Ravel’s Spain with Boléro

Friday, February 11, 2011 8 pm
Saturday, February 12, 2011 8 pm
Sunday, February 13, 2011 2:30 pm

Jones Hall

Hans Graf, conductor
Susanne Mentzer, mezzo-soprano
*Brenton Ryan, tenor
*Samuel Schultz, baritone
*Rafael Moras, tenor
*Stephen Anthony Ray, baritone

Ravel L’heure espagnole (The Spanish Hour)

INTERMISSION

Ravel Rapsodie espagnole
I Prélude à la nuit: Très modéré—
II Malagueña: Assez vif
III Habanera: Assez lent
IV Feria: Assez animé

Ravel Don Quichotte à Dulcinée
1 Chanson romanesque: Moderato
2 Chanson épique: Molto moderato
3 Chanson à boire: Allegro

Ravel/Graf Chants populaires
1 Chanson espagnole

Ravel Vocalise (Pièce en forme de habanera)

Ravel Boléro
*Houston Symphony debut
Maurice Ravel
Born: Mar 7, 1875, Ciboure, France
Died: Dec 28, 1937, Paris, France

Although Maurice Ravel only lived the first three months of his life in his birthplace before moving with his family to Paris, he always took pride in his maternal Basque heritage. He periodically returned for rest and relaxation to the tiny seaside village of Ciboure, tucked in the very Southwestern corner of France between Biarritz and the Spanish border. And like many of his contemporaries, including Debussy, Chabrier and Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel composed several works exhibiting his fondness for the music of neighboring Spain.

L’HEURE ESPAGNOLE (THE SPANISH HOUR)
Work composed: 1907-09
Recording: Jean Fournet, Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra. Singers Teresa Berganza, Alfredo Kraus, Herbert Kraus, Sesto Bruscantini, Giorgio Tadeo (Living Stage)
Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta, offstage chimes and strings

Ravel’s one-act comedy is based on a play by Franc-Nohain that had a successful run at Odéon Theater (1904). The story, set in 18th-century Toledo, involves a clockmaker’s wife who schedules trysts with her lovers just after 1 p.m. on Thursdays, while her gullible husband is regularly out adjusting and repairing all the municipal clocks in the city’s public spaces.

Unexpectedly, a husky muleteer arrives with a watch needing repair at the moment the clockmaker is leaving for his rounds. The wife keeps him busy hauling grandfather clocks back and forth from her upstairs bedroom, while she waits for appointments with a poet and a rich banker. But the poet wastes her time singing flowery verses, while the banker proves too vain for her taste. Finally, she takes the muleteer upstairs, just as the clockmaker returns to find the other two hiding inside his clocks – which he promptly sells to them.

The vocal line is largely set in short dialogue phrases, with some longer arias toward the end of the opera. Much of the opera’s beauty is found in Ravel’s exquisite orchestral setting, which includes delicate scoring for percussion instruments to simulate the ticking and chiming of timepieces in the clockmaker’s shop.

RAPSODIE ESPAGNOLE
Work composed: 1907-08
Recording: Charles Dutoit conducting the Montreal Symphony (Decca)
Instrumentation: two piccolos, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta and strings

Subtlety, brevity and a pointed orchestral technique are hallmarks of Ravel’s style, and they are admirably expressed in his first significant orchestral piece, the *Rapsodie espagnole*. The opening movement, “Prelude to the Night,” is an impressionistic sketch in which delicate fragments of melody and orchestral tone color are set against a repeated four-note motive. Trumpets and castanets interject the sharp rhythms of the succeeding “Malagueña” against successive waves of tightly packed string, wind and brass tone. Its fury suddenly dissolves in an exotic cadenza for the English horn, garnished with echoes of the four-note motive from the first movement.

The “Habanera” is the most exquisite of the four movements. The typical syncopated rhythm of this Cuban dance, made famous by the Habanera of Bizet’s opera, *Carmen*, is delicately threaded through a succession of entries by the oboe, muted trumpet, solo violin, horn and harp. Snatches of several festive melodies gather in a brilliant potpourri, turning the concluding “Feria” into a joyous exhibition of Ravel’s orchestral talent.

**DON QUICHOTTE à DULCINÉE**
**CHANTS POPULARIES**
**VOCALISE (PIÈCE EN FORME DE HABANERA)**

*Work composed*: 1932-33 (Don Quichotte), 1910 (Chanson espagnole), 1907 (Vocalise)

*Recording*: Teresa Berganza, mezzo-soprano; Dalton Baldwin, piano (EMI Classics)

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, percussion, harp and strings

Ravel’s three *Don Quixote* songs were his final compositions, written at a time when a neuromuscular disorder started its inexorable fiveyear course toward ending his life. The songs were originally intended as part of a film score starring Fyodor Chaliapin in the title role of Cervantes addled knight, but Ravel was unable to complete the remaining music.

In the first song, Quixote vows to move heaven and earth to satisfy every wish and whim of his beloved Dulcinea (who is really a rough barmaid in Cervantes’ comic novel), and in the second song, he invokes the aid of the archangel Michael and St. George in protecting her. In the final drinking song, Quixote apparently drowns his disillusionment in a frothy mug of ale. The three songs are set in Spanish dance rhythms: consecutively, a quajira, a Basque dance known as a zortzico and a jota for the drinking song.
The Chants populaires is one of four prizewinning folksong arrangements Ravel entered in a Russian competition designed to promote the awareness and performance of international folksong. A relentless militant rhythm (similar to a boléro) underlies a bitter comment in the text about the hardening effect of war upon a man’s soul, though the colloquialism in the original Galician text would be considered racially insensitive today. A French translation changes the words, comparing their hardened hearts to thistles.

The Vocalise (Pièce en forme de habanera) was one of several such pieces commissioned by a Paris Conservatory vocal professor as exercises for his students. It is an example of a century-old tradition of textless exercises sung to vowel sounds with instrumental accompaniment. Rachmaninoff’s Vocalise, Opus 34, has gained the greatest fame as a concert piece among numerous works in this genre.

BOLÉRO
Work composed: 1928
Recording: Charles Dutoit conducting the Montreal Symphony (Decca)
Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling oboe d’amore), English horn, two clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta and strings

Ravel’s international fame reached its height in 1928, following numerous awards and commissions from abroad, plus a four-month United States tour that included two Houston concerts under sponsorship of Rice University.

Following his return to Paris in the late spring, Ravel began work on a commission from dancer/choreographer Ida Rubinstein for a ballet with a Spanish theme. At first, he orchestrated some pieces from Isaac Albéniz’s piano suite, Ibéria, but abandoned that project after copyright problems emerged. Instead, he composed what became his most popular original work. Originally, he called it Fandango, but soon settled on its present title, Boléro.

Ravel’s intention was precisely set forth in a written statement issued after the premiere: to compose a 17-minute piece involving “one long, very gradual crescendo” and the insistent repetition of a rhythmic pattern over “folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind.” The side drum takes up the rhythm, maintaining it until the next-to-last measure, while the flute begins a beguiling melody over a simple string accompaniment. Gradually, more and more instruments join in – often in exotic combinations – until the entire orchestra throbs with the relentless, sometimes wailing melody.

Rubinstein and her dance company gave the work its premiere in November 1928 and, when performance rights to the musical score were generally available the following...
year, Boléro suddenly became an enormously popular orchestral piece. However, a 1930 tour performance by Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic at the Paris Opera became notorious when Ravel sat stonily in his box and refused to acknowledge the conductor’s gesture of recognition. Backstage after the concert, Ravel complained that Toscanini’s tempo was much too fast, and the conductor retorted that a boléro is not a funeral march.

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Biographies

Hans Graf, conductor
Known for his wide range of repertoire and creative programming, distinguished Austrian conductor Hans Graf – the Houston Symphony’s 15th Music Director – is one of today’s most highly respected musicians. He began his tenure here on Opening Night of the 2001-2002 season.

Prior to his appointment in Houston, he was music director of the Calgary Philharmonic, the Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine, the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra and the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra.

Frequent guest with all of the major North American orchestras, Graf has developed a close relationship with the Boston Symphony and appears regularly with the orchestra during the subscription season and at the Tanglewood Music Festival.

He made his Carnegie Hall debut with the Houston Symphony in January 2006 and returned leading the Orchestra of St. Luke’s in March 2007. He and the Houston Symphony were invited to appear at Carnegie Hall in January 2010 to present the New York premiere of The Planets—An HD Odyssey.

Internationally, Graf conducts in the foremost concert halls of Europe, Japan and Australia. In October 2010, he led the Houston Symphony on a tour of the UK to present the international premiere of The Planets—An HD Odyssey – a project that has been picked up by the Cleveland, Seattle and Sydney Symphony Orchestras. He has participated in the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Bregenz and Aix en Provence and appeared at the Salzburg Festival. In summer 2010, he conducted the opening concert of the Aspen Music Festival and returned to Tanglewood and Chicago’s Grant Park Festival.

An experienced opera conductor, Graf first conducted the Vienna State Opera in 1981 and has since led productions in the opera houses of Berlin, Munich, Paris and Rome, including several world premieres. Recent engagements include Parsifal at the Zurich Opera and Boris Godunov at the Opera National du Rhin in Strasbourg.

Born in 1949 near Linz, Graf studied violin and piano as a child. He earned diplomas in piano and conducting from the Musikhochschule in Graz and continued his studies with Franco Ferrara, Sergiu Celibidache and Arvid Jansons. His career was launched in 1979 when he was awarded first prize at the Karl Böhm Competition.

His extensive discography includes recordings with the Houston Symphony, available through houstonsymphony.org: works by Bartók and Stravinsky, Zemlinsky’s
Lyric Symphony, Berg’s Three Pieces from the Lyric Suite and a DVD of The Planets—An HD Odyssey.

Graf has been awarded the Chevalier de l’ordre de la Legion d’Honneur by the French government for championing French music around the world and the Grand Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic of Austria. Hans and Margarita Graf have homes in Salzburg and Houston. They have one daughter, Anna, who lives in Vienna.

**Susanne Mentzer,** mezzo-soprano
American mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer is recognized for her generous vocal and interpretive gifts and is widely admired for her versatility in the recital, concert and operatic arenas.

Performances in this and upcoming seasons include Eugene Onegin (Pittsburgh Opera), The Golden Ticket (Opera Theater of St. Louis), and Dead Man Walking and Le Nozze di Figaro (Houston Grand Opera). Orchestral appearances include Mahler 3 (Florida Orchestra), Mahler 2 (Indianapolis Symphony) and a performance of Now and Again (Eighth Blackbird).

Mentzer has appeared with the world’s great opera companies, orchestras and festivals in North America, Europe, Buenos Aires and on tour in Japan (Metropolitan Opera, Mostly Mozart and the Bavarian State Opera). Other recent appearances include: a nationwide broadcast on PBS’ Live from Lincoln Center, Beethoven’s 9th Symphony (National Symphony Orchestra), Ravel’s Shéhérazade (St. Louis Symphony) and Britten’s Spring Symphony (San Francisco Symphony).

In addition to her extensive discography, Mentzer has recorded two recitals: The Eternal Feminine, (Koch International Classics) and her personal favorite, Wayfaring Stranger (Erato).

She appeared on PBS’ Live from the Met and was a Breakfast with the Arts (A&E Network) series Artist of the Week. DVD credits include Don Giovanni (Teatro alla Scala), Les Contes d’Hoffmann (Opéra de Paris) and The First Emperor (Metropolitan Opera).

She is professor of voice at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, served on the faculty of the Aspen Music Festival and School and the DePaul University School of Music, worked with the George London Foundation and is a board member of the William M. Sullivan Foundation.

Mentzer began her studies in music therapy (University of the Pacific), received her bachelor and master degrees (The Juilliard School), honed her craft in the Houston Grand Opera Studio and studied voice with Norma Newton.

**Brenton Ryan,** tenor
A Missouri native, tenor Brenton Ryan is in his second year of graduate studies at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, studying with Dr. Stephen King.

This season at Rice Opera Theater, Ryan performs in Rorem’s Our Town and Monteverdi’s L’Incoronazione di Poppea. Other highlights include solo roles in
Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, under the baton of Larry Rachleff, and performances in Sondheim’s A Little Night Music and the prologue of Richard Strauss’ Ariadne auf Naxos. Ryan received his Bachelor of Music degree from DePaul University (Chicago), where he performed in Mikado, Britten’s The Beggar’s Opera and Conrad Susa’s Transformations. He was awarded the three-year New Horizon Fellowship for the Aspen Music Festival and School (2008) where he sang in Corigliano’s The Ghosts of Versailles during the 2010 season.

Samuel Schultz, baritone
Baritone Samuel Schultz has been seen in L’elisir d amore, Così fan tutte, The Rape of Lucretia, Street Scene, A Little Night Music, Viva la mamma!, and covered roles in Don Giovanni and The Mikado. In addition to tonight’s debut, his Houston Grand Opera debut in Ariadne auf Naxos comes in April, and the Pack Language Institute for Singers (Rice University) is funding his May trip to Florence, Italy to study Italian.

Solo concert repertoire includes Handel’s Messiah, Fauré’s Requiem, Bach’s Magnificat and Poulenc’s Rapsodie nègre. As a United States Senate Page Program alumnus, he had the prestigious honor of singing for Congress.

Schultz will complete the graduate program at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music this spring, and has represented the program at Regional Opera Gala Concerts in Aspen, Chicago, Dallas, New York City and San Francisco (2008).

Rafael Moras, tenor
Tenor Rafael Moras is a National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts (NFAA) Young ARTS Winner (2006), United States Presidential Scholar in the Arts (2006) and Winner of the 51st Annual New York Metropolitan Opera National Council Southwest Region Auditions. Moras debuted in The Magic Flute and subsequently performed in Così Fan Tutte and The Pirates of Penczance (University of Texas at San Antonio Lyric Theater and Orchestra). He participated in the NFAA-sponsored HBO documentary series, Masterclass under Maestro Plácido Domingo, and recently participated in the Wolf Trap Opera’s Studio Program. This spring, he sings in The Secret Garden (UTSA) followed by his Senior Recital.

Moras studies under Dr. Diana Allan in pursuit of a Bachelor of Music Degree in Voice Performance (UTSA). He will attend Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music as a graduate student of Dr. Stephen King this fall.

Stephen Anthony Ray, baritone
Baritone Stephen Anthony Ray is pursuing the Master of Music in vocal performance degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music as a student of Dr. Stephen King. He has participated in Holst’s Savitri, Mozart’s Don Giovanni and Le Nozze di Figaro, Strauss’ Arabella and Saint-Saëns’ Samson et Dalila. Ray twice performed as the baritone soloist in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, was the guest baritone soloist in Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana and performed in Così fan tutte, Die Zauberflöte and Elijah.
A Sherwood, Arkansas native, Ray completed his bachelor’s degree in music at Ouachita Baptist University and advanced to the Grand Finals of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (2008).