PROGRAM NOTES

Manuel de Falla - Suite No. 2 from The Three-Cornered Hat

Manuel de Falla

*Born November 23, 1876, Cádiz, Spain.*
*Died November 14, 1946, Alta Gracia, Argentina.*

Composition History

Falla composed this score in 1918 and 1919 as a revision of the pantomime *El corregidor y la molinera* (composed in 1916-17). The first performance was given on July 22, 1919, in London's Alhambra Theater by Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, with costumes and décor by Pablo Picasso, and Ernest Ansermet conducting. The score calls for an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, castanets, tam-tam, xylophone, harp, celesta, piano, and strings. Performance time is approximately twelve minutes.

Performance History

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of music from Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat* were given at Orchestra Hall on March 23 and 24, 1923, with Alfredo Casella conducting. The Orchestra's most recent subscription concert performances were of the complete ballet, given on September 21 and 23, 2003, with Susanne Mentzer as soloist and William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra first performed music from the ballet at the Ravinia Festival on July 10, 1937, with Ernest Ansermet conducting, and most recently on August 6, 2006, with Miguel Harth-Bedoya conducting.

Suite No. 2 from The Three-Cornered Hat

*The Three-Cornered Hat,* one of music's great international collaborative efforts, began life in 1916 as a modest pantomime called *El corregidor y la molinera* (The magistrate and the miller's wife) with music by Manuel de Falla. Sergei Diaghilev and his Russian Ballet—already famous for giving the recent premieres of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*—happened to be in Madrid during the initial run of *El corregidor.* Diaghilev had been urging Falla to write something for his troupe for years, and the impresario now asked Falla to transform his mime-play into a full ballet, expanded and rescored for large orchestra. In no time, Diaghilev put together an extraordinary cast of characters for Falla's ballet, with choreography by Léonide Massine, his star dancer (and the company's successor to Nijinsky), and
designs by Pablo Picasso.

To help devise the choreography, Massine took flamenco lessons from Felix Fernando Garcia, a phenomenal dancer whom Diaghilev found in a working-class café in the back streets of Madrid and persuaded to join the company as the star of the new ballet. (Massine also admitted to finding many beautiful poses in bullfighting.) Picasso designed sets and costumes that were characteristically witty and brilliant, and devised a front drop curtain depicting a bullfight in ochre, pale pink, white, blue, and gray that was so magnificent that Falla wrote some new music at the last minute just to show it off. (Picasso finished painting the curtain during final rehearsals.)

Shortly before the London premiere, Garcia became ill and Massine had to take over his role. On the afternoon of the first performance, Falla was summoned by telegram back to Madrid to his mother's deathbed, and Ernest Ansermet stepped in to conduct. Despite these last-minute hurdles, The Three-Cornered Hat was a triumph, and Pedro de Alarcon's 1874 tale of a corregidor (the resident magistrate) who tries, without success, to seduce the pretty wife of the local miller, became an international hit. Massine later said that of his more than one hundred ballets, it was the one of which he was most proud. (He continued to dance the role of the miller into the 1950s.) Misia Sert gave a post-premiere party at which Rubinstein played the piano and Picasso drew a laurel crown on the composer's bald head with his hostess's eyebrow pencil. (Incidentally, The Three-Cornered Hat was the last ballet danced by Diaghilev's company, on August 4, 1929, a fortnight before the impresario's death.)

This suite of excerpts designed for the concert hall is a set of three dances. It opens with The Neighbors' Dance, the seguidillas danced by the villagers who have gathered to celebrate Saint John's Eve.

In his memoirs, Massine recalls the second number, The Miller's Dance:

I began by stamping my feet repeatedly and twirling my hands over my head. As the music quickened I did a series of high jumps, ending with a turn in mid-air and a savage stamp of the foot as I landed. The mental image of an enraged bull going into the attack unleashed some inner force which generated power within me. For one moment it seemed as if some other person within me was performing the dance.

The finale, propelled by mistaken identities and general confusion, eventually ends happily, with the miller and his wife reunited. The villagers toss the corregidor into the air, and everyone joins in the jota, a wild dance from Aragon.

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