

POPULAR INSPIRATIONS

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Abendmusik Alexandria Series Director

Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840)

Centone di Sonata No. 1

Italian composer Niccolò Paganini – remembered today as the first superstar of the violin – was also a guitarist, and he was apparently quite talented on this instrument. Paganini considered the guitar “my constant companion in all my travels” and once remarked “I love the guitar for its harmony.” In the same way that Paganini wrote so much music for violin, he also wrote a considerable amount of music for guitar. These include 37 guitar sonatas, many character pieces, and also a series of 43 *Ghiribizzi* or *Whims* reminiscent in their diversity to the more famous set of 24 *Caprices* for solo violin. Yet, whereas his music for violin was written to amaze the public with its fierce technical displays, Paganini’s guitar music was mostly written to be played among friends in quieter settings. Therefore, much of his guitar music is comparatively subdued next to his radical and innovative violin compositions.

In addition to the many works he wrote for solo guitar, Paganini also wrote duets combining the unique sounds of his two instruments – guitar and violin. Among these are a set of 18 *Centone di Sonate*, a phrase which roughly translates to “Medleys of Sonatas.” By calling these works such, Paganini was disclosing that many of these pieces do not follow the strict dictates of Classical sonata form – exposition, development, and recapitulation – which at that time was still so prevalent in instrumental compositions. A century earlier, such a distinction would not have had to been made: many of the pieces in this set more closely resemble the Baroque sonata which was simply an instrumental composition often in several short movements. By 1828 – the approximate date of composition for this group – the term “sonata,” however, implied too much to be broadly applied to all of the works included in this set.

The first piece from this collection of 18 is the one heard on this evening’s program. An A minor composition in two brief movements, this work has little to do with Classical sonata form. Not unlike the other pieces of this set, the guitar takes a secondary role to the violin. The dramatic *Introduzione* provides a fiery opening which seems insistent on revealing nothing more than the mood of what is to follow. Suddenly, a demonic jig breaks loose to initiate the *Allegro maestoso*. The central section of this movement has a much more sentimental character than heard previously. After the jig returns, there is a quick reminiscence of the

Introduzione material to conclude the first movement. The second movement is marked *Rondoncino* and its recurring refrain melody hints at the rondo form its title implies. Between the statements of this refrain, there are several entertaining variations, including one that requires the violinist to take-up plucking as if a guitarist. In the closing measures, the guitarist playfully mocks the violinist’s plucks with light plucks of his own.

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946)

Seven Spanish Folk Songs

By 1914, Manuel de Falla the renowned Spanish composer had spent seven years living in Paris, working alongside and befriending France’s leading composers. Yet, with the outbreak of World War I that year, Falla was forced to return to Spain. Despite his years abroad, the music of his homeland never became foreign to Falla as imitations of Spanish folk music would continue to appear in his compositions. Nor did his associates forget he was a Spanish composer among Frenchmen – his friend the composer Paul Dukas for example would fondly call him “the little black Spaniard.”

When approached by a Spanish singer who had been a part of the Parisian production of Falla’s opera *La vida breve* to write for her something Spanish, Falla was happy to oblige. The result was the set of *Siete canciones populares españolas* or *Seven Spanish Folk Songs* which Falla completed in Paris just before his mandatory departure for Spain. For these songs, Falla uncharacteristically drew on actual Spanish folk tunes. While at least five of the seven songs are based directly on Spanish folk tunes, Falla did amend some of the melodies and added his own accompaniments to all seven. Soprano Luisa Vela gave the premiere on January 14, 1915 at the Ateneo in Madrid with Falla himself accompanying her at the piano.

The first song is titled *El paño moruno* or *The Moorish Cloth*. The tune that serves as its basis is from the province of Murcia located in southeastern Spain. This song despairs that a piece of fine cloth has become stained and has in turn lost its value. The second song *Seguidilla murciana* – a Seguidilla from the same region – places the first song in context by telling of a girl whose fickleness eventually causes her to be ignored. An *Asturiana* – a song from the northwestern region of Asturias – follows, telling of a tree who pities and weeps with a rejected lover. The lively *Jota* with its origins in the northeastern region of Aragon relates a secret and

forbidden love affair. *Nana* is a lullaby from Andalusia, a region in southern Spain traditionally associated with both Muslims and Gypsies; therefore, *Nana* has somewhat of an oriental character. The melodies of the final two songs *Canción* and *Polo* are believed to be original compositions by Falla. *Canción* radiates with renewed strength as a dejected lover finally overcomes feelings of betrayal. The fiery *Polo* is its opposite with exclamations from an outcast lover discovering betrayal for the first time.

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Histoire du Tango

Celebrated Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla skillfully combined his love for the tango tradition of South America with his training in classical composition and experience with jazz. Although Piazzolla was born in Argentina, he and his parents relocated to New York City when he was just four years old. When he was eight, his father gave him a *bandoneón* – a type of accordion often found in tango ensembles – and he soon became quite proficient on this instrument. Meanwhile, piano lessons introduced him to classical music as the jazz of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway was also becoming familiar. When he was sixteen, he and his family returned to Argentina and soon he was playing with notable tango groups. Under the tutelage of the eminent Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, he studied the music of twentieth-century classical composers like Stravinsky and Bartók, and for a while adopted their European language wholesale. While studying in Paris with the famed pedagogue Nadia Boulanger, however, she convinced Piazzolla to consider his tango heritage more seriously. This was a turning point for him, and upon his return to Argentina he set out to reinvigorate the tango tradition with all he had learned from classical music and jazz.

Throughout his career, Piazzolla wrote some 750 compositions including everything from orchestral works and chamber music to film scores. There are plenty of tangos, and some works even comment on the tango as a genre. The four-movement suite *Histoire du Tango* traces the development of the tango from its origins as an erotic dance music found in the slums of Buenos Aires to its contemporary recognition as a vital and exciting addition to the concert hall repertoire. Piazzolla wrote this piece in 1985 by which time his music was not only world famous, but also beginning to find acceptance in his native Argentina. Originally conceived for flute and guitar, *Histoire du Tango* was dedicated to the Belgian flutist Marc Grauwels who also gave its premiere.

Each of its four movements depicts a particular phase in the evolution of the tango genre. The first movement is titled *Bordel 1900* and portrays the tango as the genre is first emerging around the turn of the twentieth century in the brothels of Buenos Aires. It is a cheery sort of music reflecting the good times had by the attractive women and the men they enticed. *Café 1930* depicts the tango approximately thirty years later after it had become a much slower, gloomier sort of music full of the sensual embrace we often associate with the tango. *Nightclub 1960* illustrates a period of international exchange and excitement for the tango; it also depicts the arrival of Piazzolla's own wide-reaching influences as jazz elements begin to be heard. In its final movement *Concert d'aujourd'hui* or *Concert of Today*, Piazzolla shows the concert hall tango that he himself had envisioned with its advanced vocabulary – an example that by 1985 most tango composers were following.

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