

**JOAQUÍN RODRIGO: AN ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
THE GUITAR AND BEYOND**

HISPANIC SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

December 6, 2018

Lecture: 6:30 PM

Concert: 7 PM

Pre-Concert Lecture, December 6, 2018, Hispanic Society

It is a great pleasure to welcome each of you to the first event of the New York Joaquín Rodrigo Festival. 2019 marks the 20th anniversary of Maestro Rodrigo's death and provides a unique opportunity to re-discover and re-evaluate his contributions to the musical world and explore his lesser known masterpieces. The Hispanic Society Museum and Library along with the Foundation for Iberian Music of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York and the King Juan Carlos Center at New York University are joining together to organize a city-wide Rodrigo Festival beginning with tonight's concert and continuing throughout 2019. The festival is titled Joaquín Rodrigo: An Anniversary Celebration—The Guitar and Beyond. Events include the three concert series organized by the Hispanic Society, an international round table at NYU, a concert at the Morgan Library, and an international symposium organized by The Foundation for Iberian Music at CUNY, along with other events in preparation.

Joaquín Rodrigo, one of the most important composers in the history of Spanish music, is revered throughout the world for his hauntingly beautiful guitar concerto, *Concierto de Aranjuez*, one of the most popular concertos of all time.

This concerto is so beloved that it is almost a certainty that either consciously or not almost everyone here tonight will have heard it at some time. It is one of the most performed and recorded compositions in music history, comparable in popularity to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Rodrigo's daughter, Cecilia, commented that the Rodrigo Foundation cannot even begin to count the actual number of recordings of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* but that there are certainly several hundred. In addition, Rodrigo composed 10 other concertos for solo instruments and orchestra several of which are also spectacularly popular, such as the *Fantasia para un gentilhombre*, also for guitar and orchestra. Wonderful as these compositions are their beauty and popularity has eclipsed many other of his masterpieces and in a sense has prevented them from receiving the attention that they deserve.

Rodrigo is also renowned for his solo guitar music, which was a real innovation when the works were composed, bringing the guitar to major concert halls throughout the world for the first time. His very beautiful vocal works are much appreciated as well, however his enormous catalogue of brilliant and original works for piano and most especially chamber music are much less known. As we began planning this series of

concerts we were asked by the Rodrigo Foundation to include as many of the lesser-known works as possible and to highlight his chamber music, which is the entire focus of tonight's program. We are most fortunate to have one of the major exponents of Rodrigo's violin and chamber music works performing tonight, violinist Eva León. Along with pianist Olga Vinokur these two artists have recorded for Naxos a critically acclaimed CD of all of the violin and piano works. The very beautiful, *Siciliana* for cello and piano, whose melody was a precursor of the famed melody of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, and the wonderful *Sonata a la breve* are being performed tonight by Thomas Mesa and Ms. Vinokur.

Joaquín Rodrigo was born in Sagunto, Valencia, Spain on November 22, 1901. Rodrigo triumphed against remarkable odds. At the age of 3 diphtheria severely impaired his eyesight and only a few years later he became completely blind. The family moved to Valencia so that Joaquín could receive a fine education in Braille as well as music. Blindness did not prevent him from living a full and happy childhood. In an interview for Spanish National Television in the 70's Rodrigo recalled that his childhood had been "very happy", adding that although he could not see he had a large and loving family, music, literature and many friends. He began music study at age 8 and by the 1920's he was already an excellent pianist and had begun composing. Rodrigo wrote his compositions in Braille and later dictated the score note by note to a

copyist for notation in a manuscript. Probably due to his blindness Rodrigo developed an astonishing memory which was essential to this process.

His first orchestral works written in 1923 and 24, *Juglares* and *Cinco piezas infantiles* were highly successful. Following this early success Rodrigo decided to continue his studies in Paris with the famed composer Paul Dukas. He arrived in Paris with a thorough knowledge of and respect for Spanish music, especially the music of the great Spanish composers immediately preceding himself, Enrique Granados, Isaac Albéniz and Manuel de Falla as well as the music Domenico Scarlatti composed during the many years he lived in Spain. In addition Rodrigo had great admiration for the music of Maurice Ravel and other contemporary French composers. Much as he admired all of them Rodrigo wanted to find his own musical language. He developed a highly personal, distinctive and cultured idiom based on melody with tonal, but original and modern harmonies. His works are very colorful and often use dissonance as a tone color. The clear uncluttered textures found in his music are often described as Neo-Classical but in reality his music is actually more complex and modern.

As a musician I admire Rodrigo's formidable skill as a composer. His formal structures are always perfect and balanced. His sonorities and tone colors are beautiful and highly refined. As a listener, at times you might become aware of the introduction of a completely new and often contrasting element being suddenly introduced into the

music only to hear it again later perfectly incorporated within the previous themes. But, one need not dwell on these technical aspects to enjoy the tremendously expressive and natural flow of emotions that fills his music.

In Paris Rodrigo met the Turkish pianist Victoria Kamhi and they were married in 1933. Victoria Kamhi was an excellent pianist and decided to give up on her professional career in order to dedicate herself to her husband. The couple lived France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland before returning to Madrid in 1939. In the following year, 1940, Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* was premiered in Barcelona, bringing him world-wide fame. From that point Rodrigo was immersed in composing and attending premieres of his works throughout the world. Also, he was engaged in numerous other artistic activities including being Professor of Music History at the Complutense University in Madrid, a position he held for over 30 years. He was also Head of Music Broadcasts for Spanish National Radio, music critic for several newspapers, and Head of the Artistic Section of the Spanish National Organization for the Blind.

I mentioned that Rodrigo wrote his music in Braille and later dictated it, note by note, to a copyist. In the case of orchestral works this entails dictating each note of every instrument, often 20 or more. There is a video of Maestro Rodrigo working with a copyist dictating an orchestral score. He began dictating the first measure of each

individual instrument before continuing on to the second measure. This process required his total concentration on every detail of the music. After the copyist completed the notation of the score Rodrigo and Victoria went over it. Working in their living room with Victoria at the piano and her husband seated at her side, Victoria would read out loud the notes of each instrument measure by measure. As questions about details arose, such as accent marks or dynamics arose, she would ask him if they were to be included or not. He would respond: "No, no accents, please, but staccato in the woodwinds." We can only marvel at his perfect memory of the score and the total concentration necessary for him to keep each detail in mind during this time consuming and laborious process. And, remember, this was after he had already created this marvelous music.

I would like to briefly comment some of the works being performed tonight. The opening **Seven Valencian Songs** was composed in 1982 and dedicated to the composer's son-in-law, violinist Agustín León Ara. In this, his final work for violin and piano, Rodrigo returned to traditional Valencian melodies, heard throughout his youth, as the melodic basis of this work, adding his own highly personal harmonies and textures.

Sonata a la breve, was composed 5 years earlier, in 1977, as an homage to the great Spanish cellist, Pau Casals. Casals loved to perform the Catalan song, *El cant dels ocells* (Song of the Birds), as an encore and Rodrigo incorporated a brief allusion to it in this work. Also, in the *Allegro* movement Rodrigo quotes a theme Casals used in his oratorio *El pesebre* (The Manger).

Rumaniana was composed in 1942, 35 years before *Sonata a la breve*, as a competition piece for the Madrid Conservatory. *Rumaniana* is based on Rumanian dance tunes that Rodrigo's wife had heard as a child in Eastern Europe.

The beautiful **Siciliana** is the earliest piece on tonight's program, composed in 1929. *Siciliana* has a notably Spanish character and reveals the remarkable melodic gifts of the young Rodrigo. The beautiful melody was a precursor of the unforgettable and hypnotic melody of the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

The **Sonata pimpante** was composed in early 1966 and is also dedicated to Rodrigo's son-in-law. The title might be translated as "lively", "perky" or "smart". Rodrigo commented: "This *Sonata* opens like an iridescent fan in the clear tonality of A Major with intervals of fourths in the violin and murmuring fifths in the piano. The first movement is in classic sonata-form and the *pimpante* [and joyous] opening theme gives way to an eloquent melody." The movement closes with a humorous coda. The second

movement contains another of the composer's beautiful slow melodies. The opening *Adagio* is interrupted by a sparkling *Sevillana* which leads to a return of the *Adagio*. A complete contrast to the previous movements, the devilish *Zapateado en forma de Rondó* (*Zapateado* in the Form of a Rondo) exchanges melodic motives between the violin and piano leading to a brilliant conclusion.

Throughout his life Maestro Rodrigo was honored by governments, universities, academies and other organizations in many different countries. In 1985 he was inducted as a member of the Hispanic Society in New York. In 1991, to celebrate his 90th birthday, Rodrigo was raised to the nobility by H. M. Juan Carlos I, King of Spain, with the title *Marqués de los jardines de Aranjuez*. Five years later, in 1996 he was awarded Spain's greatest cultural distinction, the Prince of Asturias Prize, awarded to a composer for the first time. Rodrigo commented: "I like to be an ambassador for Spain." Certainly he brilliantly fulfilled his goal by bringing his unique vision of Spanish music to the entire world.

In spite of his great success he was ever modest saying: "In life you can never be first in anything. I only aspire to be an improved Joaquín Rodrigo."

-----Douglas Riva