Manuel de Falla: *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*

Given the popularity of Impressionist art today, it may come as a surprise that “impressionism” was initially used as a pejorative. After the 1874 exhibition in Paris of paintings by Monet and his circle, art critic Louis Leroy declared that the patterns printed on wallpaper were far more complete than one of Monet’s creations, and snidely dubbed the painters “Impressionists.” What was intended as an insult became a badge of honor for Monet, Renoir, Degas, Berthe Morisot and others. Yet by the end of the 19th century, several offshoots of Impressionism had developed (Pointillism, Fauvism, etc.), where each artist adapted Impressionist techniques and aesthetics to his or her own sensibilities, making a blanket definition of Impressionism practically useless.

Because the musical works of Debussy, Ravel and other French composers were so radically different in sound and structure than the music of Brahms and Wagner, these groundbreaking pieces were also considered as a kind of impressionism, but Debussy despised the term as applied to music. When asked about whether his music was similar to the painting of Monet and others, he replied, “I am trying to do 'something different'...what the imbeciles call 'impressionism', a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by the critics.”

Manuel de Falla absorbed the new melodic and harmonic techniques developed by Debussy, but synthesized these new sounds with the musical style of his native Spain. After his initial training in Madrid, Falla moved to Paris in 1907, where a generous award from the King of Spain allowed him to remain in the French capital for the next seven years. Falla met Debussy, Ravel and Paul Dukas as well as Stravinsky, Picasso and other members of the Parisian avant-garde.

Falla’s compositional voice still spoke clearly of his Spanish heritage, even while absorbing new elements of melody, harmony and orchestration. In 1909, Falla wrote four nocturnes for solo piano, inspired by the drawings of the Spanish artist Santiago Rusiñol. Rusiñol had painted a series of landscapes of formal gardens from all over Spain, compiled in a book entitled *Jardins d’Espanya*. These paintings proved to be a fruitful stimulus for Falla’s musical imagination.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Falla’s royal stipend was terminated and the young composer found it necessary to return to Spain. At the suggestion of his friend and colleague, pianist Ricardo Viñes, Falla orchestrated the three nocturnes and combined them as a single work, entitled *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. First performed in Madrid in 1916, the work was championed by important virtuosi like Viñes and Arthur Rubinstein.

Falla’s score comes closest to the true idea of impressionism, evoking an atmosphere without relying on programmatic depictions in the manner of Richard Strauss’s tone poems. The
tantalizing hints of Spanish dance music, the colorful instrumentation and the role of the piano both as a concerto-like protagonist as well as a coloristic element of the overall texture create a sensual ambience without the need for overt musical sound effects. The piece is neither concerto nor tone poem, but it certainly contains elements of both.

Falla described his intent to create a mood rather than a distinct image in his initial program notes:

"If these 'symphonic impressions' have achieved their object, the mere enumeration of their titles should be a sufficient guide to the hearer. Although in this work - as in all which have a legitimate claim to be considered as music - the composer has allowed a definite design... the end for which it was written is no other than to evoke places, sensations, and sentiments. The music has no pretensions to being descriptive; it is merely expressive. But something more than the sound of festivals and dances has inspired these 'evocations in sound,' for melancholy and mystery have their part also."

The work is in three movements, with a brief pause between the first two. *En el Generalife* (In the Generalife) is an impression of the gardens of the 14th-century Alhambra palace in the city of Granada. We hear hints of flamenco guitar, the insistent rhythm of castanets and the stomping of the dancers, but the overall atmosphere is of a passionate sensuality. *Danza lejana* (A Distant Dance) opens with woodwinds capering over trills in the strings, evoking the Andalusian *malagueña*. The piano joins in the dance, sometimes leading the capricious steps, at other times merely commenting upon and accompanying the cavorting of the woodwinds and strings. After a quiet but ominous interlude in the orchestra, the piano’s energetic ostinato figure leads directly into the vibrant opening of *En los jardines de la Sierra de Córdoba* (In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba). The orchestra’s gypsy dances and fiery interjections are answered by the piano with expressive *cantabile* interludes. As if all the dancing has exhausted the performers, the orchestra rises to one final passionate climax before subsiding into the calm beauty of the final pages.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat major, K. 365**

Mozart almost singlehandedly developed the piano concerto into the form we know it today. In his 27 concertos, we see a steady development from the *gallant* style works of his youth to the depth and subtlety of the later piano concertos. The earliest concertos are Mozart’s arrangements of solo keyboard works by C.P.E. Bach and others and imitate the simple and straightforward style of those masters. As he explores further, his piano concertos increase in harmonic complexity and emotional depth, with an increasing prominence and independence of the wind section and a more complex dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra. There is a distinct parallel between Mozart’s evolution of the Classical piano concerto and his friend Joseph Haydn’s experiments and development of the Classical symphony and string quartet.

The Concerto for Two Pianos is one of the earliest of Mozart’s truly mature works in this genre. Mozart composed it in 1779 for performance with his sister Maria Anna (“Nannerl”), even
though the years of the two young siblings barnstorming through the musical capitals of Europe with their father Leopold were long past. It marks the end of one creative period in his life and beginning the next; in the same year he would leave Salzburg for Vienna to escape both his domineering father Leopold and his overly demanding and fussy employer, the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg.

A work with two soloists poses a challenge for the composer – how do you give each soloist “equal time” while keeping the size of the work within manageable limits? Mozart treats the solo sections of the work as if they were for one instrument, but divides the solo work between both soloists. The two pianos spar musically with each other and with the orchestra throughout the three movements in a witty and urbane dialogue between all the protagonists, much like the ensembles of Mozart’s operas.

The work is cast in three movements: a majestic Allegro in the “heroic” key of E-flat major (like Beethoven’s later “Emperor” Concerto), full of a wide spectrum of dramatic and lyrical material; a serene and songful Andante in which the soloists sing to one another over discreet orchestral comment; and a vivacious Rondo, bubbling over with good humor and high spirits, but with contrasting episodes of drama and pathos as well.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Tchaikovsky’s two best known and most beloved concertos both needed to walk a difficult path to finally arrive in the concert hall. His Violin Concerto was snubbed by its original dedicatee, Leopold Auer, and after its world premiere in Vienna in December 1881, the critic Eduard Hanslick condemned the work in the press the following day: “…the violin is no longer played; it is torn asunder, it is beaten black and blue.” Despite these initial birthing pains, the Violin Concerto became and remains one of the most beloved works in the violin repertoire.

Six years earlier, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 had faced a similar uphill battle. Not a virtuoso pianist himself, Tchaikovsky was self-conscious about his ability to write idiomatically for the instrument. He pinned his hopes upon persuading the brilliant Russian pianist Nicolai Rubinstein to take on the challenge of the first performance. Rubinstein was a composer as well as a pianist, and he was the head of the Moscow Conservatory where Tchaikovsky served on the faculty. As one of the leading pianists of his time, if he would lend his advocacy to Tchaikovsky’s concerto, it would be assured of a place in the concert repertoire.

Upon putting the finishing touches on the work, Tchaikovsky made an appointment to play the concerto for Rubinstein on Christmas Eve of 1874. The older composer listened thoughtfully through the entire performance. At the end, when greeted with Rubinstein’s stone silence, Tchaikovsky asked for his opinion. Rubinstein launched into a vicious diatribe on the defects of the composition, not sparing Tchaikovsky’s feelings in the least. Tchaikovsky described it in a letter to a friend:
“There burst from Rubinstein’s mouth a mighty torrent of words. He spoke quietly at first, then he waxed hot, and finally he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It seems that my concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable. Certain passages were so commonplace and awkward they could not be improved, and the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar. I had stolen this from somebody and that from somebody else, so that only two or three pages were good for anything and all the rest should be wiped out or radically rewritten.”

Rubinstein told Tchaikovsky that if he would undertake radical and extensive alterations, and if the revisions met with Rubinstein’s approval, the great virtuoso would deign to bestow his talents upon Tchaikovsky’s poor little concerto. Tchaikovsky absorbed Rubinstein’s criticism stoically, but the conservatory director’s harsh comments and condescending attitude must have hit a nerve – Tchaikovsky soon after wrote to a friend, “I will not alter a single note, and will publish it exactly as it is!” Just as Beethoven angrily tore the title page of his “Eroica” Symphony when scratching out the dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte, Tchaikovsky rubbed out the dedication to Rubinstein and instead dedicated it to the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (who just happened to be one of Rubinstein’s professional rivals).

Karma was on Tchaikovsky’s side. Von Bülow not only graciously accepted the dedication, but immediately included it on a concert tour of the United States. Instead of a world premiere in Moscow with Rubinstein at the piano, Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto made its debut in Boston, with von Bülow conducting the orchestra of the Harvard Musical Society, a pick-up group of professional musicians from the area. The young American composer George Whitefield Chadwick was in the audience attended the premiere and found the work powerful and enchanting; American audiences agreed. Von Bülow reported the work’s success back to Tchaikovsky, who gushed in a letter to a friend, “Each time Bülow was obliged to repeat the whole finale of my concerto! Nothing like that happens in our country.”

Tchaikovsky’s concerto has been so beloved for so long that it is easy to overlook its unique musical features. The opening movement is announced in portentous horn fanfares, punctuated by sharp chords from the rest of the orchestra. The soloist enters with arpeggiated chords to accompany the orchestra in one of the lushest Romantic melodies in the concerto repertoire – in the “wrong” key (D-flat major, not B-flat minor). The piano repeats the same melody, adorned with filigree decoration, over a quiet pizzicato accompaniment. After a brief piano cadenza, this ravishingly beautiful tune returns one more time in full Hollywood orchestration over cascades of chords in the piano...and it is never heard again. A quiet interlude that follows leads to the Allegro con spirito, whose initial idea is a nervous figure in the piano which is then heard in the orchestra. The contrasting second theme is a sensitive and melancholy tune that sighs with each phrase. The piano’s pyrotechnics are evident throughout the movement, answered by the passionate outbursts of the orchestra. While the movement is identifiable in sonata form, the overall feeling one is of an extended rhapsody, with a free interplay of the movement’s themes. The energy builds throughout the movement to an extended piano cadenza, a brief reprise of the lyrical second them and a final sprint to the final chords.
The *Andantino semplice* is an ABA song form, but the central section serves not just as a contrast, but as a miniature scherzo within the bookends of the opening and closing sections. The opening flute melody passes to the piano, which extends and elaborates its simple song, with gentle responses from solo woodwinds and horn. After the central section’s bouncy exuberance, the piano returns to the wistful opening tune and brings the movement to a quiet conclusion.

The finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) bursts forth in a whirlwind of orchestral energy, which the piano seizes upon immediately in a vigorous, demonic dance, punctuated by syncopated accents in the orchestra. The pianistic fireworks relent only for an ardently lyrical waltz, introduced by the strings and taken up by the soloist. Virtuoso pianism and passionate lyricism vie for the spotlight throughout the movement, answered by muscular orchestral *tuttis*. The lyrical waltz appears in one final grand peroration for both piano and orchestra before the soloist brings the house down with the final adrenaline-fueled sprint to the finish.