

## *Beyond Borders*

To go beyond borders – to defy the boundaries set by another – is a basic human impulse. For composers and other creative individuals, escaping the mold of one's teacher or the predominance of one's contemporaries is a basic part of finding oneself as an artist. For the three composers on tonight's program, the borders are primarily geographical and social, and these non-musical borders are reflected in the musical borders these composers subsequently cross.

Geographically, Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Frenchman Maurice Ravel reached towards Spain, while George Gershwin strove to incorporate his own underrated American surroundings into a musical language dominated by the European masters. Furthermore, all three composers sought to defy the accepted boundary between art music and folk traditions. Having successfully crossed beyond these borders, these three composers – Gershwin, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Ravel – each created a masterpiece now essential to the orchestral repertoire.

### **George Gershwin (1898-1937)** *Rhapsody in Blue*

With *Rhapsody in Blue*, we must remember that George Gershwin actually crossed not from art music into folk tradition and the popular sphere, but the reverse. In 1924 when the young Gershwin composed this pivotal work, he was an emerging composer of popular songs and Broadway musicals with a jazzy tinge – not a composer of classical symphonies or concerti. Ten years earlier he had left high school to become a song plugger on Tin Pan Alley, and within a few years had gained tremendous popular success as the composer of “Swanee,” a song made famous by Al Jolson. When *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered on February 12, 1924, it was with Paul Whiteman and his jazz band – not a symphony orchestra – and Whiteman had also been the one to commission the work from Gershwin. Even the opening clarinet solo – which today is so identifying of this composition – was, in fact, suggested by Whiteman's clarinetist. Therefore, it was the popular composer who borrowed Classical form and symphonic proportions to create a work that had its basis in jazz, blues, and other popular music.

*Rhapsody in Blue* quickly propelled Gershwin into the realm of art music, however, and established him as one

of the foremost composers of modern music – “an American Stravinsky” several New York critics of the day hailed him. Although as a child Gershwin had received classical training at the piano, his professional experience had been limited to popular songwriting and piano playing. When *Rhapsody in Blue* proved of interest to symphony orchestras, Gershwin knew nothing of orchestration. Instead, Whiteman's arranger Ferde Grofé took up the task of orchestrating the piece, and it is in Grofé's orchestration that *Rhapsody in Blue* is most commonly heard today. Gershwin was unhappy that he lacked these skills, and quickly learned orchestration and in the next year fully-orchestrated and composed a new Piano Concerto commissioned by Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society, and even played the solo role in the premiere. Other classical works followed while his Broadway musicals began to resemble operas; finally, he unveiled a full-fledged opera with *Porgy and Bess* in 1935.

Gershwin's new reputation as a composer of art music was not unchallenged, however. Writing about New York's leading composers of the 1920s in his text *Our New Music*, Aaron Copland failed to mention Gershwin, although the success that had followed *Rhapsody in Blue* in the 1920s was phenomenal. Like Gershwin, Copland had incorporated jazz into many of his works; unlike Gershwin, however, Copland had received professional tutelage from France's leading music teacher Nadia Boulanger. In the 1920s, Copland's works were also fiercely modern if not experimental – very different works from his better-known Americana of the 1930s and 1940s. After Copland wrote his own exceptionally jazzy Piano Concerto in 1927, critic Paul Rosenfeld praised Copland's work as an elevation of jazz into art while he condemned Gershwin as someone who refused or was unable to bring jazz any higher than popular entertainment. Today, in a world where many would argue for the artistic merit of jazz itself, Rosenfeld's criticism seems of little relevance.

*Rhapsody in Blue* contains elements from all three spheres of American music. From the classical sphere, we may hear the rhapsody form. Already a fairly loose form, the *Rhapsody in Blue* does appeal to its main formal constraint of a slow, grand first theme and a fast, witty second theme; like the preeminent *Hungarian Rhapsodies* by Franz Liszt, the bounds of these two sections are not fixed, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody* is particularly cinematic with its ever-changing scenery. The popular sphere of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley lends the *Rhapsody* its sweet harmonies and lyrical melodies, those elements which shape so much of the piece's development and gives it its wide appeal. Finally, the traditional sphere – namely jazz with its roots in African-American folk tradition – contributes an emphasis on soloists besides the piano, improvisatory

instrumental runs, syncopation (rhythmic irregularity), and plenty of expressive blue notes. Plus, its orchestrated form maintains many of the jazzy colors of the original: these range from muted trumpets to the use of saxophones and other jazz regulars within an orchestral context.

A piece which seems perfectly at ease within each the classical, popular, and traditional spheres, *Rhapsody in Blue* crosses these boundaries so seamlessly that one forgets they might exist in the first place. Only on occasion though does the music of George Gershwin *not* straddle these imaginary borders.

### **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)**

#### *Capriccio espagnol*, Op. 34

As late as the mid-nineteenth century, symphonic music was still coming into its own in Russia. For many years, Russian monarchs saw importation from the West as the best solution to their country's lack of art music. The real change came only in the 1860s when a new generation of Russian composers had begun to gain recognition, and in 1867 the critic Vladimir Stasov dubbed five of them "The Mighty Handful." The leader of this group was undoubtedly Mily Balakirev and at his side were César Cui, Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, and the young Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. They were all amateurs each with their own non-musical careers, yet Balakirev viewed this inexperience as a good thing – something that allowed them to write "Russian" music as opposed to "European" music.

Although within just a few years Rimsky-Korsakov would lose his devotion to Balakirev and his amateurism, Rimsky-Korsakov would not lose his dedication to writing "Russian" music. Although he now began to accept elements of Western tradition and determined to be a professional composer, he still infused his music with quotations or imitations of Russian folksong and often invoked Russian folk legends and sceneries.

On more than one occasion, Rimsky-Korsakov transposed these interests to other more exotic cultures beyond the borders of his native Russia. The *Capriccio espagnol* – or *Spanish Caprice* – belongs in this category of works that explore the cultures of other lands. As its title states, the music of Spain is the inspiration here, and Rimsky-Korsakov is careful to retain the melodies, rhythms, and harmonizations of the Spanish songs he chose to become his source material. At times, he even uses the Phrygian mode – a set of pitches which have come to take on Spanish connotations. Then there is also the use of Spanish instruments like the castanets.

The *Capriccio* is set in five continuous movements which also allude to their Spanish heritage. The festive opening movement is called an *Alborada* after the sort of song traditionally sung to wake lovers as the sun rises. The second movement is a set of variations on the *Alborada* theme as heralded by a choir of horns. The theme itself returns even more brilliantly than before to constitute the third movement. The fourth movement is titled *Scena e canto gitano* which translates as "Scene and Gypsy Song." The fifth movement entitled *Fandango asturiano* is both sensual and fiery in its evocation of the fandango dance genre which Rimsky-Korsakov attributes to Asturias, a region in northwestern Spain. Other instruments build on the initial statement of the *Fandango* theme by the trombones, before the music of the *Alborada* finally returns to conclude the piece.

*Capriccio espagnol* won immediate popularity following its 1887 premiere under the composer's own baton. When asked about the new piece, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote "The *Capriccio* is a brilliant *composition for the orchestra*... the Spanish themes, of dance character, furnished me with rich material for putting in use multiform orchestral effects." Always the perfectionist when it came to orchestration, this statement by Rimsky-Korsakov inseparably links his preoccupation with orchestration to his adaptation of Spanish themes in this piece – the Spanish themes have inspired the rich and characteristic orchestration that we hear, just as Russian themes inspire the orchestration of other pieces. In effect, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov has looked beyond the borders of Russia, and found inspiration for one of his greatest masterpieces in distant Spain.

### **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

#### *Boléro*

Maurice Ravel was a composer who frequently crossed borders. Ravel provided some of the first examples of Neo-Classicism with works like *Le tombeau de Couperin*, whereas the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* are so fiercely modern that their first audiences could not believe they were works by that same reserved, good-tempered Ravel. In *Gaspard de la nuit*, Ravel sought to defy pianistic ability itself and succeeded in creating a nightmarishly difficult composition. And, numerous compositions crossed geographical borders – works like the two Piano Concerti and the Violin Sonata pull their inspiration from American jazz, but there are also works inspired by Balinese *gamelan* and, of course, a whole series of Spanish-flavored works. *Boléro* is one of those compositions incorporating Spanish elements.

Part of Ravel's fascination with Spain was that his mother was Basque. The Basque country is a region of

northern Spain which extends across the Pyrenees into a small portion of France. Although the Basque people have their own language and culture very different from the rest of Spain, this lineage was still an impetus for Ravel's interest in Spanish music. But, there was also a larger trend towards Spanish music and culture that had existed among French composers at least since the 1870s. Georges Bizet's *Carmen* is a prime example, but there were also Édouard Lalo's contemporaneous *Symphonie espagnole* and later representatives like Claude Debussy's *Ibéria*. Plus, there was the example of travelling Spanish virtuosi like Pablo de Sarasate (violin), Francisco Tárrega (guitar), and Isaac Albéniz (piano). Then, there was also the Spaniard Manuel de Falla who for almost a decade called Paris his home as he worked alongside Frenchmen like Ravel, Debussy, and others.

Towards the end of Ravel's career in 1928, the renowned dancer Ida Rubinstein requested from Ravel a Spanish-themed ballet, and he soon produced *Boléro*. Ravel named his new ballet after a Spanish dance in triple meter which had reached Paris a century earlier, already having been emulated by others like Frédéric Chopin and by Bizet in *Carmen*. Even Ravel found the finished composition quite experimental with its singular theme insistently repeated and given further color over a fifteen-minute span. On one occasion, Ravel fittingly called it an "orchestrated crescendo" and others have humorously called it "a piece for orchestra without music." Ravel's description is perhaps more fitting as the piece gradually builds from the initial drum tapping to incorporate the entire orchestra with its playfully, sensuous melody. Appropriately, the ballet's plot features a young woman who gradually excites all of the men in a Spanish tavern into a frenzy with her provocative dance. Like the men who join in watching the attractive young lady, the musical instruments join with the drum and its enticing rhythm.

Ravel was shocked at just how popular *Boléro* became and in such a short time too – especially considering some of the revealing, darker elements towards its end. For Ravel, *Boléro* was a technical exercise to see if he could grow an entire orchestral composition from a single melody. The immediate popularity *Boléro* received was much more than Ravel expected for a "technical exercise." The musicologist Eric Salzman has written that Ravel has had a greater influence on popular music and jazz than he has on later classical composers. *Boléro* is certainly one of those pieces that has crossed beyond the borders of the classical music world and established itself within popular culture.