

Short Notes

The Silence of Exile. Manuel de Falla's experience

GABRIELE CAMPANI

Musician, Composer, APRA (Australasian Performing Right Association), Perth WA

1. Foreword

“The Exile” has always had a charming, dark appeal to artists, a vehicle for a deep emotional state of mind, and a melancholic, bluesy feeling. The drama and suffering directly related to a forced, or voluntary departure from the loved ones, the “comfortable zone”, familiar habits and land, have often been a trigger for painters, writers and musicians to enhance creativity.

A sort of “catharsis”, the purification, the intellectual clarification, described by Aristotle as the way of cleaning up from tragedy, that Plato considers as part of the soul's progressive ascent to knowledge.

To be far away, living in foreign countries, can mean solitude, isolation, maybe turning to the past and embracing the homesick present, but can also offer the possibilities of new cultural contaminations, and personal connections.

A kind of unexpected reborn to new life chapters.

Writers, from Dante to Joseph Brodsky, sought refuge abroad from political oppression, finding their personal and professional fulfilment. It's not unusual between critics and scholars to emphasised and romanticised the position of exile, elevating it to noble standing. A long list of composers were able to convert this life experience into a music expression, but not Manuel de Falla.

He decided to leave Spain, his native country, and never come back, living his final years in Argentina, from 1939 to his death in 1946. He kept on working on the monumental opera-oratorio “*Atlantida*” that remained unfinished, ending his career without writing any other relevant composition. We never know the reason why, whether it was a deliberate choice, or lack of inspiration.

Probably a mix of both. Maybe simply the silence of exile.

2. Early years, and the sojourn in Paris

The initial period of formal musical education and piano lessons, did not show the full potential of Falla's composing talent, but his aptitude for theatre, literature and painting.

After his moving to Madrid in 1896, he began studying full-time at the Conservatorium, under the guide of José Tragó, an highly renowned piano teacher, and later with the ethnomusicologist/guitarist Felipe Pedrell.

The latter influenced more than one generation of scholars, with his lectures on both popular songs, and Spanish masterpieces.

After the *Mazurka in C minor*, and the *Serenada*, he composed the beautiful two acts lyric drama *La vida Breve*, that represented the creative peak of this period.

Falla initially developed his writing skills on *zarzuelas* (a sort of ancient *operetta*, that alternates spoken and sung parts, as well as dance), and the *cante jondo* (the noble and authentic root of Andalusian flamenco), deeply inside the folk tradition.

But he was much more than this, and his progressive, avant-garde vision was just behind the corner.

In 1907 Falla travelled to Paris, where he was welcomed by the local most influential contemporary musicians: Debussy, Dukas and Ravel. They had a great influence on him, and signed a mark in his style and approach.

An intense and highly fulfilling time of his life was starting. After finishing his *Pièces Espagnoles*, Falla began to work to *Noches en los jardines de España*, and revisited the orchestration of *La vida breve*.

The pivotal contact with the most qualified European contemporary composers (he travelled to UK, Italy, Switzerland too), bridged the gap between the authentic folklore tradition he came from, and the advanced harmonic concept he was adopting.

The French capital, in relation with the subject of exile, has been, at least for the first half of the XX century, one of the main gravity centres for all the arts and music. But not only the classical.

About jazz, many African-American artists found there the respect, and a much friendly environment, in comparison to what they had got in their native US, often affected by prejudice and racism, mostly in the south states.

This multi-ethnic melting pot, was a kind of refugee, a neutral zone, despite of ideology and races differences.

For instance, Django Reinhardt, during the nazi occupation begun in 1940, kept on performing his expressively banned genre, in clubs and theatres, as he did before. The most representative European jazz player was a gypsy, but was untouched by the Germans authorities, that, on the contrary, were often part of the audience.

Paris was a sort of free-land where musicians and entertainers could stay relatively safe, and remain active.

3. The come back

When the IWW started spreading around Europe, Falla decided to leave Paris, moving to Madrid and Barcelona.

El amor brujo (*gitanería* in one act) wrote after his coming back to Spain in 1914, was an amazing example of the artistic synthesis matured in the previous years. Even the great Polish pianist, Arthur Rubinstein, was so positively impressed by that opera, that commissioned him a dedicated work, named *Fantasia Baetica*, issued some years later.

This was a really productive, and busy time for Falla, in which he summarised all the influences and contaminations he had absorbed. Belong to this period the ballets, and symphonic suites of *El sombrero de tres picos*, *Fuego Fatuo*, and *El retablo de maese Pedro*, the puppet-opera based on Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, commissioned by his patroness Winnaretta Singer.

4. Homenaje: Manuel De Falla love of the guitar

The short composition *Pour le Tombeau de Claude Debussy*, (1920) was the only one written for guitar, though its tone and voicing can be heard in many of his works.

The most representative Spanish instrument, got its celebration here through a quintessence of the modern harmony, mixed with the spirit of Granada, in which he settled permanently from that year on: in the heart of Andalusia, the region where flamenco came from.

As I mentioned before, he had studied composition in Madrid with Felipe Pedrell, that opened his interests to the popular folk music from different regions, often strictly connected to the six strings instrument.

De Falla's gratitude to Debussy stays inside the harmonic research, and in some quotes, here and there, that he deliberately took from the French Maestro.

The standard tuning of the guitar in fourths, with a third in the middle, made it more suitable for the embraced quartal harmony often used by Debussy, more than other instruments, like the violin, tuned in fifth.

It's remarkable the linear score writing, the horizontal approach to voicing, closer to a pianist view. Guitarists have usually a vertical vision, due to the chords shape on the fretboard.

I've found and experienced something similar in Ralph Towner's composing template. I had the privilege to attend his lessons at the Siena Jazz seminars in 2002. The co-founder and leader of "Oregon", a pivotal ensemble hard to define with one genre only, moving from contemporary classic to jazz, was a pianist first, and only then became a guitarist in his 20s.

Towner shared the same bigger vision that I've found in *Homanaje*: a counterpoint constantly floating harmony, and not simply stiff structures movable along the fretboard.

5. Last Tango in Granada

In Grenada, Falla seemed to have found his definitive home: a small house with a fenced garden, in which he lived with his sister María del Carmen, that soon became the scene of regular visits from musician friends, and intellectuals.

By the time de Falla wrote the *Concerto for Harpsichord and chamber ensemble* (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Violin and Cello) in 1926, he couldn't imagine that it was the last lengthy completed work in his career.

He had still two decades to live, at that time, but only some short pieces came after that one.

In a certain way, it represented the ultimate summary of modern harmony and neo-classicism, always blended with his severe and serious composing style, so deeply part of the Spanish tradition, and the religious education he received in his childhood.

Polytonality was structural inside the score, with the simultaneous combination of two or more tonalities, in line with Bela Bartok and Igor Stravinsky. At the same time, passages with percussive harmony (rhythmic repetitions of the same note or chord), worked as reminders of that popular music that filled the air of Andalusia.

It was again the already seen mixing of folkloric materials, with a more academic classical sound, like several works from Grieg, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Dvorak.

But since his moving to Granada, after his parents death in 2019, he gradually started a process of spoliation of his musical language, moving away from the popular tradition, a complicated, different artistic path, maybe connected to the religious neurosis so deeply part of his character, a cultural and emotional heritage that probably followed him throughout all his life.

6. A different kind of “Exile on Main St”

I don't know why, but the word “exile” related to music, suddenly reminded me something completely alien to our topic.

It's the title of the Rolling Stones album “Exile on Main St”: the band recorded this milestone work in its “French niche” (one more time, the “refugees country”...), where the multi millionaire members of the group were living as “tax exile”.

They simply tried to escape from the high tax rates of the British inland revenue department, spoiled by their own big spender flashing lifestyles.

For Manuel De Falla to move abroad forever was instead an heartbroken decision, dictated by pain, and desire to live peacefully in a free country. The assassination of Garcia Lorca by the National Forces in the Summer of 1936, and the just started Civil War, hit him very badly. His sincere friendship and artistic collaboration with the greatest Spanish poet and playwright of the XX century, was broken by the barbarian of fascism.

They had worked together to projects since 1922, reaching a sublime synthesis of tradition and Avantgarde, like in the *Poema del cante jondo*, and *Los titeres de Cachiporra*. Lorca's tragic fate, not different to other intellectuals and dear friends, was probably the main reason for Falla's decision to exile.

But his political view remains anyway controversial, and, according to my research, it's not a well defined position.

He was directly touched by murders perpetrated by both left, and right extremists.

In April 1931, the republican and socialist parties won the elections, removing the monarchy, and the Second Republic was proclaimed. In the beginning Falla supported the new government's reforms and labour rights, but he quickly lost confidence because of the attacks to churches and convents by anarchists, and anti-clergy groups, without intervention of the authorities.

The counter-revolution, the fascist National Front, showed immediately its brutality with the execution of another family friend, Rosaria Fregenal Piñar, the “Fregenala” (Falla's sister dressmaker).

But the Republican Militia was not less guilty to his eyes, when one of his best friends, Leopoldo Matos Massieu, was executed.

7. Conclusion

Remarkable to notice that Falla spent more or less the same amount of time in Paris, as in Argentina, where he moved in 1939, without seeing his native country again. He passed away 7 years later.

Two very different situations indeed, because of his mood, feelings and approach, that

brought him to a totally opposed experience. In both cases it was his decision to move abroad, like, on the other hand, nobody forced him from coming back.

In the following year from his departure, the Franco's regime named him for The Grand Cross of Alfonso X, a civil order reserved for the highest figures in the education and cultural fields. Besides this honour, he was offered a large pension for returning to Spain. He accepted the order, but sent the prize money to a Republican refugee camp in France.

In Argentina, despite of speaking the same language, he didn't find the way of creative communication with the local musicians, and with his own inner voices too: he mainly worked as music teacher.

Probably, that deep level of imaginary consciousness, enlightenment and creativity, so tied to the composition process, were gone forever.

He couldn't "Look at the bright side of life", the Monty Python's famous anthem: it was not in his character, education and personality. Along his life, he tried his best to be apolitical, to be simply a composer, maybe living in a bubble where music would have been his only companion. He remained strictly tied to the Catholic faith, and chose a neutral country as his final residency, but I believe it was impossible for him to stay mentally detached in those troubled and difficult times.

He had been directly touched by the brutality of the human nature, living in first person the Civil War tragedy, and watching the IIWW one from his Argentinian exile. Nothing creative could come out from him anymore.

Silence became his final composition.

*Alle fronde dei salici, per voto,
anche le nostre cetre erano appese,
oscillavano lievi al triste vento*
(S. Quasimodo, da "Giorno dopo giorno")

*At the branches of the willows, by vow,
even our harps were hung,
they swayed lightly in the sad wind*
(S. Quasimodo, from "Day after day")

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