

## *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1303*

### Songs of Spain

The nationalist movement which swept European music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was particularly fruitful for Spain. Most of the great figures of the Spanish musical revival, both composers and performers, owed much to the final polish applied by studies in Paris, and to the cosmopolitan artistic atmosphere of that city, but they never lost their essential Spanish qualities. Although string players such as de Sarasate, Manén and Casals were part of the revival, much of the activity centred round the piano, the instrument of Albéniz, Granados, de Falla, Turina, Mompou and the Cuban-born Nin, and as marvellous Spanish singers were in plentiful supply, it was natural that most of the composers should enrich the art-song repertoire. In this programme we are able to hear three of these composers accompanying great singers in their own compositions. The results are not only fascinating historically, but satisfying artistically.

Manuel de Falla, was born of mixed Valencian and Catalan stock in Cádiz on 23 November 1876, and died in voluntary exile in Argentina on 14 November 1946. He grew up with a strong feeling for the musical characters of the different Spanish regions. He had his first music lessons from his mother, and studied the piano with José Tragó both before and during his years at the Real Conservatorio in Madrid. He began his career writing zarzuelas, but studies with Felipe Pedrell intensified his feeling for folk music. In 1904 he won two important prizes, one for piano playing and another for his one-act opera *La Vida Breve*. In 1907 he moved to Paris, where he met his compatriots Albéniz and the pianist Ricardo Viñes, got to know Ravel, and came under the influence of Debussy. By the time he returned to Madrid in 1914 he had written the marvellous song cycle recorded here and was ready for his finest triumphs. The seven *Canciones Populares Españolas* (*Seven Popular Spanish Songs*) were based on traditional materials, but only the first and third were left more or less untouched by de Falla's fastidious arranging skills. De Falla himself played in the première, given by Luisa Vela in Madrid on 14 January 1915. The cycle has achieved an alternative life in the excellent transcription of six of the songs for violin and piano, made by the Polish violinist Pawel Kochanski. One of the other two de Falla pieces recorded here comes from the first of his two great ballets, *El Amor Brujo* (*Love the Magician*), first performed in Madrid on 15 April 1915. The other song was quite new at the time it was recorded. The year 1927 saw the tercentenary of the poet Luis de Góngora, and de Falla was one of those asked to help celebrate it. He chose to set *Soneto a Córdoba*, which was first performed in Paris on 14 May 1927 with its original harp accompaniment (de Falla specified the piano as an alternative).

For these recordings, made in Paris in 1928 and 1930, de Falla chose the Catalan lyric soprano Maria Barrientos. She was born in Barcelona on 10 March 1884 and studied piano and violin before taking up singing. Her début in *La Sonnambula* in her native city in 1898, led to a major international operatic career in the bel canto repertoire. By the early 1920s she was concentrating on recital work and her voice was slightly in decline. This impression is rather unfairly emphasised by the poor quality of the Parisian recordings, made when she was in retirement. The rival recording of the cycle by Conchita Supervia and Frank Marshall is demonstrably technically superior, yet when it comes to artistry and subtlety of rhythm and phrasing, Barrientos and de Falla create a haunting atmosphere that lingers in the mind long after the records have been heard. Barrientos died at San Juan de Luz on 8 August 1946.

Maria Barrientos might well have recorded the Nin songs too, as she gave the première of the twenty *Cantos de España* in Paris in 1923 with the composer at the piano. Today we remember Joaquín Nin y Castellano, if at all, at second hand through the scandalous writings of his daughter Anais. His was a slenderer talent than de Falla's, admittedly, but he was a superb pianist and an excellent miniaturist as a composer. He was born of Spanish parentage in Havana on 29 September 1878 and died there on 24 October 1949. He studied first in Barcelona and then in Paris, becoming professor of piano at the Schola Cantorum. A restless soul, he moved successively to Berlin, back to Havana, then to Brussels and back to Paris, where he was well known among the musical fraternity.

In these selections from his cycle Nin partners the French soprano Eugénie 'Ninon' Vallin, who was born on 9 September 1886 at Montalieu-Vercien, Isère, and died at Millery on 22 November 1961. After studying in Lyon she became a pupil of the mezzo-soprano Meyrienne Héglon, a favourite singer of Saint-Saëns, in Paris. She made her name as a concert singer and took part in the first performance of Debussy's *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* in Paris in 1911. Her operatic début was the next year. Though only two years younger than Barrientos, she kept her voice much longer, and was one of the most illustrious recording stars of the early electrical era. She had a rare feeling for folk material, she was a huge favourite in Argentina, and recorded a good deal of it apart from these rightly esteemed 1929 discs with Nin. She was also known for her singing of de Falla's music.

Less familiar to most listeners will be the records of a song cycle and two separate songs by Joaquín Turina. He was born in Seville on 9 December 1882 and died in Madrid on 14 January 1949. He studied first in his native city, then in Madrid (his piano teacher was Tragó) and finally from 1905 to 1914 with Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. Here he also honed his piano technique under Moritz Moszkowski. Though six years younger than de Falla he actually preceded him in Paris and came under more or less the same influences. The last of the Big Four of the Spanish nationalist school, he was the only one to produce a corpus of chamber music; and it was the friendly criticism of Albéniz and de Falla, after the première of his Piano Quintet (his Opus 1), that directed him along the

nationalist path. The Quintet was written in an international late romantic style. However, Turina's mature music always shows its Spanish provenance sooner or later, the nationalist touches tending to vie with the straightforwardly romantic gestures. So it is with the 1927 cycle *Canto a Sevilla* and the other two songs here.

Turina's superb piano playing underpins the sensitive artistry of Dolores Rodríguez de Aragón, who sang under the diminutive form of her first name, Lola. Born in Cádiz in 1915, and a student of the great German soprano Elisabeth Schumann, she was herself a famous teacher and for a time worked at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música in Madrid, where one of her pupils was Teresa Berganza. Later she was teacher-director of the Escuela Superior de Canto, the Compañía de Teatro Lírico Nacional (which specialised in the zarzuela repertoire), and the Coro Nacional de España. She died in Madrid on 29 April 1984.

As an encore, we have a duet from José Serrano's popular zarzuela *La Reina Mora* by two of Spain's most beloved singers, whose vibrant voices set each other off to perfection. The Catalan mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia, who was born in Barcelona on 9 December 1895 and died tragically early in London on 30 March 1936, is best remembered as the central figure of the interwar Rossini revival. Needless to say she was a wonderful interpreter of Spanish material. The lyric baritone Marcos Redondo, who was born at Pozoblanco, Córdoba, on 24 November 1893 and died in Barcelona in 1976, also had an international career, but was best known for his operatic appearances in Barcelona and for his zarzuela records. He created the role of Don Quixote in de Falla's little opera *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* (*Master Peter's Puppet Show*) under the composer's direction in Seville in 1923.

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Tully Potter

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