

The McLennan Steinway Series

Rhapsodie Espagnole: A Musical Journey to Spain

Ping-Ting Lan, piano

James Pitts, piano

Friday, January 17, 2025 | 7:30 PM
Wilbur A. Ball Performing Arts Center

Repertoire

Préludes, Book I

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

La sérénade interrompue

Préludes, Book II

La puerta del Vino

Iberia

Isaac Albeniz (1860–1909)

Triana

Ping-Ting Lan

España, Opus 165

Isaac Albeniz
arr. Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938)

Tango in D

Fantasia Baetica

Manuel de Falla (1876–1946)

James Pitts

- *Intermission* -

Repertoire

Miroirs

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Alborada del gracioso

Ping-Ting Lan

Chamber Fantasy on Bizet's "Carmen"

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)/
Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924)

James Pitts

Rhapsodie Espagnole

Maurice Ravel

- I. Prélude à la nuit
- II. Malagueña
- III. Habanera
- IV. Feria

Ping-Ting Lan and James Pitts

*The use of all cameras and recording devices is strictly prohibited.
Please silence all electronic devices.*

Program Notes

Claude Debussy wrote several great pieces inspired by Spain. The two sets of 12 preludes (1909–1912) each contain one Spanish piece. “La sérénade interrompue” (“The interrupted serenade”), from Preludes, Book 1, opens with a guitar being plucked, with repeated notes highlighting the typical lowered 2nd degree of the Phrygian scale, so prevalent in Spanish music. The middle part of the piece has a collage-like texture, where an unperturbed D major character interrupts, or is interrupted by, the predominant Bb minor serenade, who eventually wins the upper hand.

“La puerta del Vino” (“The Gate of Wine”), from Preludes, Book 2, refers to an actual gate within the incredibly beautiful Alhambra palace in Granada, in Andalusia (southern Spain). This features a powerful ostinato rhythm in rocking 5ths in the bass, with a sultry, gently dissonant and languorous melody in the right hand. We hear some playful guitar chords deployed with Debussy’s signature parallelism, including some played softly in distant keys. The striking melody has long, held notes with rapid figurations which return to the held note, as if in a heat-filled mirage. Manuel de Falla, the great Spanish nationalist composer, wrote that Debussy’s piece was “authentically Spanish in every bar.”

Isaac Albeniz was the first of the great classical triumvirate of Spanish nationalist composers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with the slightly younger Enrique Granados and Manuel de Falla. All three were inspired by the teaching and principles of the musicologist, composer, and teacher, Felipe Pedrell.

Albeniz’ great final masterpiece is “Iberia” (1908), a massive piano cycle of 12 evocations of various locations and dances of Spain. The most famous of these is “Triana”, an incredibly colorful and virtuosic depiction of a vibrant neighborhood in Seville, famous for its Flamenco culture. In Triana, there is a profusion of notes which seem to require 3 or 4 hands, as the pianist is to be playing several textures all over the keyboard at once! The joyful main theme first appears in A major, then is transported to several other keys (F Major, Db Major, etc.) in various registers of the piano before the final climactic statement in F# Major.

Albeniz wrote his piano suite, *España*, Op. 165, in 1890. The 2nd piece in the suite is the beautiful “Tango in D”. This brief and charming piece was transcribed for classical guitar by Miguel Llobet, and is well known to guitarists. The great Polish virtuoso pianist and composer, Leopold Godowsky, arranged Albeniz’ original, simpler version, adding voices, echoes, and decorations between the hands in his exquisite “concert version” from 1921.

Manuel de Falla composed his greatest piano work, *Fantasia Baetica*, in 1919. Baetica is the old Roman (Latin) name for Andalusia, the southern region of Spain. Falla’s huge piece is a modified sonata form, and features powerful, astringent evocations of flamenco music and dance, where the piano is treated like a massive guitar. There is a slower 2nd key area, featuring “cante jondo”, the “deep song” of flamenco, representing a rhapsodic solo singer accompanied by guitar. Falla dedicated the *Fantasia Baetica* to Artur Schnabel, the internationally famous Polish pianist who was a great champion of Spanish music.

Maurice Ravel’s mother was Basque-Spanish, and this heritage had a powerful influence on Ravel. Some of Ravel’s earliest memories were of his mother singing folk songs. His great piano suite of 5 pieces, *Miroirs*

Program Notes

(Mirrors), includes one of the most famous Spanish pieces in the repertoire, “Alborada del gracioso” (“Morning Song of the Jester”). Technically demanding, this fiery piece features rapid repeated notes, swirling passagework, and double-note glissandi, with a middle section representing a solo singer with a mysterious, hypnotic accompaniment. The pulsation and rhythm are full of wonderful vitality.

The monumental Italian pianist and composer, Ferruccio Busoni, created his fantasy on themes from Georges Bizet’s iconic opera, *Carmen* (1875), in 1920. This Lisztian operatic paraphrase distills the brilliance and drama of the characters, Carmen and Don José, with virtuosic settings of several of Bizet’s main themes. The work opens with the joyful market scene from the 4th act, followed by Don José’s “Flower Song” (“La Fleur que tu m’avais jétée”) (“The Flower that You threw at Me”). The fatal motive leads to a dreamlike setting of Carmen’s famous “Habanera” (“L’amour est un oiseau rebelle”) (“Love is a Rebellious Bird”), based on Sebastian Iradier’s “El Arreglito”. The key moves from Db Major to d minor for an unsettling, scintillating variation of the Habanera. The music builds with great intensity through a storm of left hand octaves, leading to the “Arena-music” heard in the Overture. The final page of the fantasy, marked “Andante visionario”, once again quotes the fatal theme, a reference to *Carmen*’s tragic final scene.

Ravel’s *Rapsodie Espagnole* (1907) was originally composed for piano duet, and later orchestrated by the composer. It is in 4 movements.

The opening movement, “Prélude à la nuit” (“Prelude to the Night”) opens with a hypnotic 4-note descending theme, F-E-D-C#, which is repeated obstinately (“ostinato”) almost throughout the movement. This motive appears again in later movements, unifying the piece through cyclicism.

The 2nd movement, “Malagueña”, is a rapid $\frac{3}{4}$ flamenco dance from the southern Spanish province of Málaga. The bold themes are accompanied by dizzy chromatic scales in the higher registers of the keyboard. Near the end of the movement, we hear the insistent 4-note cyclic motive from the 1st movement.

The 3rd movement, “Habanera”, was composed much earlier, in 1895. Ravel included this date in the published score, to head off any accusations that he was plagiarizing Debussy’s “La soirée dans Grenade” (“Evening in Granada”), from 1903. Ravel’s “Habanera” is graceful, light, and colorful, and is based on the popular Tresillo rhythm common to habaneras and tangos.

The 4th movement, “Feria” (“Festival”), opens with tremendous energy, with glittering figuration in the highest register, with colorful, sweeping arpeggios which soon lead to exuberant themes in C Major across the entire range of the keyboard. This subsides, and gives way to a wonderful bluesy middle section, with the new theme presented first by the Primo, then by the Secondo, in some serious 4-hand traffic. The mysterious cyclic 4-note motive appears once again, and ushers in the rapid return to the boisterous festival music of the opening. This builds and builds in intensity over the 4-note ostinato, with a rapid series of chromatic chords that lead to huge C# minor chords, which are then overcome by a final massive blaze of C Major.

Artists



Dr. James Pitts, pianist and educator, began his piano studies with his mother, Dr. Ruth Pitts. He earned his Bachelor of Music degree at Baylor University, and his Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the University of North Texas, where he was a pupil of the eminent artist and Cliburn Gold Medalist, Vladimir Viardo. Dr. Pitts is an active performer, frequently presenting solo and duo recitals with his wife, Dr. Ping-Ting Lan. He has performed many of the pinnacles of piano repertoire, including Beethoven's *Appassionata* and *Hammerklavier* sonatas, Chopin's 4 *Scherzi* and 24 *Preludes*, Brahms's *Handel Variations*, *Op. 24*, and Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. He has also performed several contemporary works by Messiaen, Birtwistle, Carter, Ohana, and others. Dr. Pitts's dissertation was a study of the work

of the Russian composer and pianist, Nikolai Medtner. He has become something of a specialist in the works of Medtner, and has performed 6 of Medtner's sonatas, including the "Night Wind" *Sonata, Op. 25 #2* and the *Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27*, as well as several shorter works, such as his *Tales (Skazki)*. Dr. Pitts has been a soloist with several orchestras, including the Waco Symphony Orchestra (Gershwin *Rhapsody in Blue*, Rachmaninov *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*), the Central Texas Orchestra (Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 4*), and the Orchestra of the Pines (*Rachmaninov Concerto No. 3*). A dedicated teacher, Dr. Pitts has taught applied lessons, class piano, and a two-semester historical survey of piano literature. Many of his undergraduate and graduate piano majors have won competitions and have had professional success as teachers, collaborative pianists, and church musicians. Some of these have gone on to receive their DMA degrees. As a collaborative pianist, Dr. Pitts has worked with hundreds of student instrumentalists and singers, performing in about 40 recitals each year. He has extensive experience working with opera, choirs, and large instrumental ensembles. Dr. Pitts is also in demand as an adjudicator, and has frequently judged for the Music Teachers National Association, the Texas Music Teachers Association, Houston Forum, the Dallas Music Teachers Association, the Waco Music Teachers Association, and the McLennan Community College Piano Competition. Dr. Pitts's teachers include Dr. Ruth Pitts, Mr. Doyce Edwards, Mr. Roger Keyes, and Dr. Vladimir Viardo.

Artists



Dr. Ping-Ting Lan, a native of Taiwan, holds BA, MM and DMA degrees in Piano Performance from the University of North Texas. She has worked for Stephen F. Austin State University as a staff accompanist, adjunct faculty and Music Prep piano teacher and has performed as a soloist, duo pianist and chamber musician in the United States and in Taiwan. Dr. Lan has taught class piano and applied piano to piano majors and minors. Many of her piano students have become music teachers, performers, and church musicians. She has collaborated frequently with singers and instrumentalists in recitals. She frequently performs solo and duo recitals with her husband Dr. James Pitts. Dr. Lan has served as a church organist at Christ Episcopal Church and Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nacogdoches and is now serving in Lake

Shore Baptist Church in Waco.

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