

Concierto para una fiesta

Joaquín Rodrigo

Born in Sagunto, Valencia, November 22, 1901; died in Madrid, July 6, 1999

In May of 1982 Rodrigo journeyed with his wife Victoria from Madrid to Los Angeles, to receive an honorary doctorate bestowed by the University of Southern California. They were met at the airport by their longtime friend Pepe Romero, one of the best interpreters of the composer's work, who arranged for them to meet a friend who wanted to commission a guitar concerto. In her charming memoir of her life with Rodrigo, Victoria wrote:

"At dinner that night we met Mrs. McKay...who had come from Fort Worth, Texas, to meet Joaquín. She seemed very young, elegant, and attractive, and was very friendly and straightforward. She had two daughters, Alden and Lauri, who were about to make their social debuts. I believe that at that time they were seventeen and nineteen years old. When their parents asked them what they would like as a gift to commemorate the occasion, they were unanimous in choosing as their fondest hope a concerto for guitar and orchestra by Joaquín."

Thus the "*fiesta*" of the concerto's title was their debutante ball on March 5, 1983, when Mr. Romero indeed appeared as soloist, conducted by none other than John Giordano with the Fort Worth Chamber Orchestra ("Texas Little Symphony"), which he had founded in 1976. William and Carol McKay had in fact commissioned Rodrigo's *Concierto para una fiesta* for Maestro Giordano and the orchestra in honor of their daughters.

Rodrigo described this concerto, his last, as "exacting in terms of demanding guitar techniques," and Mr. Romero, in fact, has described it as the most difficult piece he has ever played. He once asked the composer if the tempo marking was too fast, but Rodrigo said told him it was right and that he had written it with him in mind, which gave Mr. Romero no choice but to learn it. After annunciatory chords, the guitar indeed takes off at breakneck pace, elaborating a theme that the composer called "very Valencian in tone." The movement's second main theme shows a different aspect of Valencia—"the spirit of *El Cid* and Valencia's Moorish past." Rodrigo develops both ideas and provides a part soulful, part scampering written-out cadenza, before fully recapping his opening section.

The composer pointed out that although he features English horn in his meditative slow movement, the listener shouldn't expect the melodiousness of the *Aranjuez* middle movement, because his focus in this case was rhythm. He especially features the alternation of two meters (6/8 and 5/8) "further complicated by different groups within the interior of the rhythms," which, he said results in a "continuous and agitated wave, almost restless." Midway through the movement he writes out another extended guitar cadenza, which achieves a certain rhythmic peacefulness before the restlessness returns in an iridescent guise.

The finale, in which percussion makes its first appearance, is a lively rondo, "extroverted and suitable for the setting of a party." Rodrigo's main recurring theme is a *sevillanas* (fast triple meter dance), which he freely intersperses with secondary themes—among them a jaunty little march colored by winds and brass. These ideas appear, he said, "gamboling through the episodes with a nonchalance and freedom that brings to mind Stravinsky's *Festival del Carnaval*." The cascading scales of the refrain's final appearance bring on seven emphatic chords to conclude the *Concierto* resoundingly.

—©Jane Vial Jaffe