

Symphonie Espagnole
Edouard Lalo 1823-1892

Scored for: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, triangle, snare drum, harp, and strings.

He does not strive for profundity, rather he carefully avoids that which is routine, seeking out new forms, and caring more about musical beauty than about observing the established traditions. --Tchaikovsky

Edouard Lalo was born into a military family in Northern France. His father fought for Napoleon and assumed that young Edouard would pursue the military as a career as well. Although his parents initially encouraged his musical talents, when he began to consider music as a career possibility he received stern opposition from his father. Lalo left home at age 16 to pursue musical studies at the Paris Conservatory. For a time, things went well for him as a student, but gradually the rigid structure of the institution and lack of flexibility in the instructors and their methods forced Lalo to reconsider his career options. He decided not to give in and worked for years in relative obscurity as a violinist and music teacher. In 1855 he started a string quartet to popularize the music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. It was not until the 1870s that Lalo got a break as a composer.

The Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and its aftermath created temporary havoc in France's social conditions; the practice of music had nearly come to a standstill in the country. However, the rapid reconstruction that followed the conclusion of the war gave rise to the creation of the *Société nationale de musique*. The *Société*, in turn, created a concert series to rally the musical arts, which demanded the creation of new works by French composers. Young French composers, including Lalo, were inspired and encouraged to compose large-scale orchestral works for these performances, despite the fact that such works had fallen out of fashion in France many decades earlier.

Lalo's name as a composer became widely known through a series of works he composed for the Spanish violinist Pablo Sarasate. One of the most spectacular violin virtuosos of the late nineteenth century, Sarasate was known for his beautiful tone, perfect intonation, tremendous ego, and his flair on the stage. Many composers dedicated works to him, including Max Bruch, Camille Saint-Saëns, Joseph Joachim, Henri Wieniawski, and Antonín Dvorak. The first work Lalo and Sarasate collaborated on was the *Concerto in F Major*, which was premiered in 1874. Lalo was so taken by Sarasate's abilities that he soon set to work on another, more ambitious work, which he tailored specifically to suit Sarasate. This second work, *Symphonie Espagnole*, Lalo's most famous and enduring composition, was first performed in 1875 with Sarasate as

soloist. Parisian audiences were hungry for the exotic Spanish sounding music and their response to the *Symphonie Espagnole* was one of immediate enthusiasm.

Don't let the title deceive; *Symphonie Espagnole* is not a symphony, nor a traditional concerto. It is more like a five-movement Baroque suite, especially when the incorporation of dance rhythms is considered. Although the five movements are not specifically named, they all correspond to Spanish dances and folk rhythms, while the structure of the movements corresponds to classical symphonic and concerto models. Lalo has the following commentary on the unusual title of the *Symphonie Espagnole*:

Artistically, a title means nothing and the work itself is everything; this is an absolute principle. But *commercially*, a tainted, discredited title is never a good thing. I kept the title *Symphonie Espagnole* contrary to and in spite of everybody, first, because it conveyed my thoughts—that is to say, a violin solo soaring above the rigid *form* of an old symphony—and then because the title was less banal than those that were proposed to me. The cries and criticisms have died or will die down; the title will remain, and in a letter of congratulation Bülow wrote to me that this *happy* title placed the piece beyond all others.

The first movement is a *habanera*, with the three themes of this sonata form in the same rhythm – although not the same mood. The first two themes run together, and although the first is little more than a motive, it serves as the glue that holds the movement together as both refrain, as well as the most developed musical idea. The second movement, a *seguedilla*, is a modified ABA form, the middle section is almost a recitative for the soloist, with dramatic shifts of tempo. The Intermezzo is often omitted in modern performances. This is the case with our performance today.

The fourth movement is a stylized *pavane*, a slow dance supposedly related to the gait of the peacock. The movement's slow tempo and minor key project the sense of a funereal lament. The lighthearted mood of the fifth and final movement breaks the spell. The orchestra begins by setting up an ostinato pattern over which the violin weaves delicate counter melody with elaborate embellishments. The movement contains a *malagueña* in its somewhat slower middle section and concludes with high-spirited bravura.