

When you think of Spain and Spanish music, what are some of the things that come to mind? (bullfights, flamenco dancers, clicking castanets, strumming guitars, gypsies, etc.) Surprisingly, foreign composers wrote many of the pieces of music associated with Spain. (Last year in F.A.M.E. we listened to Carmen, written by a Frenchman, Georges Bizet. Claude Debussy, another Frenchman, wrote another popular Spanish piece, Iberia).

Manuel de Falla was one of the most famous Spanish composers of the 20th century. He was born in 1876 in the town of Cadiz, a bustling port city in southern Spain. This part of Spain is called Andalusia. Many years ago, gypsies, from central Europe, settled in Andalusia. Manuel de Falla's music was influenced by the Andalusian folk songs and gypsy music, with many of his compositions reflecting the rhythms found in this music.

The Ritual Fire Dance

(Disc 1, track 5 4:23). This piece is called, "The Ritual Fire Dance" and is from the ballet, "El Amor Brujo", roughly translated as "Love, the Magician" or "Wedded by Witchcraft". This piece was first performed in Spain in late 1914. Falla made several revisions to the score, with the final version making its debut in Paris in 1925

The song opens with mysterious buzzing sounds, which rise and fall. Listen for the oboe, followed by violins. The buzzing sounds are heard again, followed by a soft drumming rhythm. Suddenly, a new tune is heard, first loudly played by horns, followed quietly by a flute.

Story: The ballet takes place in the hills of Granada. It tells the story of a beautiful young gypsy girl named Candelas. Her boyfriend, a cruel man, has recently died. Candelas falls in love with a handsome young gypsy named Carmelo. Unfortunately, when Candelas and Carmelo are together, the jealous ghost of her dead boyfriend haunts Candelas. The ghost continues to torment her and brings her bad luck and unhappiness. Candelas decides to get rid of the ghost by means of witchcraft and music.

The song we are listening to takes place at midnight when the gypsies make a large circle around a cauldron in the center of their camp. Candelas and the other gypsies do a "ghost buster" dance and mutter incantations. Alas, the ghost is not discouraged.

However, Candelas remembers her dead boyfriend had a wandering eye for a pretty face. She asks the most beautiful gypsy in the camp, Lucia, to dance an enticing dance for the ghost. The next night, when the ghost begins to torment Candelas, Lucia dances to distract him. Soon she begins to dance with the ghost. Faster and faster they whirl, round and round the fire. While the ghost is diverted, Candelas and Carmelo succeed in undertaking the kiss of the perfect love in private, thus breaking the magic spell cast by the ghost. By the magic of the Ritual Fire Dance, the ghost is drawn into the flames and is vanished forever. (You Tube has a video of the dance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ftd8tldiYq4>)

Biography: Falla spent his youth in Cadiz. His father was a merchant, his mother an accomplished pianist who taught Manuel. Manuel would perform at the homes in the city, sometimes playing duets with his mother. As a child, he was withdrawn, imaginative and meticulous; traits that would continue throughout his life.

When he was 20, the family moved to Madrid and Manuel began to compose in addition to his piano studies. During this time, his family's finances deteriorated and Manuel tried to sell music to help his family financially. He sold zarzuelas, Spanish musical comedies, but unfortunately, most failed miserably. It was also around this time that he heard the Norwegian nationalistic music of Edvard Grieg and Falla came to the realization that each nation should develop music based on its heritage. Falla wanted his compositions to reflect Spain's past.

When he was in his 30's he traveled to Paris for a seven-week visit, which turned out to be a seven-year stay in France, leaving with the outbreak of WWI. While in Paris, he met and was influenced by Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Manuel did little composing while in France. Most of his composing took place while he was living in Spain, in Granada. In 1918, the head of the Russian Ballet ask him to compose a ballet. Falla utilized Spanish folk songs as the basis for this ballet, "El Sombrero de Tres Picos" (The Three Cornered Hat). Pablo Picasso provided the costumes and the scenery for this ballet. (Track 2, disc 13) The beginning of this piece from the ballet has what we think of traditional Spanish music, with hand clapping; clack castanets and cries of "ole".

Falla was an interesting character. He was known to be very self-critical and fastidious. Before he would write a piece, he undertook extensive research and while composing, he would agonize over even the smallest chords. He was superstitious, deeply religious. He took the ten commandments and his moral responsibilities very seriously as he worried about the potential influences his works would have on others. He suffered from many ailments, many of which were probably psychosomatic. In his will, he wrote that all of his works needed to be performed under strict conditions and only in a program with other acceptable Christian works. Fortunately for us, conflicts with his publishers prevented his wishes from being carried out.

Manuel de Falla moved to Buenos Aires after the Spanish Civil War. He retreated to the mountains, living with his sister. He supposedly never left his house and died in his sleep, shortly before his 70th birthday in 1946.