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 Igor Stravinsky opined that Falla was "as modest and withdrawn as an oyster," and "the most unpityingly religious" man he had ever known.

This son of a prosperous merchant, he learned piano in his youth, tried his hand at composing Zarzuelas—an indigenous Spanish operetta—before "serious" studies with Felipe Pedrell and a fateful move to Paris in 1907, where he lived for the next seven years. The French capital was the artistic hub in all the arts during the two decades preceding the World War I and well into the 1920s. Falla's obvious gifts drew him into a circle of friends that included Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel and Paul Dukas, plus fellow countryman Isaac Albeniz and other Spanish exiles.

Native and foreign musicians drawn to Paris were fascinated by the exoticism of Spanish mores; Falla and his Iberian cohorts found much to love in the fragrant essences of French Impressionism. The blending of the two cultures proved to be a fertile consummation; just think of the myriad Spanish-inspired works from French, Spanish, and other composers who passed through the City of Light.

Originally composed to accompany a pantomime, *The Corregidor and the Miller's Wife*, from a short story by Pedro de Altarcon, 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.

Part I opens with *The Afternoon*, an evocation of the miller, his lovely wife and the area immediately in front of their house. A blackbird whistles the time—two-o-clock. A series of brief flirtations involving the wife and two would-be suitors follows, a passing young man and the elderly Corregidor wearing his three-cornered hat (symbol of authority) and accompanied by *his* wife.

Shortly the limping Corregidor approaches and is mocked by the miller's wife. Seeing what's afoot, the miller sets in motion a plan to stop the attempted seduction. The wife dances a *fandango* (*The Dance of the Miller's Wife*) and teases the magistrate. In *The Grape* the Corregidor attempts a kiss and clumsily falls down when she easily eludes his grasp. The miller returns, large stick in hand under the pretense that his mill is being robbed. He helps his wife lift up the lecher, tricks him into sniff an enormous liquid-filled bottle. Realizing that his dishonorable intentions have been uncovered the Corregidor leaves in a huff. When the constable arrives, the miller feigns contrition for embarrassing the would-be suitor. As the policeman leaves, the *fandango* resumes.

Part II opens with *The Neighbor's Dance*, a *seguidilla*. Townsfolk gather and drink wine on St. John's Eve. A feverish *farruca* (*The Miller's Dance*) follows; it is an irresistible flamenco dance with colorful statements from a solo French and English horns. As the miller and his friends enjoy themselves, the police arrive, clad in black cloaks, and arrest the miller despite pleas from the distraught wife. As the neighbors leave, the young woman is left alone with her anxious and despairing thoughts.

During the night, the sound of a cuckoo is heard, warning husbands to lock their doors lest they risk a visit from the "devil." The cuckoo-clock strikes nine and a blackbird whistles in imitation. The young wife, a loaded gun nearby, sleeps warily. Soon enough, the Corregidor returns on the sly, launching into *The Corregidor's Dance* which ends badly for him: a cloud covers the moon, and the lustful magistrate falls into a stream under the bridge he is attempting to cross. Lo and behold, the wife hears the commotion and heads for the bridge just as the moon emerges from the clouds. The thoroughly drenched Corregidor runs after her and draws his own small arsenal of pistols, prompting a hasty retreat on the part of the wife. Unsuccessful and very uncomfortable, the would-be-rake leaves his sopping clothes and hat on a chair in the miller's house. Meanwhile the young man has escaped from jail. Returning home he discovers the wet clothes and feels betrayed. A new plan fills his mind. Donning the sopping clothes, and arming himself with a gun, he plans revenge, leaving a note on the wall for his rival: "Sir Corregidor, I am off to avenge myself." Meanwhile the governor sees and is alarmed by the threatening words on the wall and puts on the miller's garb. Tragedy is finally averted. The police have come to recapture the miller just the Corregidor enters, wearing the miller's outfit. After much confusion, the miller and his wife are happily reunited as the neighbors mock the errant Corregidor—all this comic action coming during *The Final Dance*.

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.

Before Debussy perfected his unique musical style he experimented ceaselessly, often to the bewilderment of his professors at the Paris Conservatory who were puzzled and/or put off by his audacious harmonies which violated the sacrosanct rules that had governed composition since the earliest glimmerings of tonality around 1600. Even before his liberating visit to the Paris Exhibition in the summer of 1889, where he was transfixed and transformed by the wondrous sounds of Javanese and Balinese gamelan, he was already seeking to disencumber himself of conventional (read that German) harmony, development and post-Wagnerian music rhetoric.

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.

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 Pasdeloup 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.) An introductory *Prélude* flows by in a rapid stream of 16th notes that recalls world of 18th century solo keyboard fast movements, a specialty among that era's great *clavicinistes*, including, of course, Couperin. The gigue-like *Forlane*, a highly rhythmic dance with origins in Italy, was a favorite in pre-revolutionary France. If any work captured the imagination of the mid-18th century mentality, it was the *Minuet.* Ravel's is classically French in its balance, poise, understatement and elegance. The work concludes with an energetic *Rigaudon*, a lively 17th century dance with origins in Provence. Here, scurrying sixteenth notes flash by like a perpetual motion machine in high gear.

MAURICE RAVEL
Piano Concerto in G major

Work composed: 1929–31

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

Though often compared with the voluptuous, sensuous and intentionally ambiguous music of Debussy, Maurice Ravel's compositions are precise, clear in design, economical in their unfailingly skillful orchestration. Igor Stravinsky characterized Ravel as a Swiss watchmaker, an apt metaphor that captured the French composer's stated objective—technical perfection. "I can strive unceasingly to this end," Ravel wrote, "since I am certain of never being able to attain it." This artistic creed is typically French and recalls similar thoughts uttered by as disparate a pair of composers as Camille Saint-Saëns and the Russian-born Stravinsky, who spent critical years in Paris absorbing French esthetics. Nonetheless, Ravel's music seldom fails to engage the emotions.

By the late 1920s, Ravel's was enjoying considerable success capped by a triumphant tour of America in 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. While working on the G-major concerto—not unfairly likened to Prokofiev's *Classical* Symphony as an affectionate gesture of appreciation to the 18th century—Ravel was asked by the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein to produce a concerto for the left hand. Ravel worked on both concertos simultaneously, delaying completion of the G-major until 1931.

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 *Allegramente* 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 development section is given over to an elaboration of the perky opening theme. The movement ends with a dazzling coda.

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. Writing both concertos at the same time "nearly killed me," the composer acknowledged.

The pensive and inward slow movement gives way to a whirling, swirling finale marked *Presto*; it is a near-manic 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 l920s. 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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