THE THREE-CORNERED HAT

by Pedro de Alarcón

The Three-cornered Hat, Suites 1 and 2

MANUEL DE FALLA was born in Cádiz, Spain, on November 23, 1876, and died in Alta Gracia, Córdoba, Argentina, on November 14, 1946. His ballet “El sombrero de tres picos” (“The Three-cornered Hat”) was originally composed as music for a mime-play entitled “El corregidor y la molinera” (“The Corregidor and the Miller’s Wife”), first performed on April 7, 1917, in Madrid, with Joaquín Turina conducting. The music was then revised and given its present title for a production by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the first performance taking place in London’s Alhambra Theatre on July 22, 1919, Ernest Ansermet conducting, with a scenario by G. Martínez Sierra, adapted from a story by Pedro de Alarcón.

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The Three-cornered Hat is a ballet in one act, with music by Manuel de Falla, first performed in London in 1919. The story is set in a Spanish town and tells the tale of the ill-fated attempts by the corregidor—the resident magistrate—of a small Spanish town to seduce the pretty wife of the local miller, with humor and keen observation. Already in the 1890s it was used as a source for, of all things, a German opera. The great German art-song composer Hugo Wolf had devoted years to the composition of Der Corregidor, a unique by-blown of his musical output, and almost forgotten today. Wolf’s interest in Spain, as indicated by his Spanish Songbook, settings of Spanish lyric poetry in German translation, made Alarcón’s story a natural choice for his attempt at comic opera. Though filled with much beautiful music, including some of the “Spanish” songs in orchestral garb, Der Corregidor has proved too weighted with Wagnerian techniques to float as a light comedy, except for rare revivals in Germany. It is very unlikely that Manuel de Falla had ever heard of Wolf’s setting when he undertook to write music for a theatrical version. The main difficulty in putting the story on stage was minimizing the number of sets, which forced the removal of one of the most striking characters of the original story.

As Alarcón told it (claiming that he was retelling an old ballad that supposedly had a basis in fact), the corregidor, the representative of the law, is tempted to break the law by the entrancing beauty of the miller’s wife, a young woman from “the North” who has married an ugly older man, but one who is astute and humorous. The original story involved details and locales that could not be worked into the somewhat simplified ballet version—including the miller’s “revenge,” dressing in the corregidor’s clothes and cheerfully going to visit that magistrate’s attractive wife. That lady makes only a token appearance in the ballet, though in the original story she dominated the denouement.

In turning the story first into a mimed stage piece, then a ballet, the collaborators simplified things by omitting the ending at the corregidor’s residence entirely and restricting the location to the outside of the miller’s house. Of course, Spanish audiences would know all the details of the story in any case, but for others the plot has had its confusing elements. Still, the warmth, color, and Spanish flavor of Falla’s music made the ballet one of his most successful works and the last big international success of Diaghilev’s company. The original production sported a set designed by Pablo Picasso and the brilliant dancing of Leonide Massine as the miller. The individuals in the story are delightfully characterized by Falla’s music, which sometimes quotes fragments of traditional tunes and works them into a symphonic web as the characters become intertwined in their story.

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The Three-cornered Hat follows the sequence of the full ballet; the entire plot is summarized here, for the sake of comprehensibility, but the portions not contained in the suite are set off within brackets.

There is a brief introduction [ featuring a mezzo-soprano ]; composed for the London ballet performance in order to give the audience time to admire Picasso’s drop curtain. As the curtain rises, the miller and his wife go about their business. Each is represented by a fragment of folk song, the wife by a fragment of a jota from Navarre (the region from which she hails) heard as a fragment in the full orchestra and later to be developed as the final dance, the miller
by a tune from Falla’s *Seven Spanish Folk Songs*, presented in the cellos and bassoons in answer to the wife’s tune. Though the couple is devoted to each other, neither can resist a little flirting. [ A dandy comes by ogling the wife. Then comes a procession including the corregidor, his wife, and their retinue. The corregidor is captivated by the miller’s wife, but when he notices his own wife observing him, he departs quickly. The miller meanwhile pretends to flirt with a servant girl carrying a pitcher from the mill. Soon they hear the corregidor returning (bassoon solo), and the miller is certain that the magistrate is returning alone to woo his wife. She, however, hides her husband behind the tree and bids him watch the proceedings. ] As the corregidor arrives, she pretends not to see him and dances a Fandango (Dance of the Miller’s Wife). The magistrate interrupts her and offers himself in a grotesquely polite little tune in the bassoon. The miller’s wife laughs and begins teasing him by pretending to offer grapes from the arbor, but every time he comes close to take one (or to attempt a kiss), she dances out of reach. [ Finally he grabs her and tries to kiss her, but he slips in his eagerness and goes sprawling. The miller rushes up, pretending to have just arrived. He and his wife help the corregidor to his feet and brush him off—a little more vigorously than mere politeness would require!—before letting him go on his way in some disgust and with threatening gestures. Husband and wife laugh and celebrate in merry dance, concluding together the fandango that the wife had started earlier. ] Part Two (Suite No. 2) opens that evening with the Seguidillas, a dance by the neighbors who have gathered to celebrate St. John’s Eve. It is an Andalusian night, filled with the perfume of flowers and the rhythm of guitars. The miller’s wife asks her husband to dance. He performs a vigorous Farruca (composed as a late addition to the score to give Massine a big solo number), a macho dance obviously intended for his wife’s benefit. [ Suddenly “fate knocks at the door”—quoting Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony! It is the bodyguard of the corregidor, come to arrest the miller and carry him off. The neighbors, intimidated, depart, leaving the miller’s wife alone. The off-stage mezzo-soprano sings again, with a warning (“At night the cuckoo sings, warning the married couple to bolt their door tightly. . . .”) The miller’s wife withdraws into the house. The clock strikes nine. Suddenly the corregidor returns. He dismisses his bodyguard and approaches the house with the mincing steps of a ludicrous overaged Don Juan, to music suggesting an old-fashioned courtly dance, almost a minuet. As he attempts to cross the bridge, he falls into the stream, attracting the attention of the miller’s wife as he tries to get out. The attempted seduction is a total failure. After threatening him with her husband’s rifle, the miller’s wife escapes, leaving her dripping suitor to remove his clothes and climb into the miller’s bed. Just at this moment the miller returns, having escaped his captors. Furious at seeing the garb of the corregidor on his doorstep, he picks up his rifle and seems about to use it on his rival when he notices the three-cornered hat and gets a better idea. Dressing up in the corregidor’s clothes, he writes a message on the wall: “Sir Corregidor, I am off to avenge myself; the Corregidora, too, is very handsome.” No sooner has he left than the corregidor peers out to see if he is alone; he is astonished to discover his clothes gone and furious at the message he sees on the wall. In a frenzy he dresses in the miller’s clothes and is about to go off in pursuit when his own guardsmen come and, mistaking him for their escaped prisoner, arrest him. The miller’s wife returns, having failed to locate her husband. She sees him (apparently) struggling with the corregidor’s guards and begins to join in the fray. Spectators begin to gather, attracted by the noise, and finally the miller appears, still in the official uniform of the magistrate. ] Identities are quickly clarified, husband and wife are reconciled, and the poor corregidor, who has already received numerous cuffs from the populace (with whom he is quite unpopular), is seized by the bystanders and tossed in a blanket while everyone joins in a general dance of rejoicing (Jota), a final transmutation of the wife’s theme heard at the beginning of the ballet.

Steven Ledbetter

STEVEN LEDBETTER was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998 and now writes program notes for orchestras and other ensembles throughout the country. THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES—WHICH WERE ALSO THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCES—of music from “The Three-cornered Hat” were of three excerpts (Dance of the Neighbors, Dance of the Miller, and Final Dance; see page 48) led by Pierre Monteux in December 1921 and then in January 1922 in New York. Subsequent BSO performances of excerpts from Falla’s score were given by Serge Koussevitzky, Enrique Fernández Arbós, Désiré Defauw, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Richard Burgin, Ernest Ansermet, Charles Munch, Eleazar de Carvalho, Jesús López-Cobos (the most recent Tanglewood performance of the two suites, on August 7, 1988), and Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos (who has led the BSO in the two suites on two previous occasions: in January/February 1971—the BSO’s first performances of the two suites—on the occasion of his BSO debut [see page 52]; and in November/December 2006, the orchestra’s most recent subscription performances). In addition, the orchestra has played performances of the complete score under Seiji Ozawa (September/October 1976 in Boston, then at Tanglewood in July 1977, with mezzo-soprano Beverly Morgan), Charles Dutoit
(August 1984 at Tanglewood, with mezzo-soprano Janice Taylor), and Gustavo Dudamel (August 2006 at Tanglewood, with mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard).