



SEASON FINALE CONCERT

SINGLETARY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

405 ROSE STREET

SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2025

PROGRAM NOTES

By Marcello Cormio



Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1858), Overture to *La gazza ladra*

Rossini was only 25 years old when *La gazza ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*) premiered at La Scala in 1817, but he had already established himself as the dominant figure in Italian opera. His best-loved masterpiece, *The Barber of Seville*, had appeared the previous year, and new works continued to spring out of his creative genius at an astounding pace, elevating musical standards in the process. He was even nicknamed “il Tedeschino” (“the little German”) because his calibrated and inventive writing for the orchestra reminded critics of the German tradition of instrumental music. “Signor Crescendo” was another epithet — a nod to Rossini’s brilliant use of a gradual increase in volume and orchestration (*crescendo*) for comic or dramatic effect. Both these aspects of Rossini’s style are reflected in this masterful overture.

Despite its lighthearted title, the opera blends humor with serious drama. The plot, adapted from a French play, and inspired by true contemporary events, recounts how the servant girl Ninetta is falsely accused of stealing a silver spoon and condemned to death, only to be saved at the last moment when the true culprit—the thieving bird of the title—is discovered.

The overture was immediately hailed as a masterpiece at its premiere. One account of the performance reported five minutes of uninterrupted applause at the conclusion, with the audience exclaiming: “Bravo, Maestro!”

The opening sounds of snare drum rolls set a military march in motion, reflecting the opera’s elements related to war and justice, and perhaps alluding to Ninetta’s father and her husband-to-be, who are both soldiers.

The piece is full of fire, and occasionally includes music taken by the opera itself, which is unusual for Rossini up to this point, as he would often recycle overtures from previous operas or compose one on the fly at the last minute, in a somewhat facile manner. The lively main Allegro section, in a loose sonata form, showcases brilliant orchestration and Rossini’s signature crescendo technique. The main theme, typically Rossinian, is a sparkling minor key passage with a fast, catchy melody, lightly accompanied by *battute* in the string instruments (lightly “beating” their bows on the strings). It will be heard later, in the opera, as the accompaniment figure to the servant girl’s lament as she is being imprisoned. The secondary, lyrical theme, presented by the oboe, is a witty tune later echoed by the clarinet. The writing for the woodwinds is delightfully playful, while the peak of the orchestral crescendo features an unusually prominent and excitingly virtuosic passage for the trombones. The conclusion is a final *Presto* of exhilarating energy and orchestral verve.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), *Capriccio Espagnol*, op. 34

- I. *Alborada*
- II. *Variazioni*
- III. *Alborada*
- IV. *Scena e canto gitano*
- V. *Fandango Asturiano*

In 1887, after having completed the score of Borodin's *Prince Igor*, left unfinished by its author, Rimsky-Korsakov returned to devote himself to original composition, which for some time he seemed to want to abandon. And the result of this new creative outburst were three

orchestral masterpieces that cemented the stature of their composer and have since taken place among Rimsky's best known and most beloved works: *Capriccio Espagnol* (1887), *Sheherazade* (1888), and *The Great Russian Easter Overture* (1888-89).

The fascination for Spain, its culture and popular music, and a perceived Iberian exoticism, is truly ubiquitous among European nineteenth century composers, from Lalo, Liszt, Bizet, to Debussy and later Ravel. But closer to home for Rimsky-Korsakov, the conception of *Capriccio Espagnol* was likely inspired by the memory of the "Father of Russian music", Glinka, composing two "Spanish" works: the *Jota Aragonesa*, notably also called "Capriccio Brillante", and *Summer Night in Madrid* (*Souvenir d'une nuit d'été à Madrid*).

Rimsky's *Capriccio Espagnol*, op. 34, is a formally and stylistically peculiar composition of orchestral virtuosity, in five movements that represent colorful tableaux, distinct yet tightly connected. The work is characterized by an inexhaustible rhythmic vitality, a kaleidoscopic richness in orchestral timbers and gestures, and an unmistakable Spanish flair in the melodies and their sensuous harmonic underpinnings. The evocation of Spain is seen through the prolific imagination of an artist who is supremely gifted in the art of orchestration and instrumental writing and effects. As we can imagine, the percussions take a major role in the piece, providing movement and color, but representatives of all of the other instrumental families in the orchestra are featured in a display of evocative musical idioms. In a way, the work could also be interpreted as an original reinterpretation of a Concerto form: an abundance of solos alternating throughout the piece finds its culmination in a series of actual cadenzas at the structural core of the work, the beginning of the fourth movement, displaying brilliant virtuosity and functioning almost as a show-stopper.

The opening movement is a joyous and catchy *Alborada* – literally a "dawn song" from the word "alba" (while a "Serenade" is an evening song, from the word "sera"). It is followed by a series of *Variations* on a gorgeously tender melody - the epitome of *cantabile* in its openness and simplicity - leading into a reprise of the *Alborada*, rescored and raised a half-step higher from its first appearance, therefore sounding more brilliant. The last two movements are connected and form a broad and exciting finale: it all starts, as mentioned, with a sequence of cadenzas in *Scene and Gipsy Song*, which then takes on an exuberant dance rhythm, progressing into the closing *Asturian Fandango*. In an explosion of orchestral colors, the *Alborada* makes its last appearance at the closing of the piece, animated by a rambunctious and almost frenetic energy.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), Mambo from West Side Story

Bernstein's most celebrated stage work, *West Side Story*, a modern re-imagining of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, arguably represents a crucial turning point in the history of American musical theater. The work is set in the slums of New York and tells the story of two rival gangs of teenagers of different ethnic backgrounds, the Jets (white, from New York) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican immigrants). In a climate of hatred and intolerance, love develops between Tony, a former Jets and best friend of Riff, their leader, and Maria, the sister of Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks.

West Side Story proposes well-known themes, such as love that conquers prejudice, youth against maturity, tradition that challenges progress; however, the long dance sequences and the attention to social justice are a real novelty in American musical theater. The lyrics contain the rude and violent language of the streets, some dance scenes are closer to ballet,

and Leonard Bernstein's music offers a unique, "local" color with its idiomatic use of trumpets and percussions, its swing dance rhythms, its mambo and cha-cha, breaking through the more traditional flow of song numbers.

The *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* originated in close relation to the MGM movie adaptation of the musical. The soundtrack of this film, an arrangement of the original by Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal, was revisited in 1960 by Bernstein, who extracted and reorchestrated nine sections to form a concert suite. The piece was performed for the first time in 1961 by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Lukas Foss, in a gala concert to raise funds for the orchestra's retirees, and has since become a staple of symphonic programs for its incredibly appealing score. The suite contains some of the musical's best-known pieces and most memorable music, including *Somewhere*, *Maria*, *Mambo*, *Cha-cha*, *Rumba*, with each section flowing seamlessly into the next. The *Mambo*, which concludes tonight's program, is a fast-paced, Cuban-inspired dance. In the musical, it comes from the Act I sequence at the neighborhood dance, where a challenge dance takes place during which Tony and Maria first notice and are attracted to each other. In a few minutes of music Bernstein's brilliant orchestration is in full display, featuring thrilling licks in the trumpets and trombones, and an exciting array of percussion instruments, employed in a flamboyant rendition of Latino rhythmic idioms. Of course, the very essence of the piece is its irresistible rhythmic energy, to the point that it is hard to stay still while listening to it, and inevitably one will picture Bernstein's himself conducting it with his signature podium dance moves.