



# Debussy & Mozart 39

Sunday, April 10, 2022, 2 p.m.

Joslyn Art Museum, Witherspoon Concert Hall

François López-Ferrer, conductor

HECTOR BERLIOZ

*Béatrice et Bénédict Overture*

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

*Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune" ("Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun")*

MANUEL DE FALLA

*Suite No.1 from The Three-Cornered Hat*

- I. Introduction - Afternoon
- II. Dance of the Miller's Wife (Fandango)
- III. The Corregidor
- IV. The Grapes

INTERMISSION

EMMANUEL CHABRIER

*"Fête polonaise", from Le roi malgré lui ("The King in Spite of Himself")*

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

*Symphony No 39. in E-flat Major, K. 543*

- I. Adagio - Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Menuetto: Allegretto
- IV. Allegro

## ***Béatrice et Bénédic* Overture**

Hector Berlioz

Born: La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France, December 11, 1803 | Died: Paris, France, March 8, 1869

In 1827, Hector Berlioz attended a performance of *Hamlet* at the Odéon Theatre in Paris and was twice smitten—once by the compelling presence of actress Harriet Smithson and once again by the power of Shakespeare. His infatuation for the Irish actress bordered on what we would call “stalking” today. The young composer hounded her time and again until she agreed to marry him. As one could almost guess, the marriage was distinctly not one made in Heaven; their union exemplified the warning to be careful what you wish for lest it come to pass! Ouch!

His love for Shakespeare held firm, however, and in the course of his life he composed a number of pieces drawn from the English playwright’s canon of masterpieces. In his memoirs, the composer noted, “This sudden revelation of Shakespeare overwhelmed me. The lightning flash of his genius revealed the whole heaven of art to me, illuminating its remotest depths in a single flash.” The eventual expressions of this passion eventuated in the composer’s *Roméo et Juliette*, the *King Lear* Overture, the Fantasy on *The Tempest*, a memorial to his wife, *La Mort d’Ophélie*, and his comic opera, *Béatrice et Bénédic* (based on *Much Ado about Nothing*). The last-named opera is seldom staged, but its overture has enjoyed a life of its own on the concert stage.

Commissioned in 1860 for the opening of a new theater in Baden-Baden and composed two years later, the new work was as frothy and lighthearted as his enormous opera *Les Troyens* was epic and majestic. Berlioz characterized *Béatrice et Bénédic* as a “caprice.” The effervescent and brilliantly quirky overture pointedly captures both the romance and comedy of the opera and play. The scintillating opening section draws music from the second act duet by the principals, “L’amour est un flambeau” (“Love is a torch”), which is offset by a quiet central paragraph derived from Béatrice’s aria, “Il m’en souvient” (“I remember the day”). An embellished reprise of the opening music closes the overture on a note of energetic brilliance.

## ***Prélude a l’Après-midi d’un faune* (“Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun”)**

Claude Debussy

Born: Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, August 22, 1862 | Died: Paris, France, March 25, 1918

Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* marked a major break with 19th century German Romanticism; note it was not anti-Romantic, “merely” anti-Wagnerian. In direct comparison with leviathan scores from Wagner, Richard Strauss, Mahler and early Schoenberg, “Faun” shimmers with a beguiling clarity of line and uncluttered texture. Its fragrant atmosphere implies rather than overstates. For Debussy—in common with painter Claude Monet and poet Paul Verlaine—art was a sensuous rather than an ethical or intellectual experience. Debussy upheld the age-old ideal of French esthetics: to charm, to entertain, and to serve as a ‘fantasy of the senses.’

Debussy disliked the term “Impressionism,” a term originally used disparagingly to Claude Monet’s 1867 painting, *Impression: Sun Rising*. Debussy preferred “symbolism,” the artistic movement of expressing truth through metaphorical language and imagery – and of which Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem “Afternoon of a Faun” has been called the “hallmark in the history of symbolism in French literature.” Mallarmé, 20 years Debussy’s senior, was his friend. The two creators engaged in long discussions with leading artists and writers of the day, such as Paul Verlaine, Monet, Auguste Rodin, Gide, Paul Valéry, James Whistler, Maurice Maeterlinck, et al. Dating from 1893, Debussy described the score to “Faun” as “A very free interpretation of [Mallarmé’s 1876 poem], a series of backgrounds against which the faun’s dreams and desires stir in the afternoon heat.” The quietly revolutionary scores embodies new concepts of harmony that were less goal-oriented (an all but sacred precept of post Renaissance music), borrowing scales from exotic cultures of the Far East and ancient times. In 1900, commentator Olin Downes wrote of the score’s effervescence “...as if a rosy mist, or an invisible fragrance had passed and evaporated leaving nothing clear for the memory to grasp.”

One notes the delicacy of Debussy's scoring and his subtle rejection of tonality. Not a single chord is heard for almost half a minute, and when that first harmony arrives it is as strange and otherworldly as one could imagine. Debussy uses color as a basic compositional element, rather than as an enhancement of the musical argument. The music is seductive, subtle and understated.

### **Suite No. 1 from *The Three-Cornered Hat***

Manuel de Falla

Born: Cadiz, Spain, November 23, 1876 | Died: Alta Gracia, Argentina, November 14, 1946

Manuel de Falla's music conjures up the hot blood and passionate colors of the Iberian Peninsula, yet those who knew the man behind the music describe him as rather self-effacing. Igor Stravinsky opined that Falla was "as modest and withdrawn as an oyster," and "the most unpitifully religious" man he had ever known.

This son of a prosperous merchant, he learned piano in his youth, tried his hand at composing zarzuelas—an indigenous Spanish operetta—before "serious" studies with Felipe Pedrell and a fateful move to Paris in 1907, where he lived for the next seven years. The French capital was the artistic hub in all the arts during the two decades preceding the World War I and well into the 1920s. Falla's obvious gifts drew him into a circle of friends that included Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel and Paul Dukas, plus fellow countryman Isaac Albéniz and other Spanish "exiles."

Native and foreign musicians drawn to Paris were fascinated by the exoticism of Spanish *morés*, while Falla and his Iberian cohorts found much to love in the fragrant essences of French Impressionism. The blending of the two cultures proved to be a fertile consummation; just think of the myriad Spanish-inspired works from French, Spanish, and other composers who passed through the City of Light.

Originally composed to accompany a pantomime, *The Corregidor and the Miller's Wife*, from a short story by Pedro de Alarcón, *The Three-Cornered Hat* underwent revision and expansion when Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes toured Spain in 1919. The new version contained two additional numbers, the *The Miller's Dance* and *The Final Dance*.

The story centers on the lives of people in an Andalusian town, specifically a young miller, his pretty wife and an aging Corregidor (governor) whose energies are spent trying to woo the miller's spouse. *The Introduction*, a forceful attention-getter armed with blaring drums and fervent drums, also sounds a cautionary note from afar that wives should bolt their doors. *The Introduction* segues directly into *The Afternoon*, an evocation of the miller, his lovely wife and the area immediately in front of their house. A blackbird whistles the time—two o'clock. A series of brief flirtations involving the wife and two would-be suitors follows: the first, a passing young man and the second, the elderly Corregidor wearing his three-cornered hat (symbol of authority) and accompanied, ironically and horribly, by his wife. The limping Corregidor is mocked by the miller's wife, while the miller himself, seeing what's afoot, sets in motion a plan to stop the attempted seduction. The wife dances a fandango (*The Dance of the Miller's Wife*) and teases the magistrate. Finally, during *The Grapes* the Corregidor attempts a kiss and clumsily falls down when she easily eludes his grasp. The miller returns, large stick in hand under the pretense that his mill is being robbed. He helps his wife lift up the lecher, tricks him into sniffing an enormous liquid-filled bottle. Realizing that his dishonorable intentions have been uncovered, the Corregidor leaves in a huff. When the constable arrives, the miller feigns contrition for embarrassing the would-be suitor. As the policeman leaves, the fandango resumes.

### **"Fête polonaise" from *Le roi malgré lui* ("The King in Spite of Himself")**

Emmanuel Chabrier

Born: Ambert, France, January 18, 1841 | Died: Paris, France, September 13, 1894

Like his countrymen Debussy and Ravel, Emmanuel Chabrier was smitten by the allure and passion of music south of the Pyrenees. A fine pianist and essentially self-taught composer, Chabrier spent several months in 1883 touring Spain in a state of nearly continuous rapture, jotting down themes and rhythms of indigenous music wherever he stopped. Unlike other non-Iberians who, from a distance, composed music inspired by Spain, Chabrier relished actual contact with the people he met there—Romani, Flamenco dancers, and others.

Committed though he was to music of Spain, Chabrier also became an acolyte of the music of Wagner like many other French composers—especially Debussy, who ultimately abandoned the "Master of Bayreuth," asserting that the German composer's music was "a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn." Ravel offered a less charitable assessment, saying that he would rather have composed Chabrier's opera than Wagner's entire *Ring* cycle.

Chabrier completed *Le roi malgré lui* (“The King in Spite of Himself”) in 1887. It was loosely based on Henri de Valois, who reluctantly ascended to the throne as the King of Poland in 1574. Rarely performed in modern times, the opera got off literally to a fiery start: the theater burned to the ground at the premiere. By far the most popular number in the ill-fated opera remains the “Fête polonaise” that launches Act II. Here, Chabrier revels in a riotous vaudevillian showstopper, strong on rhythmic vitality and over the top instrumental color. Polish mazurka rhythms abound, though less beholden to Chopin than to Wagnerian chromaticism.

### **Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: Salzburg, Austria, January 27, 1756 | Died: Vienna, Austria, December 5, 1791

An air of mystery and uncertainty has shrouded the last three of Mozart’s symphonies, of which No. 39 is the first. All three were written in 1788 but there is no evidence regarding a commission for any of them, an unusual circumstance in Mozart’s life where almost every composition came into being to fulfill a contract or obligation. Some commentators have suggested that Mozart may have written Nos. 39–41 in anticipation of a voyage to London that never materialized. Contrary to long-standing opinion, however, the works probably were performed during his lifetime.

The year 1788 was not a happy one for the composer. The great success of his seven years in Vienna seemed to slip away between the mounting of *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786 and the writing of *Don Giovanni* a year later. The political satire of *Figaro* may have alienated Mozart’s fickle and nervous aristocratic patrons, especially given the growing wave of discontent that would throw France into violent revolution in 1789. (The eminent scholar Joseph Kerman, however, suggests that it was Mozart who rejected Vienna, not vice versa, arguing that his music was advancing beyond the capacity of Viennese.) On a personal level, Mozart and his wife Constanza fell into poor health in 1788, forcing them to move into cheaper lodgings because of the composer’s reduced income. The death of Christoph Willibald Gluck in November 1787 created a vacuum among the compositional elite at the Hapsburg court, one that Mozart hoped to fill by being appointed as Gluck’s successor. The good news was that Emperor Joseph II named Mozart Court Chamber Music Composer; the bad news was that the salary was but 40 percent of what his predecessor had earned.

Yet these cumulative woes did little to diminish the élan of the E-flat Symphony, K. 543. The music is prevailingly warm-hearted, fleet and optimistic, and as such is a testament to Mozart’s ability to rise about external circumstances to produce a glowingly healthy work. The first movement sets under way with a lengthy *Adagio* introduction that is noble in pacing, almost serenely assured and only occasionally marked by implied darker emotions. The *Allegro* grows out of a lovely, simple theme that undergoes rich transformation and development. Exuberant tuttis contrast with intimate asides from smaller subgroups, and the entire movement is songlike in its gracious unfolding.

The spirit of song similarly infuses the slow movement, though the mood is more reflective than the opening *Allegro*. The middle section shows Mozart to be an imaginative colorist, adept at using instruments old and new (as, for instance, the still evolving clarinet) in a fresh and forward-looking style. Hints of darker emotions surface briefly in two sections lying respectively in F minor and E-flat minor.

The rousing vigor of the *Menuetto* seems almost Haydn-esque and points to the burly scherzos of Beethoven that lay just a few years hence. The woodwind-dominated Trio, with its lovely clarinet part, reminds us of Haydn’s opinion that “Mozart taught us how to write for the clarinet.”

The humorous finale, dashing from the starting gate with a mercurial scalar theme, is filled with irrepressible joie de vivre that races undiminished until the very last note.

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## François López-Ferrer, conductor

Spanish-American conductor François López-Ferrer came to international attention after a critically acclaimed debut at the 2018 Verbier Festival, where he jumped in for Iván Fischer in a shared program with Sir Simon Rattle and Gébor Takács-Nagy.

In demand as a guest conductor, López-Ferrer's recent and upcoming highlights include debuts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Rochester Philharmonic, Orquesta Nacional de España, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Verbier Festival Orchestra, Berner Symphonieorchester, Orquesta Sinfónica Radio Televisión Española (RTVE), Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León, Orquesta de Valencia, Orquesta Sinfónica de Navarra, Orchestra di Padova e del Veneto, Musikkollegium Winterthur, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Chile, Orquesta de Extremadura, Joven Orquesta Nacional de España, Orquesta Joven de la Sinfónica de Galicia, Orquesta Sinfónica do Paraná, and the Orquesta Sinfónica de Porto Alegre.

For 2021-22 López-Ferrer is a Dudamel Fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As Associate Conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (CSO) and May Festival, he conducts the CSO's Young People's Concerts and provides artistic support to CSO's Music Director Louis Langrée and May Festival's Principal Conductor Juanjo Mena. López-Ferrer was one of six participants to be featured in the 2022 Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview with the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. He previously served for two years as associate conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Chile (OSNCH), Principal Conductor of the Ballet Nacional Chileno, and was the youngest ever Conductor-in-Residence of the OSNCH's Summer Concert Series.