

Obituary:

Joaquin Rodrigo, famed Spanish composer dies

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Joaquin Rodrigo, acclaimed Spanish composer and the man most responsible for popularising the guitar as a classical concert instrument, died on July 6 in Madrid at the age of 97.

Rodrigo is best remembered for his 1939 *Concierto de Aranjuez*, the first orchestral work composed specifically for guitar. This ground-breaking composition was prompted by a meeting between Rodrigo and Spanish guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza, in Paris. De la Maza performed the *Aranjuez* for the first time in 1940 with the Barcelona Philharmonic Orchestra. Since then, the work has been recorded innumerable times and is the most well-known and influential piece of 20th century Spanish music. Among the many thousands of musicians and composers inspired by its evocative and haunting qualities was jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, who recorded a version of it almost 40 years ago, on his "Sketches of Spain" album.

Aranjuez, the work's location, points to the end of the 18th century and the Spanish courts of Carlos IV and Fernando VII. As Rodrigo explained in 1974: "It is named after the famous royal site on the shore of the River Tagus, not far from Madrid, along the road to Andalucia, and some perceive Goya's shadow in the notes of its music, full of melancholy emotion. Its music seems to bring to life the essence of an 18th century court, where aristocratic distinction blends with popular culture. In its melody the perfume of magnolias linger, the song of birds and the whisper of fountains ... *Concierto de Aranjuez*, a synthesis of classical and popular in both form and emotion, lies dreaming beneath the foliage of the park that surrounds the Baroque palace, and only wishes to be as agile as a

butterfly and as precise as a matador's cape pass."

Rodrigo's compositions developed from his blending of Baroque compositions for the vihuela (a lute-like instrument that pre-dates the guitar) with the folk traditions of flamenco music and his own classical training. Before he began producing compositions for guitar the only classical work available to master guitarists, such as Andres Segovia and others, were piano transcriptions of Bach and other classical composers.

Born in Sagunto, Valencia on November 22, 1901, Rodrigo's achievement was all the more remarkable in that he was seriously blinded by diphtheria when he was three years old. Medical treatment and surgery did little to improve his condition and then glaucoma blinded him completely. Rodrigo later commented, very objectively and without regret, that his blindness led him to music.

His parents enrolled him in a school for blind children in Valencia and by the age of eight he was studying solfa, piano and the violin in Braille under some of Spain's best musicians. Rodrigo's professor of harmony and composition was Francisco Antich and he later studied with the musicians Enrique Gomá and Eduardo López Chavarri. Rafael Ibañez, employed by Rodrigo's family as a tutor and later as Rodrigo's companion, secretary and copyist, cultivated the child's interest in literature.

By the 1920s Rodrigo had become a first-class pianist, was familiar with the most important compositions of that time and capable of performing the most difficult work of Ravel, Stravinski and others. His first serious compositions for piano, cello and

violin date back to 1923. *Juglares*, his first orchestral work, premiered in 1924. These early works are characterised by a delicate lyricism, a daring orchestral colourism and a harmonic vocabulary reminiscent of another famous 20th century Spanish composer, Enrique Granados.

In 1927, Rodrigo decided to follow the footsteps of other great Spanish composers, Manuel de Falla, Isaac Albeniz and Joaquin Turina, and travel to Paris. In Paris he studied with Paul Dukas and was soon befriended by de Falla, composer of the ballet *The Three Cornered Hat*. He also met and fell in love with Victoria Kamhi, a young Turkish music student, and married her in 1933. From then, until her death in 1997, Kamhi collaborated in every aspect of Rodrigo's work.

Few who have enjoyed the optimism and poetic beauty of *Aranjuez* realise that it was written under the most difficult conditions. As Kamhi explained in a later biography, the young couple faced tremendous poverty, she was pregnant and at one point Rodrigo fell seriously ill after developing an abscess in his eye.

The concerto earned him almost instant fame in Spain—after its premiere in Madrid he was borne shoulder-high around the old city—and resolved many of the financial difficulties facing the young couple. Rodrigos was offered a post in the Radio Madrid's Department of Music and appointed manager of Arte y Propaganda de la ONCE (National Spanish Organization of the Blind).

Rodrigo occupied teaching posts for many years and, using a special machine to write music in Braille or dictating to assistants, continued composing right into the eighth decade of his life. Rodrigo received several awards during his life, including the prestigious Prince of Asturias prize for the arts in 1996.

Spanish poet Gerardo Diego aptly described Rodrigo as the composer of acoustic landscapes, his music evoking places, monuments and terrain. Some of the many famous orchestral works written by Rodrigo include *Fantasía para un gentilhombre*, *Concierto Andaluz*, *Concierto Madrigal* and many more. Apart from *Aranjuez*, he composed at least 26 pieces for guitar. He also composed ballets, film scores, songs, zarzuelas (Spanish comic operatta), vocal pieces, and many works for piano and orchestra. Following de la Maza, the great interpreters of Rodrigo's guitar compositions were Narciso Yepes and Jose Romero,

who collaborated with him very closely. The most recent guitarist of note to interpret the *Aranjuez* is Paco de Lucia.

Rodrigo's life, which has almost spanned the entire 20th century, was devoted to carrying forward the disparate forms of Spanish music, both popular and classical. The sensational international success of the *Aranjuez* is a testimony to their continuing vitality and their place in this century's musical heritage.



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