

# NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

## PROGRAM NOTES BY

Steven Lowe

### MANUEL DE FALLA

#### *The Three-Cornered Hat*

**Born:** November 23, 1876, in Cadiz, Spain

**Died:** November 14, 1946, in Alta Gracia, Argentina

**Work composed:** 1917; rev. 1919

**World premiere:** April 1917, in Madrid (original version); July 1919 (revised version)

Manuel de Falla's music conjures up the hot blood and passionate colors of the Iberian Peninsula, yet those who knew the man behind the music describe him as rather self-effacing. Igor Stravinsky opined that Falla was "as modest and withdrawn as an oyster," and "the most unpretendingly religious" man he had ever known.

Originally composed to accompany a pantomime, *The Corregidor and the Miller's Wife*, from a short story by Pedro de Alarcón, the score underwent revision and expansion when Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes toured Spain in 1919. The new version contained two additional numbers, the *The Miller's Dance* and *The Final Dance*.

The story centers on the lives of people in an Andalusian town, specifically a young miller, his pretty wife and an aging Corregidor (governor) whose energies are spent trying to woo the miller's spouse. The *Introduction*, a forceful attention-getter armed with blaring drums and fervent drums, also sounds a cautionary note from afar that wives should bolt their doors.

### CLAUDE DEBUSSY

#### *Petite suite*

**Born:** August 22, 1862, in St. Germain-en-Laye

**Died:** March 25, 1918, in Paris

**Work composed:** 1888

**World premiere:** March 1, 1889, Debussy and Jacques Durand performing original two-piano version

What Chopin had done for the piano earlier in the 19th century, Debussy accomplished in its final decade and into our own tempestuous era. His genius to create new sounds, to coax the piano's complex mechanics into myriad shadings of light and darkness, textures that danced like light on water, and harmonies whose radiance disguised their revolutionary displacement of major-minor tonality with modal-inspired chordal arrangements—all these are the hallmarks of Debussy's piano-writing.

*The Petite suite provided him the opportunity to experiment more freely, since the piano duet format provided him twice as many hands with which to create new and arresting musical textures. He had, as it were, a miniature orchestra at his disposal, and he used it to develop a vocabulary based on non-traditional, non-Western scales. Passages of whole-tone and occasional modal scales graft on to the more conventional harmonic language that still defines the piece.*

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*A suite is, of course, a collection of dance-inspired movements. France was the birthplace of well-written ballet music, led by Leo Delibes, composer of Sylvia and Coppelia. Delibes' efforts to raise the musical end of ballet to an equal footing with the dance bore great fruits for the subsequent history of the genre, beginning with an admiring Tchaikovsky and continuing well into our own century. Debussy's choregraphic Petite Suite carried on Delibes' pioneering efforts in France, though it is likely that more people know the music from **Henri Büsser**'s later orchestral version, which is performed in these concerts, rather than from the original four-hand version.*

*All four movements of the orchestral suite are essentially in A–B–A (“song-form”), though Debussy cleverly draws material from the central episodes in the repeats of the A sections. The opening Bateau's arpeggiated chords under a lovely melody suggest the rippling flow of water. In Cortège Debussy clearly evokes the sound and rhythms of a marching band as it moves along the parade route. A beguiling Minuet calms the mood before the finale, Ballet. Reflective of the symbiotic relationship between Spanish and French composers in the decades straddling the new century, the concluding movement vibrates with a festive vigor redolent of Chabrier.*

## MAURICE RAVEL

### *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

**Born:** March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France

**Died:** December 18, 1937, in Paris

**Work composed:** 1917 (original six-movement piano version); 1920 (four-movement orchestral version)

**World premiere:** February 28, 1920, in Paris, with the Padeloup Orchestra conducted by Rhené-Baton

Caught up in a wave of patriotic fervor against the German enemy, Maurice Ravel managed to enter the armed forces as an ambulance driver in World War I despite his short height and weak constitution. Before the war's end, he was discharged for medical reasons. Having witnessed the horrors of that execrable slaughter, he was deeply affected by the deaths of six comrades. His return to civilian life was compounded by the passing of his mother. Against this painful backdrop, he sought release in composition, adopting an age-old French tradition of writing *tombeaux*—literally “tombstones”—in memory of his losses. The 18th century composer François Couperin had done likewise.

Each movement in the original piano version of *Tombeau* carries a dedication to a soldier nursed by Ravel, ultimately in vain since they all eventually died from their wounds. Though born in grief, *Le Tombeau* does not sound especially funereal in the vividly-colored orchestral version. (The piano version sounds far more somber.)

## MAURICE RAVEL

### *Piano Concerto in G major*

**Work composed:** 1929–31

**World premiere:** January 14, 1933, in Paris, Ravel conducting the Lamoreux Orchestra, Marguerite Long as soloist

By the late 1920s, Ravel's was enjoying considerable success capped by a triumphant tour of America in

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1928 as both pianist and conductor. The following year, in anticipation of a follow-up tour to the States, he began working on what would become his popular Piano Concerto in G major, a masterwork that blended modern age jazziness with Mozartean grace in a traditional three-movement format that had served composers since Vivaldi had adopted that structure in the 1720s.

With his predilection for economy and restraint, his G-major concerto recalls the piano concertos of Mozart in its lightness of touch, overall form and sensibility. The opening *Allegro moderato* entrances the listener with a brightly etched melody on piccolo with roots in the folk music of the Basque region of France where Ravel was born. Several themes pop up during the exposition, including some with a bluesy character that that proclaims 20th-century provenance.

The chaste and gently paced *Adagio assai* opens with a long-breathed piano solo before a flute joins in followed by an oboe. The apparent simplicity and unforced loveliness of this movement belies the composer's reported arduous work on the *Adagio assai*, indeed the concerto as a whole.

The pensive and inward slow movement gives way to a whirling, swirling finale marked *Presto*; it is a near-maniacal showpiece for the soloist. With its trombone slides, interjections from muted trumpet and screaming winds, the music exults in a celebration of jazz—wildly popular both in the United States and France during the 1920s. A truly Janus-faced work looking back to Mozart and Saint-Saëns while swinging to the rhythms of contemporary jazz, Ravel's G-major Piano Concerto quickly established itself among the most popular piano concertos of the modern era.

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