Amor! Program Notes

Welcome to this evening’s celebration of love—Spanish style. Spanish stories, told by Spanish, French and Mexican composers, through music with the special lyricism, passion and rhythmic vitality of centuries of Spanish musical tradition.

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946)    Ritual Fire Dance from El Amor Brujo (1914-15)

Manuel de Falla was one of the leaders of the revival of Spanish music that began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Living in Paris, he was exposed to influences from French composers such as Ravel and Debussy who had, ironically, already become captivated by Spanish musical idiom. Armed with a new outlook on his native music, he returned to Spain in 1914 at the outset of World War I to immerse himself in Spanish music and culture. Our first love story tonight is the ballet he wrote in 1914-15, El Amor Brujo (Love the Magician), a Spanish tale of loss and bewitchment.

Long story short: the husband of Candela, a young gypsy woman, is now dead after many years, and she is free to marry again—her original love, Carmelo. But she continues to be haunted by her husband, whose ghost comes every night to dance with her. The villagers think her crazy and advise her that a ritual dance is needed to free her from the ghost. The first few times the dance doesn’t work. It is only when Candela tricks another woman (with whom her husband had been unfaithful) to dance the ritual in her place, and who is then abducted by the ghost, that the ritual succeeds and Candela and Carmelo are now free to enjoy their love.

Not only is this exciting, even savage, Fire Dance an important element in the ballet’s story, it is also a clear example of de Falla’s ongoing exploration of the richness of Spain’s musical traditions.

Georges Bizet (1838-75)    Carmen Suites 1 and 2 (1875)

This evening’s second story of amor doesn’t work out so well for the participants, and not much better for the composer. “They make out that I’m obscure, complicated, tedious, hampered by technical skill rather than lit by inspiration,” Bizet wrote. “Well, this time I’ve written a work that is all clarity, vivacity, full of colour and melody. It’ll be entertaining.” He was speaking of Carmen, and he was right, but the sad irony is that he did not live to enjoy the renown his influential opera quickly acquired. The Parisian opening night audience in March 1875 was hostile, shocked by the story, unaccustomed to its sexual suggestiveness and the exoticism of the music’s Spanish flavor; they likely remained convinced that Bizet was a difficult composer. Nonetheless, by June Carmen had had a respectable run of over 30 performances. Bizet died from a heart attack after the 33rd. He was 37 years old.

This love story, in the emerging operatic verismo style, is well known: the love affair between the factory girl Carmen and the toreador Escamillo, her flirtation with Don José, a corporal in the guard whose life she corrupts and ruins, and her eventual murder by him. After Bizet’s sudden death it was his composer friend, Ernest Guirard (1837-92), who created the two Carmen Suites. As is often the case with music adapted from ballet and opera, these suites do not attempt to follow the opera’s narrative but combine the memorable melodies with which this opera abounds into two compelling orchestral pieces.
José Evangelista (1943)  

*Symphonie Minute* (1994)

After the anguish of *Carmen*, a brief time-out from the stresses of *amor*. Music with a Spanish flavor from a Spanish-Canadian composer: two movements from his “minute” (brief) symphony.

José Evangelista came to Canada from Spain in 1969 with parallel careers in physics and computing and in music composition. It is music that has prevailed. He acknowledges his “sensitivity” to composers of the 20th Century, Ravel, Debussy, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, and also a deep interest in the musical traditions of Bali, and other Asian cultures. While admiring the classical tradition of Mozart, Beethoven and others, his own composing preferences are for shorter, concise forms that focus more on melody than on extended thematic development. He agrees that this *Symphonie Minute* is like an” anti-symphony,” but not a rejection of traditional symphonic form, instead, a distillation or compression of it. The traditional four-movement structure is there: fast, slow, scherzo, finale, but each one only about a minute and a half long. Evangelista calls it “transparent” music. Tonight, we hear the second and fourth movements, one slow, *Mélodee* (Chant) the other lively, *Presto chromatique*. Of *Mélodee* Evangelista writes: it “presents a melismatic (chant-like) melody of improvisatory character, which grows in range and intensity”; the finale, *Presto chromatique*, he says, “consists of rapidly rising and descending lines.”

Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-99)  

*Concierto de Aranjuez* (1940)

Rodrigo composed this, the best-known concerto for guitar, in the spring of 1939 in Paris for guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza, to whom the work is dedicated. It was his first work for guitar, and composed, like all his work, using Braille since he had lost most of his sight at age three. Rodrigo had been living and studying in Paris since 1927, but the threat of war in Europe drove him back to Spain, so the premiere took place in Barcelona in 1940 with de la Maza as soloist. It was an immediate national sensation and has become internationally popular both in its original form as well as in many arrangements such as those by Gil Evans for Miles Davis, by the Modern Jazz Quartet and others.

The concerto’s title refers to the famous gardens and palace of Aranjuez south of Madrid, former summer residence of Spanish royalty. His title tells us about the music: that the work reflects the musical culture of the Spanish court as well as the rich tradition of Flamenco, the traditional music of Spain. For Rodrigo it is also a reflection of *Amor*, of deep feeling, not for a person but for the character of his homeland, music that captures, as he says, “the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds, and the gushing of fountains” in the gardens of Aranjuez.

In the dance-like first movement, *allegro con spirito*, the guitar leads the way with the vigour of Flamenco-based rhythms. The orchestra is given melodic material which, Rodrigo says, does not “interrupt the relentless pace.” The emotional heart of the concerto is the second movement, *Adagio*, Rodrigo calls “a dialogue between guitar and solo instruments,” the English horn, bassoon, oboe and horn, ending with a lengthy guitar cadenza. Its form has religious roots in traditional Catholic mourning songs of Holy Week—explained many years later when Rodrigo’s wife revealed that it expressed their grief over the miscarriage of their first pregnancy.

The third movement, *Allegro gentile* (graceful), is like a courtly dance developed in rondo form. Its stately but playful character is partly the result of the combination of double and triple time, with the guitar bringing the dance to a nimble but quiet close.

Our evening of celebrating Amor draws to its close—time for the Last Dance. Not the slow shuffle that ended the high school prom, instead a sturdy and exhilarating dance, with rhythms that embrace the whole range of love—tenderness, strength and passion. This is the Danzón, a Cuban partner-dance with a complex musical history embracing Spanish, French, African, Creole, even English influences, the result of repeated colonization in the Caribbean. The Danzón has also become popular in Mexico, where Latin-American folk rhythms help shape its unique form.

Danzón No.2 is the work of Mexican composer Arturo Márquez who has studied in Mexico and in France, Spain and the United States. He has composed music for film, multimedia, and ballet, as well as for chamber groups, and orchestra. Much of this orchestral writing has been in the form of the Danzón, using its exciting rhythms, sensuous melodies and colourful instrumentation to celebrate the traditional dance music of Latin America.

This dance starts at a moderate tempo with the plaintive main theme, cantabile (songlike), presented by the clarinet. As the piece progresses, this melody is varied by different instruments and instrumental groups while the tempo builds con fuoco (with fire). In the middle, the slower tempo returns with the theme now in the solo violin. Then the tempo gradually increases again, leading to a breathless, passionate conclusion to the dance and to our evening of amor con fuoco.