

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

HISPANIC SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

May 2, 2019

Lecture: 6:30 P.M.

Concert: 7 P.M.

Pre-Concert Lecture, May 2, 2019, Hispanic Society, Douglas Riva

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the final concert of the Hispanic Society Joaquín Rodrigo concert series. 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 have joined together to organize a Rodrigo Festival which began last December with a brilliant chamber music concert here at the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The festival is titled Joaquín Rodrigo: An Anniversary Celebration—The Guitar and Beyond. The organizing committee is comprised of myself, Isabel Pérez Dobarro and Dr. Antoni Pizà, Director of the Foundation for Iberian Music. Events have included the three concert series organized by the Hispanic Society and also, a round table with leading international experts along with a brief concert at NYU and another similar event at Harvard University. There are other events still being planned which will be announced on the web site rodrigofestival.com. If you have attended our two previous concerts or one of the other events of the festival you already know that 2019 marks the 20th anniversary of Maestro Rodrigo's death. This anniversary has provided a unique opportunity

to re-discover and re-evaluate his contributions to the musical world and explore his lesser known masterpieces.

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 virtually certain that either consciously or not almost everyone here tonight will have heard it at some time. The concerto is one of the most performed and recorded compositions in music history, comparable in popularity to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. In addition, Rodrigo composed 10 additional concertos for solo instruments and orchestra, a *zarzuela*, an operetta, a ballet, vocal music, works for chorus and orchestra and film music as well as the chamber music and piano works which we have presented earlier this season.

In this series of concerts we wanted to present as many of the lesser-known works as possible along with others that are more frequently performed. And, in keeping with the sub-title of the Festival, *The Guitar and Beyond*, in the previous two concerts the music performed belonged to the "Beyond" category mentioned in the sub-title of the festival. Tonight, however, every work on the program involves the guitar.

The guitar is closely associated with Joaquín Rodrigo since many of his finest and most often performed works were either composed for the guitar or highlight the instrument. For that reason many people might imagine that Rodrigo was a guitarist. However he did not play the guitar. Nevertheless, his

guitar music forever changed all future music composed for the instrument. This fact is all the more remarkable since the catalogue of his guitar works comprises only some 25 titles. But, these works are appreciated world-wide as one of the central pillars of the concert repertoire.

The fact that Rodrigo was not a guitarist may explain some of the important technical intricacies in many of his pieces. Certainly, in his compositions Rodrigo was entirely indifferent to the usually accepted technical limitations of the guitar. He had an inspired concept of music possible to perform on the guitar that no one had previously conceived. This required guitarists to expand and develop entirely new guitar techniques. Once Rodrigo had imagined a certain sound, for him it had to be played regardless of the technical difficulties for the performer.

Throughout his works Rodrigo explored the Spanish nature of the guitar, responding to the distinguished history of plucked instruments from the 16th Century forward. Many strands of Iberian culture, including Catalan, Valencian, flamenco and folk-song are integrated in his guitar writing and his achievement remains central to the development of the instrument.

It might be surprising for many people to realize that Rodrigo's achievement as a composer of seminal guitar works was unique among internationally recognized Spanish composers. Numerous music lovers imagine that most noted Spanish composers wrote extensively for the guitar. However, of the most celebrated Spanish composers, including Isaac Albéniz, Enrique

Granados, Joaquín Turina and Manuel de Falla, only Falla wrote one brief guitar piece while the others did not compose a single work for the instrument.

At our previous concert on April 2 we were honored to have with us Rodrigo's daughter Cecilia and granddaughter Patricia. They are not able to be here tonight but Cecilia asked me to convey to the performers and all of you that their thought are with us this evening.

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 1924, were highly successful. Following this early success Rodrigo decided to continue his studies in Paris with the famed composer Paul Dukas. Rodrigo arrived in Paris as a fine pianist

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, one that did not imitate his predecessors. 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 musicians we 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. To use a word popular today, Rodrigo often "deconstructs" a previously introduced element in some of his works, stripping away notes and even harmonies to reveal the elemental notes of a phrase. As a listener, at times you might become aware of the introduction of a completely new and often contrasting element suddenly being 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 in 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 would like to briefly comment the works being performed this evening. The opening three works, *In the Wheat Fields*, *Close to the Generalife* and *Within an Olive Grove* are from a collection of impressionistic pieces titled *Por los campos de España* (In the Spanish Countryside). *En los trigales* was composed during a summer visit to northern Spain in 1938 after Rodrigo had spent many years abroad. The work is a joyful expression of his return to Spain as well as a glowing portrait of Spanish landscape. At the time Rodrigo regarded it as "one of the best works I have written for guitar." *Junto al Generalife* was composed in 1955 and was inspired by the enchanted summer palace of the Arab kings of Granada with its exquisite fountains and lush gardens. *Entre olivares* was

published in 1958. Although the title suggests a tranquil olive grove, the work opens with energetic dissonant chords more characteristic of a country dance.

Pequeña Sevillana, A Little Dance from Seville, dates from 1963. It is a charming miniature and a memorable encapsulation of the spirit of flamenco dance. Anna de la Paz created all the choreography for tonight's performance.

Rodrigo had an extensive knowledge of Spanish poetry and he found that the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez was especially full of what he called "musical suggestions". Rodrigo selected two poems by Juan Ramón Jiménez to set to music. His genius led him to score these two texts for voice and flute, an unusual and in this case a truly inspired combination. The voice and flute intertwine and cross over each other throughout these gorgeous songs.

Coplas of the Shepherd in Love was composed in Paris in 1935 as a song based on a text by Lope de Vega. It is considered one of Rodrigo's finest works. The original version was not premiered until 1939 by tenor Michel Benoist, with the composer at the piano. Tonight we are hearing the version for flute and guitar.

In 1961 Rodrigo's friend Robert Vidal was organizing a competition sponsored by the national French Radio and Television networks for composers to write a guitar work. He encouraged Rodrigo to participate but Rodrigo was not especially interested in composing a new guitar work. However, Victoria

reminded him that he had an incomplete sketch for a guitar piece hidden in a drawer and he decided to revise it for the competition. It had been originally conceived as an homage to Manuel de Falla and has numerous allusions to Falla's music. The work contains tremolos, dissonances and strumming which incorporate elements of flamenco guitar into the world of classical guitar. Not surprisingly Rodrigo won the competition and *Invocación y Danza* was premiered in Paris. Today it is in the repertoire of almost all guitarists.

The *Three Spanish Songs* are included in the 1951 collection of *Twelve Spanish Songs*. The collection, originally for voice and piano, was commissioned by the Barcelona Musicology Institute. Together, Victoria and Joaquín selected the songs so as to highlight the different regions of Spain. All twelve songs were premiered in 1952 at the Ateneo in Madrid by soprano Marimí del Pozo, accompanied by Victoria.

This group of songs is one of the most significant contributions to the Spanish art-song tradition, and demonstrates the composer's thorough knowledge of his country's traditional music. Although the settings have their roots in the Spanish folk repertoire, the results reflect Rodrigo's own inimitable style and are a deeply personal recreation of traditional Spanish songs.

Victoria Kamhi, was born in Istanbul into a family with Sephardic origins. She introduced her husband to Sephardic traditions and culture. Rodrigo commented: "In spite of common belief, harmonization of a traditional song is not easy. Traditional or "popular" music is born without any formal prejudices

since it flowered in artistic lands which had not been so developed nor had centuries of musical art imposed on it.” Nevertheless, he composed quite a number of works based on traditional songs, such as these four Sephardic songs, the three Spanish songs I just mentioned as well as the seven Valencian songs for violin performed at the chamber music concert last December. This collection was composed in 1965. The texts are sung in the Sephardic language which is closely related to Spanish but is a distinct language.

Early in 2018 as we began planning this concert series it was clear to all of us that the series needed to conclude with the music of the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, without a doubt Rodrigo’s most beloved composition. The composer described this work with these words: “It would be wrong to expect power in my *Concierto* which would falsify the guitar’s essential nature. Its strength is found in delicacy and in intense contrasts. The music . . . is a synthesis of the classical and the popular, of form and feeling and only wishes to be strong like a butterfly but is as tightly controlled as a *veronica*, the pass of a bullfighter’s cape. . . . If nostalgia could take form the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* would be its perfect mold.”

Although there are innumerable versions of the second movement, in 1988 the composer and his wife, both then in their 80’s, decided to create “their own version” of this emblematic work. Obviously, Joaquín arranged the music and Victoria composed the text. She decided that it should be in French, the language of the country where they had met. Remarkably, in only two weeks this beautiful version of Rodrigo’s most famous work was created.

**Rodrigo often 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.**

-----Douglas Riva