



Falla (y Matheu), Manuel de (1876-1946)

by Mario Champagne

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Manuel de Falla is one of the most illustrious of twentieth-century Spanish composers. He contributed important works in a variety of genres, including chamber music, opera, and ballet.

He was born in Cádiz on November 23, 1876 into a prosperous family. His father was Valencian, his mother Catalan. He studied piano and composition with private tutors and then, at age twenty, entered the Real Conservatorio de Música in Madrid. His early compositions were written for small ensembles and they were heavily influenced by Spanish folk music. He wrote six *zarzuelas* (a kind of folk operetta), though only one, *Los amores de la Inés*, was staged.

Disappointed with opportunities in Madrid for both composition and the performance of his works, de Falla traveled to Paris in 1907, where he resided until 1915. In Paris, he met several important figures in the musical world, including Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, Paul Dukas, Ricardo Viñes, and Sergei Diaghilev.

During this time, he composed the well-received *Trois mélodies*, based on texts by the homosexual poet Théophile Gautier, as well as the famous gypsy *gitanería* or ballet *El amor brujo* and his "symphonic impressions," the suite for piano and orchestra entitled *Noches en los jardines de España*. He was poised for greater success when the start of World War I forced his return to Spain.

Soon after his return to Madrid, de Falla met Federico García Lorca, the gay poet and a future collaborator, who was to become a close friend. The composer also spent time refining his musical language, which Spanish critics now approvingly discerned as having been purged of foreign, and especially French, mannerisms.

In 1917, Diaghilev and his choreographer Massine heard de Falla's pantomime, *El corregidor y la molinera*, which is loosely based on Alarcón's *El sombrero de tres picos*. They persuaded de Falla to create a version suitable for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Completed in 1919, this new ballet, with sets and costumes designed by Pablo Picasso and entitled *El sombrero de tres picos*, opened to rave reviews in London. The ballet, however, was not very well received in Spain a couple of years later.

Madrid's hustle and bustle palled on de Falla, and he retired to Granada for more peace and quiet to compose. Granada did, indeed, prove more conducive to de Falla for composition. He and García Lorca explored several potential collaborations, although only a couple of minor works resulted from their efforts.

Granada also fostered de Falla's innate austerity and religious disposition. At this time, he delved into the historical musical styles of Spain to forge a neo-classical style that defines this period of his life and work. One popular composition to result from this was the chamber opera *El retablo de maese Pedro*, based on an excerpt from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This idyllic and productive period was interrupted by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

de Falla's devout Roman Catholicism led to his cultivation by the Nationalists. However, despite the high esteem he enjoyed in their eyes, the composer was unable to prevent the execution of his friend and collaborator García Lorca.

As the civil war wound down in 1939, de Falla left Spain with his sister for Argentina, where he had been invited to conduct concerts at the Teatro Colón. His decision to leave Spain may have been prompted by the execution of García Lorca and the homophobia of the Franco regime. de Falla remained in Alta Gracia in the Sierra Córdoba of Argentina for the rest of his life, working on a large-scale work, the cantata *La Atlántida*, which was not completed at the time of his death on November 14, 1946.

The evidence of de Falla's homosexuality is circumstantial. While he is not known for certain to have had sexual relationships with either men or women, nearly all of his emotional attachments (apart from his close relationships with his sister and lesbian harpsichordist Wanda Landowska) were with men, especially gay intellectuals and artists.

While the elegance, sensuality, and erotic suggestiveness of his music have sometimes been seen as expressions of the composer's homosexuality, these qualities may have more to do with his Spanish musical formation than with homosexuality *per se*.

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