Manuel de Falla arrived for a stay in Paris in the summer of 1907 and immediately asked his compatriot Ricardo Viñes, the Catalan pianist and a close friend of Maurice Ravel's, to introduce him to his French idol. The meeting was arranged, and Falla went to hear Ravel and Viñes read through Ravel's newly composed *Rapsodie espagnole* in its version for piano four-hands. "The Rapsodie ... surprised me because of its Spanish character," Falla later wrote,

but how was I to account for the subtly genuine Spanishness of Ravel, knowing, because he had told me so, that the only link he had with my country was to have been born near the border! The mystery was soon explained: Ravel's was a Spain he had felt in an idealized way through his mother. She was a lady of exquisite conversation. She spoke fluent Spanish, which I enjoyed so much when she evoked the years of her youth, spent in Madrid, an epoch earlier than mine, but traces of its habits that were familiar to me still remained. Then I understood with what fascination her son must have listened to these memories that were undoubtedly intensified by the additional force all reminiscence gets from the song or dance theme inseparably connected with it.

The *Rapsodie espagnole* was not Ravel's first flirtation with the Spanish style, nor would it be his last. In 1904–05 he had produced his five-movement piano suite *Miroirs*, of which the fourth movement was titled *Alborada del gracioso (Dawn Song of the*

Jester). The critic M.D. Calvocoressi, to whom this movement would be dedicated, wrote of it with great admiration in a review, describing it as "a big independent scherzo in the manner of Chopin and Balakirev." He continued: "The 'humor,' the frank and vivacious fantasy of 'Alborada' merit the highest praise."

For Ravel, Spanish flavor often goes hand in hand with good humor, as in his comic opera *L'Heure espagnole* (1911) and his late orchestral song cycle *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* (1932–33). Elsewhere it may strike a more mysterious tone, most famously in his *Boléro* (1928). *Alborada del gracioso* is of the high-spirited variety, right from the

IN SHORT

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1904–05, for solo piano; transcribed by Ravel for orchestra in 1918

World premiere: January 6, 1906, at the Salle Erard in Paris, Ricardo Viñes, pianist; in its orchestral form on May 17, 1919, in Paris, by the Padeloup Orchestra, Rhené-Baton (the stage name of René-Emmanuel Baton), conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 1, 1925, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 1, 2013, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 8 minutes

guitar-like strumming motif at its beginning. Ravel's friend and biographer Roland-Manuel regretted that pianists rarely played the complete *Miroirs* cycle, but at least he was pleased about their "keeping in their repertory the *Alborada del gracioso*, where the dry and biting virtuosity is contrasted, Spanish-wise, with the swooning flow and the love-lorn melodic line which interrupts the angry buzzing of guitars." "It is," he continued, "an altogether admirable piece of work, and doubly successful in the bril-

liantly orchestrated version." The title does not translate idiomatically. An *alborada* is a song sung at dawn, and a *gracioso* is a humorous or amusingly entertaining person; the musicologist and philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch spoke of Ravel's *gracioso* as a sort of "Andalusian Petrushka."

Serge Diaghilev, the impresario famous for heading the Ballets Russes, had visited Spain for the first time in 1916 and was so captivated that he set about producing several ballets on Spanish themes. The first

Views and Reviews

In the book *Ravel According to Ravel*, derived from a series of radio conversations in 1950, the violinist Héléne Jourdan-Morhange interviewed the pianist Vlado Perlemuter about the interpretation of the composer's piano works. Both musicians had been close to Ravel and, in 1927, Perlemuter had been coached by the composer in the whole of his piano music. The discussion of *Alborada del gracioso* includes these insights:

Héléne Jourdan-Morhange: The works inspired by Spain ... led Ravel to react, after his first compositions, against the impressionism from which he wanted to free himself. ... *Alborada* arrives like a meteor from its colorful country of origin, with its lashing accents and "earthy" rhythms.

Vlado Perlemuter: It's quite a unique piece in Ravel's works and perhaps the most difficult because of its precision and its technical demands.

H J-M: At the very beginning, did Ravel have any particular comments for you?

VP: Yes, he wanted each chord to be very taut, like a guitar being plucked. And in a lively tempo.

H J-M: Hm! That's a rather dangerous piece of advice for certain pianists who have a craze for speed.

VP: It has to be said, however, for those who, on the contrary, might tend to be too cautious, their caution occasioned by the difficulty of the work.



Violinist Héléne Jourdan-Morhange (third from left), and Maurice Ravel (far right) with friends in 1925

appeared that same year: *Las meninas*, inspired by Velázquez's painting of the same name (which Diaghilev had seen in the Prado). It was danced to a composite score that included *Alborada del gracioso* (in its piano version) along with pieces by Louis Aubert, Gabriel Fauré, and Emmanuel Chabrier. Diaghilev went on to commission Ravel to create the orchestral version of *Alborada del gracioso*, which figured in later revivals of the ballet. One might say that the composer had a leg up on the project since, as a piano piece, *Alborada del gracioso* seems already very symphonic in its palette. The transcription posed no stumbling blocks, and he achieved it quickly. Harp and pizzicato strings evoke the idea of a guitar; a muted trumpet plays

a rapid-fire, triple-tongued tattoo; a solo bassoon sings plaintively as the *gracioso*, its phrases answered by a greatly divided string section. Deft touches like these proclaim Ravel's finesse as an orchestrator.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, xylophone, castanets, military drum, cymbals, bass drum, two harps, and strings.

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Sources and Inspirations

Ravel's birthplace of Ciboure is a seaside resort on the Atlantic Ocean, near Biarritz, in the Basque Country that straddles the border of France and Spain. Ravel spent little time there after his birth in a home facing the harbor, but he was greatly influenced by his mother, Marie, who was born in Spain of Basque descent. Ravel is known to have vacationed in Ciboure as an adult, and returned in 1930 for a festival renaming the dockside street on which he was born as Quai Maurice Ravel.

Basque Country, situated at the foothills of the Pyrenees, is made up of seven provinces. Three on the French side of the border, and governed by that country, are also known as Northern Basque Country; four to the south encompass an autonomously governed region of Spain. The two sides share a strong ethnic heritage and ancient language, Euskara, which linguists say is unrelated to any other that is still spoken. It is no surprise that Ravel recalled his mother passing along the culture to him through folk songs, as Basque music is grounded in a strong oral tradition that has circumvented efforts over the decades by Spain and France to discourage speaking the language.

— The Editors



The harbor of Ciboure, where Ravel's birthplace can be seen at the center, a five-story structure, with the steeple of the Church of St. Vincent's, where he was baptized, directly behind it