

# ROMANTIC SOUNDS OF CLASSICAL GUITAR

*Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Abendmusik Alexandria Series Director*

The majority of this evening's program consists of works by Spanish or Latin American composers. Yet these five compositions also possess great diversity among themselves as they are drawn from across two hundred years spanning the beginnings of classical guitar to one of its greatest contemporary proponents. They shall be the core of these notes, for the remaining two pieces require little introduction. These two are transcriptions made by this evening's featured performer John De Chiaro himself of works so well-known as to be familiar even to those who know little classical music. These are the *Ave Maria* by Austrian composer Franz Schubert (1797-1828) and the *Can-Can* which remains the best-loved work by the French composer Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880).

Our program begins with music by the Spanish composer Fernando Sor (1778-1839). While Sor was prolific in many genres and with many instrumental combinations, it is as a guitarist and a composer for guitar that Sor is best remembered. Born in Barcelona and receiving his musical education at Montserrat, he sided with Napoleon against the Spanish monarchy and, upon Napoleon's defeat, was exiled from Spain. No matter, Paris became his adopted home for some years, and his subsequent musical career was largely successful – if occasionally nomadic. One of the leading guitarists of his age, Sor did much to invigorate the early history of classical guitar: he contributed many new pieces to the guitar repertoire and also wrote technical manuals to teach aspiring guitarists. Whether due to his exile from Spain or simply because the nationalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century had yet to take shape, the majority of Sor's compositions are well-grounded in the internationalist style that had first developed under the Viennese Classicists like Mozart and Haydn.

The Sonata No. 1 in D major, Op. 14 also called *Gran solo* is clearly reflective of these internationalist tendencies. It begins with a slow, minor mode introduction and then follows the standard sonata-allegro form that Mozart and Haydn would have known, neatly moving through the phases of exposition, development, and recapitulation. Furthermore, there is little distinctly Spanish-sounding about this piece. Dating this composition is somewhat tricky. In fact, three different versions survive – one from 1810, another from 1822, as well as an undated arrangement by Sor's friend Dionisio Aguado, another leading guitarist of the day. Regardless, *Gran solo* is an excellently-crafted and enjoyable piece of music.

Like Sor before him, the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) wrote in many genres yet his other works are almost completely overshadowed by those he wrote for his own instrument – in his case, the piano. That these works were originally composed for piano is often obscured, however, because so many of them are better-known in their guitar or orchestral arrangements. Unlike Sor though, Albéniz was a devoted nationalist, fully-utilizing the elements and even the melodies of Spanish folksongs in his compositions. He was inspired in this direction by Felipe Pedrell (1841-1922) who – although an unfamiliar name today – was once regarded as the father of Spanish nationalist music. Ultimately, Albéniz was able to fully-realize the vision that had begun with Pedrell, and in turn inspired many other Spanish composers to do the same.

Originally written for piano, *Leyenda de Asturias* is heard this evening in a transcription by the famous Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia. *Leyenda* is actually the fifth piece from the first *Suite española*, a set of eight pieces depicting different regions of Spain. This piece highlights Asturias, a mountainous province of northwestern Spain situated on the Bay of Biscay. Whereas Albéniz had originally drafted the *Suite española* in 1886, the *Leyenda* that appeared in the final version of the suite some twenty years later was actually the Prelude to his *Cantos de España* composed between 1891 and 1894, and was only placed in this suite and titled as such by Albéniz's publisher. Nonetheless, this is a fantastic piece in three sections. The first section thrills with its quick pulsing while the second is reminiscent of an operatic recitative with its measured declaration of its musical material; the third section is a repetition of the first with an added coda.

Leo Brouwer – born in 1939 and still active today – is one of Cuba's foremost musical personalities. A classical guitarist who has played around the world, many of Brouwer's works for guitar have also gained an international reputation in the hands of others. In addition, Brouwer served for years as music director of the *Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Cuba*, one of the island nation's leading orchestras. Although at one time his style reflected the avant-garde tendencies of composers like Krzysztof Penderecki and Hans Werner Henze, since the late 1970s he has described his style as "national hyper-Romanticism" in that it combines traces of his Afro-Cuban heritage with traditional techniques and a touch of minimalism.

The 1981 composition *El Decamerón negro* was his first piece for solo guitar to exhibit the traits of this new stylistic phase. This set of three pieces – the last of which is heard on this evening’s program – is based on a book by the early twentieth-century anthropologist Leo Frobenius which collects African folk legends into a larger narrative in a similar manner to the original *Decameron* by Boccaccio. The movement heard on this evening’s program is called *Balada de la doncella enamorada* or *The Ballad of the Love-Sick Maiden*. Set in rondo form, this piece shows considerable lyricism, and has been called the most tender of any of Brouwer’s works.

The Spanish composer Sebastián Yradier (1809-1865) is remembered almost exclusively for his song *La Paloma*. Although the name Yradier might be unfamiliar, *La Paloma* is one of the most-performed songs in history, having inspired musicians as different as Plácido Domingo and Elvis Presley, Celedonio Romero and Bing Crosby. *La Paloma* was written around 1860 after Yradier visited Cuba, and in its opening lines the singer regrets the secret lover that he was forced to leave behind with his departure. Representative of lost love generally, *La Paloma* quickly migrated to Mexico and has since established itself around the world. Today, it is heard in Zanzibar at weddings, in Romania at funerals, and elsewhere in other contexts. Apparently, there are over two thousand versions of *La Paloma* on record by an impressively wide range of artists.

The last piece on this evening’s program is by Spanish composer Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909). Tárrega is perhaps the most essential figure to the history of classical guitar. This composer and virtuoso performer not only restored the standing of the guitar among audiences and critics, but also pointed the way forward for successive generations of guitarists. In particular, his playing techniques and his use of the footstool became commonplace among later guitarists; his mixed programming of compositions originally written for guitar with those arranged from other sources is still the standard today; and his emphasis on composing short character pieces with a Spanish feel has made this type of piece the most commonly-encountered on present-day guitar recitals.

*Gran jota de Aragonesa* is a ten-minute composition traversing many moods amid a Spanish backdrop. Like its name implies, the source material for this piece is from the northeastern region of Spain known as Aragon. Specifically, the popular folk themes that make up this piece were first collected and written-down by Julián Arcas (1832-1882) who was an early influence on Tárrega. Throughout the playful series of episodes, we encounter much that is both endearing and somehow

familiar. There are many interesting segments to *Gran jota*, including a particularly militaristic variation towards the end when the guitar takes on the character of snare drums.

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