

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Edouard Lalo

Born January 27, 1823, Lille, France.

Died April 22, 1892, Paris, France.

Symphonie espagnole for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 21

Lalo composed the *Symphonie espagnole* in 1874 for the violinist Pablo de Sarasate, who introduced the work in Paris on February 7, 1875. The score calls for solo violin and an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, snare drum, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* were given at the Auditorium Theatre on April 20 and 21, 1900, with Leopold Kramer as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting.

Bizet's *Carmen* is often thought to have ignited the French fascination with all things Spanish, but Edouard Lalo got there first. His *Symphonie espagnole*—a Spanish symphony that's really more of a concerto—was premiered in Paris by the virtuoso Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate the month before *Carmen* opened at the Opéra-Comique. And although *Carmen* wasn't an immediate success (Bizet, who died shortly after the premiere, didn't live to see it achieve great popularity), the *Symphonie espagnole* quickly became an international hit. It's still Lalo's best-known piece by a wide margin, just as *Carmen* eventually became Bizet's signature work.

Although the surname Lalo is of Spanish origin, Lalo came by his French first name (not to mention his middle names, Victoire Antoine) naturally. His family had been settled in Flanders and in northern France since the sixteenth century. Edouard was determined to study music early on, but his father, a highly decorated military man who had fought for Napoleon, balked at the idea of having his first born become a professional musician. At the age of sixteen, Edouard left home for Paris, where he studied violin and composition. He decided to stay in that great music capital, and for many years he made his living there quietly teaching violin and playing chamber music with the Armingaud Quartet, which he put together to promote the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. (The quartet was sometimes joined by high-profile pianists such as Clara Schumann and Camille Saint-Saëns.)

Lalo didn't attract attention as a composer for some time, largely because he favored the then-unfashionable forms of chamber music. For a while he gave up on composition altogether. But in 1866 (he was then forty-three), he finally tried again with the opera *Fiesque*, which he entered in a competition sponsored by the Théâtre-Lyrique. When his work failed to win, Lalo was so incensed that he published the score at his own expense; however, it was never performed. Then, in the 1870s, Lalo's fortunes turned after he met Sarasate and immediately set to work on a series of concerto-like pieces for him and other leading performers of the day. In 1874, Sarasate premiered Lalo's Violin Concerto (now forgotten), and that same year Lalo composed the *Symphonie espagnole*.

Lalo was no doubt inspired to write "Spanish" music by Sarasate's colorful playing, so different in style from that of Joseph Joachim, Germany's great master. Sarasate was both a virtuoso and a great stage presence—as Alberto Bachmann's classic *Encyclopedia of the Violin* concluded, no one else could combine "grace, clean-cut brilliancy, and bewildering vitality in so remarkable a degree." Although Sarasate eventually premiered several major works (Bruch, Saint-Saëns, and Dvořák all dedicated pieces to him), Lalo's Spanish Symphony is the one that best reflected his personality, as well as the spirit of his native land.

After writing a straightforward concerto for Sarasate, this time Lalo chose to compose something different—a five-movement symphony for violin and orchestra. It's a curious hybrid, neither concerto nor symphony, but as a character piece it's unsurpassed. And as an orchestral evocation of Spain, it's the work that launched a celebrated series of French portraits of its neighboring country, including Chabrier's *España* and Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*. (In the meantime, Lalo turned out to be geographically restless, turning his attention within the next five years to a *Russian* violin concerto and a *Norwegian* Fantasy for violin and orchestra. And Sarasate, an off-hours composer, later wrote his own fantasy on themes from *Carmen*.)

The first movement of the *Symphonie espagnole* is the most assertively "symphonic" of the five, particularly in the way it develops most of its material from the opening fanfare. The beginning also introduces the rhythm of a duplet followed by a triplet, and this two-plus-three (and sometimes three-plus-two) pattern lends a Spanish quality to the music. The violin enters in the fourth measure—with the fanfare motto—and is rarely silent after that. This is high-wire solo material, memorable not so much for its pyrotechnics as its genuine melodic invention and rhythmic flair. The second movement is a scherzo, colored by the same seguidilla dance rhythm that dominates *Carmen*'s famous aria and sung like a grand serenade, with soaring violin lines over pizzicato strings and harp, like the sound of guitars in the night.

The central Intermezzo used to be routinely omitted (it was skipped at the Chicago Symphony premiere in 1900)—inexplicably, for it includes some of Lalo's most colorful, virtuosic, and decidedly Spanish music. (Yehudi Menuhin apparently was the first violinist to restore it.) The Andante is darkly seductive, with a violin melody as natural and indelible as folk song. The finale is all bravura and local color (the atmospheric opening, with its bell-like sonorities, is especially striking). The pace slows midway, for a hushed melody that *Carmen* could easily borrow, before the final fireworks.

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