

## A Year in Classical Music: 1926, vol. 7

What did Spanish composer Manuel de Falla have in common with the Finnish Jean Sibelius and the American Charles Ives in 1926? The answer: that it was effectively the last year of all three composers' careers. They would all three live for decades longer, but none produced any important work after 1926. In de Falla's case, 1926 saw the completion of the *Concerto for Harpsichord, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Violin, and Cello* – the last composition he would ever finish.

Surpassing even the exemplary work of his contemporaries Albéniz, Granados, and Turina, de Falla was the most important figure of the group of Modernist composers that revitalized Spanish art music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, giving Spain a distinctive national voice in classical music. But in contrast to his importance as an artist, de Falla was small of physical stature and very shy. Many who knew him likened a conversation with him to speaking to a monk – and in fact he was a devout Catholic, whose daily practice of his faith framed all the rest of his life. Igor Stravinsky remarked that de Falla possessed “the most unapologetically religious nature” of any person he'd ever met. As a composer de Falla was a meticulous perfectionist. He took a very long time to complete most of his pieces, revising them over and over until he was satisfied. Only a little over 15 minutes long, the *Harpsichord Concerto* took him three years to finish – much to the frustration of its dedicatee and first performer, Wanda Landowska. She found it worth the wait, though, writing to the composer that she “trembled with joy and happiness” as she learned the score.

The final chapter of de Falla's career had begun in 1919, after his parents died and he had moved from Madrid to Granada to live with his sister. The compositions of his late period take on a more introspective quality, and are more thoroughly Spanish in spirit than his earlier work despite the fact that they make less use of folk melodies and rhythms. De Falla's earlier work had evoked Andalusia, the southernmost region of Spain with its Muslim cultural roots and more sensual cultural expression; his Granada compositions suggest the asceticism and emotional detachment of northern Spain's Castilian Catholic heritage, instead. With the compositions of his late period de Falla adopted sharp-edged sonorities and thinner textures, as we hear in the *Harpsichord Concerto* with its use of extreme instrumental ranges and a chamber ensemble scoring with which de Falla tips his hat to Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. The *Harpsichord Concerto* was the great masterpiece of de Falla's Granada years, and the apotheosis of his work both as a Spanish artist and as a Catholic artist. The faster outer movements are a brilliant Modernist take on the old Spanish Baroque, and the slow inner movement suggests a meditative prayer repeated many times, the penitent gaining new spiritual insight with each repetition.

Many critics recommend the performance by Igor Kipnis and members of the New York Philharmonic under Pierre Boulez, and no one is a bigger fan than me of the Boulez-New York partnership in recorded performances of Modernist

music. Their recording of the de Falla *Harpichord Concerto* is very, very good, but even so I prefer the recording by members of the Paris Conservatory Concert Society Orchestra with harpsichordist Gonzalo Soriano, a student of de Falla's. Their phrasing is more attractive and they make more sense out of de Falla's score, better capturing the grace and beauty of its lines. The recorded sound of the ensemble is more cohesive, too; it's warmer and more attractive. It comes on a de Falla compilation album on EMI that offers a number of the composer's orchestral and chamber pieces.

In 1926 Alban Berg's career was at its summit. His atonal opera *Wozzeck* – the great Expressionist work in the genre, and the last great opera by any composer to become part of the standard repertoire – had premiered at Berlin in December of 1925, earning Berg worldwide fame and recognition as a major composer. Berlin was the epicenter of Central and Eastern European music between the wars, so conquering the city with *Wozzeck* had been a coup for Berg. He moved freely thereafter within the artistic establishments of Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Munich – the solar system, so to speak, of the arts in Central Europe at the time. It was in the midst of this great success that Berg composed his great masterpiece of twelve-tone chamber music: his Second String Quartet, entitled *Lyric Suite*, which was complete by October of 1926.

Berg was from Vienna, and when it came to an appreciation of Modernism in music Viennese audiences were at the opposite end of the spectrum from hip, sophisticated Parisian audiences. By the 1920's, forward-looking composers had for decades been exasperated with Viennese concertgoers, seeing them as aesthetically vapid bourgeois halfwits incapable of understanding any musical style and expression outside that of the long-past golden age of the First Viennese School: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. So Modernist composers in Vienna took a certain pleasure in shocking and offending their conservative audiences, and during the composition of *Wozzeck*, which he had completed in 1922, this had been Berg's attitude, as well; but by the time of *Wozzeck*'s premiere and the composition of the *Lyric Suite*, his temperament had changed. The Berg of the *Lyric Suite* is no longer an Expressionist looking to shock, but rather a Neoclassicist looking to use the twelve-tone technique together with traditional compositional forms and procedures.

The *Lyric Suite* is in fact a programmatic work: it's constructed, like an opera, around a plot. In 1925 Berg had met and begun an affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, the wife of a Prague businessman at whose home Berg stayed during a visit to Prague. But Berg was married as well, and the two were almost never able to meet or even communicate in private. Their infatuation was hopeless. The six movements of the *Lyric Suite* tell the story of their affair and express its passions, its emotional highs and lows. The first movement depicts their meeting, the second is a tender portrait of Hanna and her children, the third and fourth depict the couple's declaration and consummation of love, and the fifth and sixth deal with Berg's agony and depression in the days afterwards, as he is faced with the hopelessness of it all.

There are only a few first-rate performances of the *Lyric Suite* on record, and the performance by the Pražák Quartet, on an album of string quartet music by Berg and Webern recorded in Prague in '99 and 2000, is easily my favorite. The Pražák Quartet play Berg's *Lyric Suite* as though it were Schumann, bringing out the warmth and affection of the score; there's not a hint of the abrasiveness with which other readings of this piece are tinged to one degree or another, with the music approached more as an abstract theory and not a sympathetic emotional event. Also, their album offers the sixth and final movement for string quartet alone that Berg used in his final, published draft of the piece, as well as an alternative sixth movement that includes a vocal part. In 1977 the American music theorist Douglass Green discovered that Berg had initially conceived the last movement as a setting of a Baudelaire poem for soprano and string quartet, and was able to reconstruct the soprano part from Berg's earlier drafts. If you're interested to look it up, the English translation of Baudelaire's poem is entitled "Out of the Depths Have I Cried," from his collection *Flowers of Evil*.

There's no piece of music I know that rewards repeated listenings better than Berg's *Lyric Suite*. Even if radical Modernism and twelve-tone aren't a particular interest of yours, your experience of classical music is missing quite a lot if you don't know this piece, and the Pražák Quartet add their own distinctive and memorable take on it.

1926 saw the Zürich premiere of Zoltán Kodály's *Psalmus Hungaricus*, a setting in the Hungarian language of Psalm 55 for solo tenor, chorus, and orchestra. Composed three years earlier as part of the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of the union of the ancient cities of Pest, Buda, and Óbuda to found Budapest, *Psalmus Hungaricus* is one of the great masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup> Century music, and its premiere in Switzerland was one of a number of successful performances of Kodály's music outside of Hungary during the mid-1920's. He was emerging as a composer of international acclaim, then, but it was establishing a national musical style within Hungarian borders that had Kodály's attention. Like his countryman Belá Bartók, Kodály devoted a great deal of his time to collecting and cataloguing Hungarian folk music from remote parts of the country. A whole school of Hungarian musicians in those days was determined that Hungarians should stop conforming to German Romanticism and have a music of their own.

As part of this effort, Kodály was extensively involved in the creation of a music curriculum for children, for use in the public schools. In addition to developing principles of pedagogy, Kodály composed a good deal of choral music for children in an effort to provide them with literature that was grounded in the Hungarian folk tradition, and that was substantive enough to help them understand and appreciate fine art music. Largely as a result of Kodály's efforts, Hungary would develop into one of the world's most musically literate cultures in generations to come. 1926 saw another addition to his catalog of music for children's choir with the composition of *Gergely-járás*, or *Procession for the Feast of St. Gregory*. St. Gregory is the patron saint of

musicians, students, and teachers, so it was a tradition amongst Hungarian schoolchildren on his feast day to go out into their neighborhoods, singing and asking for alms to cover their tuition and expenses for the year. There's a good recording by the Children's Choir Miraculum, from Zoltán Kodály Elementary School in Kecskemét, Hungary; it comes from conductor Iván Fischer's thoroughly enjoyable 1999 album of Kodály works with the Budapest Festival Orchestra, including the *Dances of Galánta* and the *Háry János Suite* for orchestra.

Speaking of *Háry János*, in 1927 Kodály would arrange the orchestral suite featured on Fischer's album using music of his opera *Háry János*, which the composer completed and premiered in 1926. As with his other opera *The Spinning Room*, Kodály's aim with *Háry János* was to bring Hungarian folk music to the stage while avoiding Wagnerian complexity. Wagner was still the dominating influence on opera at the time, but the density, complexity, and length of the Wagnerian style baffled most Hungarians. Kodály saw that Hungarian composers needed to offer an antidote. So *Háry János*, while being skillfully orchestrated music of great structural sophistication, is also direct and simple in its presentation of many of the Hungarian folk melodies Kodály had collected over the years. The composer wrote that "once the walls of our theaters and the ears of our people have become attuned to folk music, it will be possible to move on to work of a higher order, music that is less closely earth-bound – for then there will be no danger of its being uprooted."

*Háry János* was a real-life historical figure: a veteran of the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800's who spent the rest of his life telling war stories at the local tavern. János exaggerated and embellished his experiences to the point that they became the point of departure for a fantastical Hungarian folk tale. Through the course of the story, among other exploits János gets Napoleon's wife to fall in love with him, he defeats the French army single-handedly and imprisons Napoleon, then he returns with his sweetheart to his native village. Kodály wrote, "Though on the surface János appears to be merely a braggart, really he is a natural visionary and a poet. That his stories are not true is irrelevant, for they are the fruit of a lively imagination, seeking to create for himself and others a beautiful dream world." By 1926, after almost a decade of political and social upheaval following the end of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, Hungarians looked to this poetic cultural dream world for comfort. After their union with Austria had been dissolved at the end of World War One, Hungary established a republic as its new government. This government had immediately disbanded the Hungarian army, prompting Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Serbia to invade, seizing control of three-quarters of Hungary's territory and two-thirds of its population. The republic lasted less than six months, being followed by a communist regime that was similarly short-lived, as the Romanian army invaded and deposed it in 1919. After that, former Austro-Hungarian soldiers installed their general, Miklós Horthy, as new Hungarian monarch. He would lead Hungary into an alliance with Nazi Germany in the 1930s, largely out of fear of the looming Soviet Russian threat.

A mythic affirmation of the Hungarian culture and national character such as *Háry János* was important to Hungarians in the midst of this turmoil.

You have two choices when listening for a good recording of *Háry János*. The first is by the Hungarian State Opera, conducted by János Ferencsik. It's an all-Hungarian production and it sounds great, but the downside of this album is that it contains none of the dialog sections in between the musical numbers. The other option, then, is the recording by the great Hungarian conductor István Kertész, leading a cast of Hungarian soloists with the London Symphony Orchestra. Kertész is able to turn the London Symphony into a very good Hungarian band, but an English translation of the spoken dialogue is acted out in-between the Hungarian language musical numbers by British actor Peter Ustinov (who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in Stanley Kubrick's film *Spartacus*). Some really like this approach to making *Háry János* available as an album experience in English, and some don't; the only solution, as I see it, is to get to know both of these albums and decide for yourself.