

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 24 September 2024  
1.00pm

Javier Perianes piano

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946)

Homenaje 'pour le tombeau de Claude Debussy' (1920)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

La soirée dans Grenade from *Estampes* (1903)  
La puerta del vino from *Préludes Book II* (1911-3)  
La sérénade interrompue from *Préludes Book I* (1909-10)

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

El Albaicín from *Iberia (Book 3)* (1907)

Manuel de Falla

Suite from *El amor brujo* (1922)  
*Pantomima • Danza del terror • Romance del  
pescador • Danza ritual del fuego*

Fantasía Bética (1919)

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Mutual admiration between Debussy the impressionist and Spanish composers at the turn of the 20th Century provides the link in Javier Perianes's programme. Spain is one of the countries in Europe whose national music holds its own with notable vigour. Influenced by centuries of Moorish and Jewish occupation, flamenco and guitar are still heard as the essence of Spain.

**Manuel de Falla** (1876-1946) was a major figure in bringing Spanish art music into the cultural fold at the turn of the century without compromising its uniqueness. This was in the shadow of two Spanish calamities, the Spanish-American War of 1898, which marked the country's collapse as a world power, and the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) with its dire, long-lasting effect on the national psyche.

Like many Spanish composers, Falla had passed through the hands of Felip Pedrell, the conservative *éminence grise* who played a big part in guiding Spanish music into the 20th Century. And, crucially, from 1907 the 30-year-old Falla spent seven years in Paris, then the cultural hub of southern Europe, to learn some French polish from composers such as Debussy and Ravel, both of whom valued the perceived exotic otherness of a nation nearer to the continent of Africa than Calais is to Dover.

Falla came across as timid and introverted, remained a bachelor, and was a devout Catholic. He was also a perfectionist who produced relatively few works, and strangely only one for solo guitar, his *Homenaje 'pour le tombeau de Claude Debussy'* (1920), which he also transcribed for piano. The *habañera* rhythm dominates this short piece, doffing its cap to **Debussy's** *La soirée dans Grenade*.

This was the second of the three *Estampes* Debussy wrote in 1903, in the wake of the first staging of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the opera in which he perfected a style that worked through implication and subconscious association. Like his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and *La mer* (1904), in its elusive way this was music that helped change the course of European culture. The French title of the *Estampes* group translates as 'prints' or 'engravings' and was used particularly in reference to the Japanese prints that had caused a sensation in Paris towards the end of the 19th Century. The tempo direction of *La soirée dans Grenade* is 'Mouvement de Habañera', with an antique Moorish flavour to its main tune, and there are two brief episodes in a new rhythm and time signature that attempt to lift the piece out of the prevailing atmosphere of sensual indolence.

We stay in Granada and with the *habañera* outside *La puerta del vino* ('The Wine Gate'), the third of Debussy's *Préludes Book II*. An impression of one of the gates into the Alhambra, where Romani musicians used to play

their guitars, the piece is full of guitar-inspired flourishes over the insistent rhythm. With Debussy's specific direction 'quasi gitarra' printed in the score, the angular repeated notes and evocative flourishes dominate *La sérénade interrompue*, the ninth *Prélude* of *Book I*, with a fragment of melody struggling to make an impression.

**Isaac Albéniz** (1860-1909) was a virtuoso pianist, and even as a child performed widely in South America, the USA and Europe. There is a story that, aged 12, he stowed away on a boat to Buenos Aires, earning his keep as an itinerant performer. Although deeply patriotic, he became estranged from Spain and its apparent backwardness, and in 1890 he left to live first in London, then in Paris, which became his base for the rest of his short life. His masterpiece was *Iberia* (1905-8), a set of 12 pieces and his last major work, in which he rendered the elements of Andalusian and flamenco music a natural fit for the piano. The seventh, *El Albaicín*, is an impression of the 'gypsy quarter' of Granada, one of the great melting-pots of all things flamenco. The sound and style of the guitar is omnipresent – and indeed *El Albaicín* transcribes brilliantly for the instrument – and the piece alternates between rhythmic vitality and, in the chant-like scraps of melody, a very dark, Spanish languor.

Albéniz was Catalan; Falla was Andalusian, a southerner born into flamenco and *cante jondo*, the elemental 'deep song' folk music that he used in his ballet *El amor brujo* ('Love the Magician', in three versions 1915-24), about the Roma woman haunted by the ghost of her dead, unfaithful husband who is set on stopping her new romance. Falla created from this a piano suite, introduced by a *Pantomima* (the ghost's power failing) and ending with his exorcism in the famous *Danza ritual del fuego* ('Ritual fire dance'). Between these comes the *Romance del pescador* ('Song of the fisherman'), wherein the haunted widow draws a circle in the ground to protect herself, and the *Danza del terror*, with the ghost at his most evil.

Falla's last big work for piano was the *Fantasia Bética*, composed in 1919 for and dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, who only played it a few times. Bética (or Bætica) was the Roman name for Andalusia. With a duration of around 13 minutes, the piece is a whirlwind parade of the flamenco style, the piano writing doing its best to imitate the guitar in its chord clusters and percussive effects evoking clattering castanets and emphatic heel stamping. Extravagant *glissandi* add to the excitement, and Falla's brief snatches of melody are based on the dark drama of *cante jondo*.

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