

Turina: La Oración del Torero, Op. 34 (1925)

Like his illustrious predecessors, Isaac Albéniz and Enrique Granados, and classmate, Manuel de Falla, Joaquín Turina (1882-1949) was a member of the school of Spanish (specifically Andalusian) composers who received formal composition training in Paris. Turina, born in Sevilla in 1882, moved to Paris in 1905 to study with Vincent d'Indy at the *Schola Cantorum*. While there, Turina gained an immense appreciation for French impressionists, like Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, and incorporated a number of their techniques into his own compositional style. However, Turina (alongside Albéniz and Falla) was also deeply invested in promoting Spanish (especially Andalusian) cultural heritage as a way of asserting his nationalist pride in a historical moment when European nationhood and cultural heritage underwent a trial by fire.

In January at the SBCMS, the Pacific Trio presented Turina's Trio No. 2 in B minor, a *tour de force* synthesis of Parisian style and Andalusian melody, and today the New Hollywood String Quartet presents the meditative tone poem: *La Oración del Torero, Op. 34* (The Bullfighter's Prayer). Composed in 1925, about a decade after Turina returned to Madrid after his Parisian studies, and after the political bouleversement that was World War I, *La Oración* is exemplary of Turina's combinative style, drawing on the tonal language of the Parisian masters to express the melodies of his own country in a heightened medium.

The inspiration for Turina's work purportedly came to him one hot afternoon in Madrid at the bullfighting arena. Going behind the scenes to where the *toreros* prepared themselves, Turina came upon a small and peaceful chapel, which carried with it the heavy air of impending doom. All around, censers burned with incense, and within, bullfighters prayed to the Lord Almighty to protect their lives as they went out to win fame and glory against the force of nature that was *el toro*. Distant crowds cheering, the occasional bellowing of a bull, a still room, and eloquent prayers to God muttered beneath the breath of celebrities who risked everything for another chance at glory – these were the sounds that knit the fabric of Turina's tone poem which vivifies the moment before the *torero* steps out in the public eye, ready to face the dangers of the arena.

Originally composed for an ensemble of four *laúd*, a family of Spanish-style lutes of differing sizes more closely related to the Arabic *oud* than to the European lute, and common in Andalusian folk music traditions. Turina subsequently arranged it for a string quartet, appealing to a broader range of audiences, and eventually for a larger symphonic orchestra. Despite its transformations, listen carefully to the ways in which Turina preserved the sound and timbre of the *laúd* even when writing for the violin family of instruments. Percussive motifs, *pizzicato* passages, and highly rhythmic melodies are reminiscent of the Andalusian style of *laúd* and eventually guitar playing, and the medium of the string quartet lends itself well to the nuanced timbres of the *laúd* quartet. Listen for the earnest supplications of the bullfighter, punctuated in equal measure by glimpses of bravado and anxiety, of belief in the strength of his prayer and of fear that this may be his very last show.

### Schnittke: *String Quartet No. 3*

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) was a leading composer of the former Soviet Union, having studied at the Moscow Conservatory in the 1950s and taught there for a decade afterwards. As his name suggests, he was of Jewish-German heritage on his father's side and Volga German on his mother's. His father, Harry Maximilian Schnittke, was a journalist and translator, fluent in both Russian and German and moved to the Soviet Union in 1927 to pursue his career. His son, Alfred, was born in 1934 and went on to become one of the contemporary world's leading composers of art music. Schnittke's signature approach to composition came to be known as "Polystylism," whereby he mixed the musical material and styles of a number of the composers who came before him in eclectic combinations to make a statement about the interrelationships of these musical figures.

A prime example of Schnittke's *polystylism* is his third string quartet, which confoundingly opens with a closing statement. Lurching us *in medias res* into the cadence of Orlande de Lassus' *Stabat Mater*, Schnittke then moves on to quote the opening theme of Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*, before ending up on a surprisingly familiar four-note motif. The notes in question are D-E flat-C-B, spelled out in German as D-S-C-H, the musical signature of Dmitri Shostakovich, Schnittke's musical predecessor and another renowned Soviet composer.

The citation of Lassus' Renaissance polyphony in the opening bars of the *Andante* sets the stage for a harmonic world which values symmetry of structure and form, hearkening back to the geometry of Classical Antiquity yet valuing the ingenuity of human creativity above all else. This is followed by the Beethovenian romanticism of the *Grosse Fugue* – an obsession with the beauty of the natural world underpinning the despair of human creativity's futile attempts to reach the sublime. Finally, humanity has taken center stage in the creative work, seeing itself mirrored within the very fabric of the music just as Shostakovich's signature was a *leitmotif* for his own presence in the score.

Schnittke takes all three of these motifs and plays them against each other, weaving a story spanning both centuries and just a few minutes. As we react to the familiar sounds of these classic works pitted against and with each other within Schnittke's quartet, we are encouraged to contemplate the juxtapositions. What does Beethoven's late style have to do with the church music of the Renaissance? How can Shostakovich's musical signature relate to the nineteenth century German soundscape? As you listen, think about the ways in which these musical figures (both real and metaphorical) play into each other, resulting in a work of art that is as *polystylistic* as it is singularly Schnittkeian.

The second movement, *Agitato*, is at moments an unhinged outpouring of emotion, yet it still stays true to the bounds of an ABA structure, maintaining its structural integrity in the face of what may seem nearly like uncontrolled violence. Schnittke reduces the three themes from the first movement into motivic cells in an extremely economical use of musical material. The final movement, *Pesante*, leads us back to the ideas of the first movement, having synthesized the disparate identities of Lassus, Beethoven, and Shostakovich into one composite whole. Here, Schnittke shares with us what he himself has learned on this musical journey.

Beethoven: *String Quartet 9, Op. 59, No. 3* (1806)

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Austro-German musical sphere was deeply concerned with the preservation and promotion of musical genius. Beethoven himself was no stranger to the wedding of creative and legendary genius, after seeing how Franz Joseph Haydn made a name for himself as a composer of creative capabilities rivaling that of the mythical Handel with his *Creation Oratorio*, in which the composer himself exerted the creationary force of God, sublimating the line of “fiat lux” with a shift to C Major. Just a few years prior to composing the Razumovsky quartets, Beethoven put the finishing touches on the *Eroica* Symphony, completing it in 1804, on the eve of his Napoleonic disillusionment.

In 1806, as part of a concert series he was patronizing in conjunction with the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh and his string quartet, the Russian ambassador to Vienna, Prince Andrey Razumovsky, commissioned a set of three quartets from Beethoven. These would be known as the Opus 59 quartets, or more simply the “*Razumovsky*” quartets.

Coming to define what we now know to have been Beethoven’s “middle style,” the Razumovsky quartets combine the virtuosity of later Beethoven’s work with Schuppanzigh’s accomplished ensemble into a set of quartets which may bear the mark of simplicity on face value but which actually express the depth of range of human expression and showcase the virtuosity needed to perform them convincingly. Schuppanzigh was an accomplished violinist and the leader of his eponymous string quartet which premiered many of Beethoven’s chamber works, leading the way for the string quartet genre to transform from a private recitation of music between amateurs and friends to a genre worthy to be performed by professional musicians on a stage in front of reverent audience members. In order to honor his dedicatee, Razumovsky, Beethoven decided to clearly include (and indicate) Russian themes in the first two quartets, but the third quartet received no explicit indication of the “*thème russe*” which characterized the two earlier quartets. The apparently rushed nature of its composition has led scholars to believe that the Beethoven simply left it out, but Nicholas Mathew argues that the cello’s rustic *pizzicato* in the second movement set the stage for a tune loosely based off a Russian folk melody in the upper voices, though he hasn’t expressly spelled it out with a textual indication.

The first movement, *Introduzione: Andante con moto – Allegro vivace* opens with a series of dark and brooding diminished seventh chords, none of which fully resolve, leaving the listener at the edge of their seat, constantly seeking the moment when the dust finally settles. As the diminished chords lose any sense of metered rhythm, time seems to stand still, and tension lies heavily on the air. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, the jaunty primary thematic material of the quartet jumps out of the page, in a clear nod to the quartet writing of the eighteenth century masters, Mozart and Haydn. The first violin takes center stage, as the part written for Schuppanzigh allows him to showcase his own musical talent. The second movement, *Andante con moto quasi allegretto* is a simple air, with the upper strings playing off a steady cello accompaniment. The third movement, *Menuetto grazioso*, is an exercise in form, full of the minuet grammar of the eighteenth century and a fair deal of contrapuntal voice leading, not unlike the works of Mozart.

The fourth movement, *Allegro molto*, is a fugue of epic proportions, foreshadowing the complexity and bombastic nature of the *Grosse Fugue*. The fugue itself is a Baroque form and style, though many subsequent composers continued to adopt it in their compositions, the impulse is nearly always a glance back at history and our cultural heritage. The movement begins with the viola's statement of the primary fugue theme, followed by the violins and then the cello. The whole movement, despite the complexity of its fugue, is a *moto perpetuo*, in which the action is unceasing until the very end of the movement. The absolute equality given to each instrument is a clear nod to Haydn's style and his Op. 20 No. 2 quartet's finale, another fugue which distributes the spotlight evenly across all four instruments. The conversational nature of Beethoven's Razumovsky quartets is undeniable and if you listen carefully enough, you can hear traces of Beethoven's own life and interactions hidden within the fabric of the music.

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