

Manuel de Falla
(1876 – 1946)
Obras para piano
Gustavo Díaz - Jerez, piano

Manuel de Falla's works for piano – a life at the keyboard

In a statement on April 15th 1915 for the newspaper *La Patria*, Manuel de Falla warned, “I never thought of being a virtuoso. Virtuosity, with its tour concerts, has always horrified me”.¹ Faithful to his statement, the musician said no to a profession as a concert pianist, although he had the necessary education and skills to devote himself to it – in fact, in his youth, Falla started a successful career as an interpreter in Cadiz and ended up winning prestigious concerts, such as the one organized by Casa Ortiz y Cussó in 1905. In any case, the truth is that the piano played a central role in the musician’s life. He finished his official education with flying colors, strived to keep his fingers “active” (proof of which is the mute piano that he left behind in his room at Paris’s Kléber Hotel when he hurriedly left for Spain after World War I broke out²), kept playing in public through October 13th 1932 – when he reportedly performed for the last time at the Palau de la Música Catalana – and, mostly, he composed important works for piano during his career as a composer. It is true that, in terms of numbers, Falla’s entire works for piano are not plentiful. But if we take into account the composer’s reduced catalog, we can conclude that this corpus plays a notable role in his production. Besides, it covers all his creative periods, and comprises some of his most successful works. That is the reason why we have to welcome this new initiative by the Sociedad Española de Musicología of offering us a new version of Manuel de Falla’s entire works for piano – a version that will join the classic ones, including those by Esteban Sánchez, Josep Colom, Rafael Orozco, Ricardo Requejo, Joaquín Achúcarro, and Daniel Ligorio. In this recording, the pianist from Tenerife Gustavo Díaz-Jerez goes in depth into the repertoire’s numerous nuances.

To trace Manuel de Falla’s first contacts with the piano, we have to go back to 1875. It was then that, at the age of nine and after playing his first games with the keyboard before his mother, Falla started his education with Eloísa Galluzzo, an excellent pianist from whom he received his first piano and music theory lessons. Her strict teaching method, supported by some “baton-hitting” of the amateur’s ill-trained fingers, soon achieved satisfactory results.

By 1888, Falla continued taking piano lessons with Alejandro Odero, the son of the founder of the Real Academia Filarmónica de Santa Cecilia in Cadiz. After Odero’s death in 1897, the young Falla, who needed high-level orientation that local teachers were unable to offer him, contacted José Tragó, a piano professor at Madrid’s Escuela Superior de Música y Declamación. Thanks to the private lessons from Tragó, Falla became familiar with Chopin’s piano school (Tragó was an indirect disciple of this school), went in depth into his technical education, and reached a thorough control of the instrument. In fact, it was during those years that Falla thought about devoting himself to teaching piano in his hometown and developed his brief career as a concert pianist. From 1899 to

¹ “En Lara, ‘El amor brujo’. Hablando con Manuel de Falla” [“Love, the Magician”. Talking to Manuel de Falla]. *La Patria*. Madrid, April 15th 1915.

² See the letter sent by Pedro Jaime de Matheu (second cousin to the composer) on April 10th 1919, in which he listed all the musician’s belongings that he looked after in his office at El Salvador’s consulate in France.

1902, his performances took place in different stages in Cadiz, such as the Viniegra and Quirell salons or the Teatro Cómico. And it was precisely for those evenings that Falla made his first composing attempts, in the form of small pieces for piano created for his own use.

Among these first works there are some who have been preserved, such as a very Chopin-like *Nocturno* written in 1896, which premiered on August 16th 1899 at Salon Quirell in Cadiz. *Mazurca* in C Minor can be traced back to 1899. This is a piece that is connected to the romantic repertoire of the salon and that was played for the first time by Guillermo González at Fundación Juan March on January 13th 1989.³ Along the same line we can find *Canción*, dating from April 2nd 1900, and *Vals-capricho*, which premiered at Madrid's Ateneo on May 6th 1900. A year later, on March 4th 1901, Falla finished *Cortejo de gnomos*, another small piece of exquisite simplicity that reveals the author's early passion for Grieg and that, as Antonio Gallego suggests, it possibly belonged to *Suite fantástica*, unfindable today. Finally, among the works of this first period, his two *Serenatas* are particularly interesting. In them the musician exploits the local character making use of the Andalusian style, introducing folkloric melodic turns, and recreating some guitar effects. The first one, *Serenata andaluza*, was dedicated to the Prince and Princess of Asturias and was played for the first time by Falla himself on May 6th 1900. The second one, *Serenata* in E Minor, was concluded on April 2nd 1901. There is no evidence, however, of it being played before an audience until the above-mentioned recital by Guillermo González at Fundación Juan March in 1989.

As we have already said, from a stylistic point of view, Falla's first forays into the creative domain are very much linked to romantic language. Apart from the similarities of many of these works with Chopin's pianism (who was, indeed, one of the authors Falla most admired along his career), we can also notice the momentary trace of other pianist-composers, including Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, and Grieg. All this is very much compatible with the use of certain turns of local flavor or the emulation of some Andalusian folkloric elements, which appealed to Falla since his earliest works. As time passed by, the composer rejected almost all works dating from his youth, which he scorned as "silly things".⁴ Despite the hardness with which Falla judged them, these are very charming pieces that show some of the mastery that was characteristic of the person who was going to become the most remarkable Spanish composer of the 20th century.⁵

If we are talking about these early works, *Allegro de concierto* deserves a special remark. It is a bigger work in which Falla, without abandoning Chopin's melodic touch, gets close to Liszt's brilliant pianism, with some references to Schumann. Written for the contest organized by Madrid's Conservatorio de Música y Declamación on October 1st 1903, this work owes its virtuosic character to the use that the winning piece would be put to – it was intended to be interpreted as compulsory piece at the contests to take place upon completion of studies in 1904. As it was stated in the minutes of the contest awarding, 24 scores were submitted, whose evaluation was responsibility of the center's two professors of composition (Emiliano Serrano and Tomás Fernández Grajal) and three permanent piano teachers (José Tragó, Pilar Fernández de la Mora, and Manuel Fernández Grajal). Although the prize was unanimously awarded to Enrique Granados, the jury wished to give an honorable mention to six more works, among them, in fifth place, the one by the young Falla, who had to share this honor with authors such as José María Guervós, Luis Leandro Mariani, Javier Jiménez Delgado, or Cleto Zavala. Finally, Falla's *Allegro de concierto* premiered at the recital given at Madrid's Ateneo on May 15th 1905.

³ Gallego, Antonio: Prólogo: La obra para piano de Manuel de Falla. Mazurca en Do menor [Prelude – Manuel de Falla's Works for Piano. Mazurca in C Minor]. "Mazurca para piano". Madrid, Manuel de Falla Ediciones, 1992, [s.p.].

⁴ See the letter from Manuel de Falla to Jean-Aubry. Paris, September 3rd 1910.

⁵ For more information about these pieces, see Nommick, Yvan: La formación del lenguaje musical de Manuel de Falla: un balance de la primera etapa creadora del compositor (1896-1904) [Manuel de Falla's Education on Musical Language – Taking Stock of the Composer's Earliest Creative Period (1896-1904)]. "Revista de Musicología", Vol. XXVI, No. 2, 2003, p. 545-583.

During those same years, imbued in the teachings of Pedrell and with his eyes set on stage music, Falla abandoned his career as a pianist. However, the musician never gave up the instrument as a way of making a living – when forced to do so by the circumstances. He considered it a vehicle for spreading the repertoire he admired, a supporting tool during his composing work or, what is most important for us now, his most direct way of channeling his creative impulse. Thus, for example, one day in Paris, pressed by a precarious economic situation and after several years of fruitless efforts to put on stage his opera *La vida breve*, Falla punctually picked up again his interpreting activity and put his best creative efforts on the piano. In fact, the first work that he finished in Paris was *Cuatro piezas españolas* for piano, dedicated to Isaac Albéniz and played for the first time by Ricardo Viñes in a concert at the Société Nationale de Musique on March 27th 1909.

The composition of *Cuatro piezas españolas* began in 1906, when the musician was still living in Spain, and finished in August 1908, after having been assessed by Paul Dukas, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel. Its publication, organized by the prestigious publishing house Durand in 1909, was made possible by the recommendations of the above-mentioned French musicians, and was the composer's first great success.

Faithful to his nationalistic ideals, Falla picked as a starting point “the character and atmosphere of four very different branches of Spanish ethnicity”, which he tried to translate into music from his own impressions. In a letter written to Henri Collet on April 15th 1909, the musician revealed the specific sources that had inspired him. For the accompaniment of the *Aragonesa*, which is evidently similar to the Spanish *jota*, Falla admitted to having been inspired by the “musical ensembles of serenaders”, typical of that area of Spain. For the *Cubana*, he used two themes of close rhythmic similarities “the first one based on *guajira* and the second one, on *zapateo*”. The third piece, *Montañesa*, evoked the Asturian landscape, and also had its origin in two popular themes (the second one of them is identified with the famous Asturian song “La casa del señor cura”). Meanwhile, *Andaluza* was born out of several flamenco styles – *fandangos*, *polos*, and *malagueñas*. Talking about this piece, Falla said to Cecilio de Roda in 1912, “... it is the freest of the four, in terms of form, content, and as a whole. You, being an Andalusian, must know as well as I do that our songs, save for certain exceptions, have countless variations, and that the same *cantaor* or *cantaora* will not sing them the same way twice, since it all depends on the ‘feeling’ of the moment.”

After finishing *Cuatro piezas españolas*, it took Falla over 10 years to write his next work only for piano, since he was fully occupied with the creation of stage music. There is no doubt that it was worth the waiting. When he faced the piano again, he did it to write *Fantasía bætica*, a work with a completely renewed pianistic language that, as Yvan Nommick said, “sums up the Andalusian period and, at the same time, announces the sobriety of his future works due to its heartbreaking dryness, its precision, its roughness, and its abstraction”.⁶

The birth of *Fantasía* is intimately linked to the pianist Arthur Rubenstein, who, knowing about the economic troubles that Igor Stravinsky was going through since the Russian Revolution in October 1917, decided to commission two works for piano in exchange of a substantial amount of money. One of them was commissioned, of course, to the Russian composer and the second one to Manuel de Falla, who had acted as a mediator between the pianist and the composer. The result of this commission was the composition of two masterpieces: Igor Stravinsky's *Piano-Rag-Music* and Manuel de Falla's *Fantasía bætica*, played for the first time by Rubenstein himself on February 20th 1920 at New York's Society of Friends of Music. Falla based this work on the *cante jondo* to, as he said, “pay a tribute to our Latin-Andalusian ethnicity”. Hence its primitive strength, its recreations of some flamenco styles (as *bulería*, *seguiriya*, or *guajira*), its evocations of some guitar turns (including tremolo, strumming, or plucking), and its suggestions of vigorous *taconeos*, heel

⁶ Nommick, Yvan: “Manuel de Falla, œuvre et évolution du langage musical” [Manuel de Falla – his works and the development of his musical language]. Doctoral thesis, Université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), 1998-1999, Vol. I, p. 167.

stamping, all carried out with a highly virtuosic and percussive language in which the harmonic and rhythmic richness excels.

Fantasia bætica was the last big work for piano written by Manuel de Falla and – as Falla himself admitted in March 1926 – the last one composed “with ‘purely pianistic’ aims as to its instrumental technique”. Since then and until his death in 1946, that is, 27 years later, the composer did only arrangements, some harmonization, or “minor” creations motivated by very specific circumstances. This is the case of *Hommage pour le Tombeau de Claude Debussy*, dating from August 1922 in Granada and written to be part of the special issue of *La Revue Musicale* that was going to be dedicated to the French composer after his death. As a tribute to a person who had been his teacher and friend during the years he lived in Paris (1907-1914), Falla introduced some Debussyist characteristics into his work that reveal the love the French composer felt for Spain. Thus, *Hommage* picks up again the rhythm of *habanera* (a recurrent element in the Spanish-inspired works written by Debussy). It also quotes some bars of “*La Soirée dans Grenade*”, a piece in which the French composer evokes precisely the mystery of Granada’s night. At first, moved by the constant demands of the guitarist Miguel Llobet, Falla wrote this piece for guitar, making therefore his only but essential contribution to the guitar repertoire of the 20th century. However, on September 8th 1920, only a few days after finishing the first version, Falla himself transcribed the piece for piano, a version that, according to experts, does not only stand comparison with the original one, but it also reaches new added values in the piano language.

Together with that unbreakable gratitude towards his teachers, Falla had an extreme sensitivity towards human poverty and misfortune all his life. That is the reason why in 1922, when the diplomat Ricardo Baeza asked the musician to collaborate in order to offer financial help to the over two million refugees from Russia that had been displaced and imprisoned during World War I, the musician did not hesitate to pick up his quill and sent Baeza a new work, *Canto de los remeros del Volga*, whose benefits would be destined to defray the campaign. Written in Granada in March 1922, this small piece’s starting point was the homonymous popular Russian song, for which Falla made an original harmonization based on the theory of natural resonances and rich in superimpositions of tones, chords with added notes, plagal cadences and ostinati.⁷

The production for piano by Manuel de Falla finished with *Pour le Tombeau de Paul Dukas*, another tribute by the musician from Cadiz to a person that had been his teacher in Paris, together with Debussy. Written a few months after Dukas’s death in December 1935, this tribute was published in the special issue that *La Revue Musicale* dedicated to him in May/June 1936. This piece, which has references to Dukas’s Sonata in E flat, was the last one that Falla wrote for piano. However, during his last years in Argentina, the piano did not stop being an inseparable partner for him and a witness to the efforts that the musician made every day to finish his *Atlántida*.

Elana Torres

⁷ Nommick, Yvan: “Manuel de Falla: œuvre et évolution...”, Vol. 1, p. 168, No. 6.