

Ernesto Halffter: A Spanish Musician

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The Early Years

My father was born in Madrid, in 1905, of German and Spanish descent. My grandfather, jeweller by trade, in the course of an extended stay for business purposes in Spain's capital, met and married the daughter of a Spanish colleague. The couple decided to take up permanent residence in Madrid, and so, the Halffter family came to Spain.

My grand father was a music lover but like his family had not been especially associated with the musical profession, prior to the generation of Ernesto and his brother Rodolfo. At the age of 6, Ernesto showed a proclivity for music, and his mother, a non-professional pianist but able to play the piano well and his uncle Ernesto Escriche, a keen musical enthusiast, were his first music teachers. Later, he received systematic instruction in harmony and piano by Francisco Esbrí, a military-band conductor and winner of the 1915 Rome Prize, and Fernando Ember, respectively, both friends of the family. He and his older brother Rodolfo, from a very young age, used to improvise for an imaginary audience, small operas and zarzuelas libretti and music, and thus my father composed small pieces in which he reproduced, with a graceful air, the melodies of opera, his favorite spectacle.

At the age of 13, my father started to compose music for the piano. On March 27, 1922, Fernando Ember, professor at the Budapest Conservatory, who had fled his native Hungary because of World War One, gave the Madrid premiere of one the most remarkable piano pieces of my father's early years: *Crepúsculos* (Twilights). This recital proved to be a turning point in my father's life.

Adolfo Salazar and Manuel de Falla

In the audience at this recital was Adolfo Salazar, Spain's most influential musicologist at the time, music critic of the Madrid daily *El Sol* and the French journal *La Revue Musicale*. He was greatly impressed by the creativity and intuition of the young Ernesto. His attention was attracted to this music, which followed down the trail blazed by Falla. So, he made haste to arrange a meeting between Ernesto and Falla, which took place in April 1923. My father presented two works: *Crepúsculos* and *Hommages, Petite Suite pour Trio*, which Falla took with him to his home in Granada. A few days later, he returned both pieces with a "bravo" note on one of the pages of *Hommages*.

Although Falla never taught composition on a regular basis, he was impressed by my father's spontaneity and innate creativity and so accepted quite exceptionally to become his teacher. Thus, Ernesto became his best-known and most devoted disciple. In addition than teaching him composition, Falla also launched his conducting career by appointing him to the post of music director of the newly established Orquesta Bética de Cámara in 1924, at the age of 19.

His relationship to Falla was central to his musical development at the beginning of his career as a composer, his constant guidance being a sort of road map to my father, but as Falla told him: “consider my guidance as a means to avail yourself of my personal experience.” Also, Falla introduced him to his own publisher, and in 1926 he signed his first contract with Editions Max Eschig in Paris. He was then 21, and his works began to be published. This was my father’s daily schedule with Falla, in Granada. In the morning, one hour was devoted to the study of counterpoint and musical analysis of selected scores, and for the rest of the day, to continue his work as a composer.

In 1925, he won the Spanish National Prize for *Sinfonietta*, undoubtedly his most emblematic work. Dedicated to Falla and written for orchestra and violin, cello and bass soloists, it was premiered by Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid, with my father conducting, at the Teatro de la Zarzuela in April 1927. Shortly after, Enrique Fernández Arbós, the renowned conductor, premiered *Sinfonietta* in the United States, at a Carnegie Hall concert in February 1928 and at other American concert halls in 1928 and 1929. Only in the thirties was this work heard in European countries outside Spain.

Orquesta Bética de Camara

From 1924 to 1936 and during his term as music Director of the Orquesta Bética, my father toured Spain with Falla at the piano in several concerts and visited London in 1925, to conduct for the first time abroad, at Wigmore Hall. The repertory of the Orquesta was a blend of the old revived as part of the neoclassical movement and new foreign contemporary music. In the thirties and aside from the Orquesta Bética, practically all major Spanish orchestras played under his direction.

Paris: Maurice Ravel and his Contemporaries

At my father’s request, in 1924 Falla wrote an introductory letter to Maurice Ravel asking him to welcome young Ernesto kindly. He studied composition with Ravel for some years and even orchestrated the movement “La valée des cloches” from his piano piece *Miroirs*. From 1925 and for a number of years, he lived in Paris most of the time, with short breaks in Granada and Madrid. Over this period, he became acquainted with the celebrated Les Six and many foreign musicians who were Parisian residents.

The influence of Ravel’s orchestrations, Stravinsky’s first works, the music written by Les Six and, of course, the mastery of Falla, converged in his ballet *Sonatina*, premiered in Paris in 1928 by Antonia Mercé, “La Argentina,” and her dance company. Two dances from this ballet became very popular: *Danza de la gitana* (Dance of the Gypsy) and *Danza de la pastora* (Dance of the shepherdess). Both pieces were originally written for solo piano and as such often played as well as in their versions for different instrumentations.

Generation of 27 and the Group of Eight

In 1927 the most prominent Spanish poets and writers celebrated the tricentenary of the death of the prodigious poet of the Spanish *Siglo de Oro*: Luis de Góngora. Their generation came to be recognized as the Generation of 27. But the term Generation of 27, when applied specifically to music, was adopted by Adolfo Salazar to

refer to the group of composers formed in Madrid in 1930: Ernesto and Rodolfo Halffter, Rosa García Ascot, Salvador Bacarisse, Gustavo Pittaluga, Fernando Remacha, Julián Bautista and Juan José Mantecón.

So, the Grupo de los Ocho (Group of Eight), Spanish counterpart to the French Les Six, was part of the Generation of 27 and consisted of eight composers born between 1890 and 1905, sharing the same aesthetics ideals. These were their common principles:

1. To restore music's status amongst the other arts;
2. To revive musicological investigation, which had its beginnings in Spain in the middle of the nineteenth century;
3. To renew the Spanish musical language and connect it to the mainstream of European thinking.

Many of the performances and exchanges of the Group members took place in Madrid's Residencia de Estudiantes, a meeting ground where practically all composers, Spanish and from abroad, played and discussed music. My father, Lorca, Dalí, and Buñuel became fast friends, and Dalí drew the cover for two of Ernesto's piano pieces: *Marche joyeuse* (Joyful March) and *Serenata, Valse y Marche*.

At the Residencia and with an orchestra formed by soloists from the Philharmonic Orchestra, in June 1931 my father conducted the Spanish premiere of Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*. In 1934, when the Conservatorio Superior de Música in Seville was founded, he accepted the post of director, which he kept until 1936.

The Portuguese Years

At the end of 1935, my father received a one-year grant from the Conde de Cartagena Foundation to continue his work on the opera *La muerte de Carmen*, unfortunately left unfinished. Married since 1928 to the Portuguese pianist Alice Camara Santos, in December 1935, during a Madrid break, Ernesto and his wife had to decide in which country they would spend one year (the period for which the grant was given), because in accordance with the Foundation bylaws, it was mandatory to spend it in a foreign country of the recipient's choice. The couple thought of a homecoming to Paris, where they had been living, but gave up the idea because of the unsettled political situation in central Europe. They finally decided to go to my mother's parents' home in Lisbon, in February 1936. The Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, and my parents remained in Lisbon during this war and also World War Two.

In those difficult years, my father became acquainted with Portuguese folk music and wrote the most important piece of his Portuguese years: *Rapsodia portuguesa* for piano and orchestra, using many folk songs that he arranged. This work was written in memory to Maurice Ravel. In the meantime, I was born, and my father was appointed assistant professor at the Spanish Institute in Lisbon. Therefore, we took up residence in this city, where my father wrote several other works, like his orchestration or solo piano versions of Falla's *Siete canciones populares españolas*; his own *Seis canciones populares portuguesas* for voice and piano (some of these have also been orchestrated); the incidental music for *Dulcinea*, based on Cervante's *Don Quijote*

de la Mancha; and *Llanto por Ricardo Viñes* (Grieving for Ricardo Viñes) for piano solo.

Other than the works produced during my father's nineteen years in Portugal, he supervised and directed a program conducted in Spanish, presented by the Spanish Institute and broadcast by the Emissora Nacional, Portugal's Official Radio Station, to disseminate the music written in Spain, by means of live recitals, recorded music, and lectures. Also, many of the new works by his Spanish contemporaries were given their Portuguese premiere in concerts under his direction.

During this period, his visits to Spain were short and occasional, though he conducted a few concerts and composed some film scores.

***Atlántida* and Italy**

Manuel de Falla, since 1939 in his Argentinian exile, passed away in November 1946, leaving unfinished *Atlántida*, the cantata he had been working on for so many years. In the late 1940s, Falla's family sought advice from my father as to best decision that could be taken regarding this work. On account of his love and admiration for Falla, he felt committed to undertake the polemical project to put in order and complete the cantata, a score so full of problematic fragments.

The completion of *Atlántida* affected his own composition, took him five years to achieve, and was to cause another change in his residence, this time to Milan, at the end of 1956. He lived in this Italian city from this date until the late sixties, when he finally settled down in Madrid. Prior to 1956, the Italian publisher Ricordi had agreed with the Falla's family to publish *Atlántida*, but Falla's manuscripts, drafts, and related material were stored in Milan at Ricordi's head office, and under no condition could they be consulted elsewhere. After a very hard and time consuming process, *Atlántida* was finally premiered, in 1961, in the concert version, in Barcelona. The scenic version was first performed in 1962 at La Scala, in Milan, while the second and final version was premiered in 1976 in Lucerne, for the centenary of Falla's birth.

While in Italy, my father wrote *Concierto para guitarra y orquesta*, a series of religious works inspired by Falla's *Atlántida* such as *Canticum in Memoriam P.P. Johannem XXIII*, *Elegia en Memoria de S.A.S. Príncipe Pierre de Polignac*, *Dominus Pastor Meus*, and a chamber opera in one act entitled *Entr'acte*.

Back to Spain

A new period began for my father when he became a Madrid resident in the 1970s, though he often travelled abroad, especially to France and Italy. Editions Max Eschig remained the main publisher of his music throughout his life, and his stays in Paris to discuss projects and new works continued to be part of his normal activity. As for Italy, several meetings with Ricordi were necessary to go ahead with the second and definitive version of *Atlántida*, which premiered in 1976.

In 1971 he conducted a concert of his works at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Falla's death, and he would return to Argentina in 1976 to participate in several cultural events in Buenos Aires and

Córdoba in connection with Falla and modern Spanish music. Also in 1971, he gave a lecture at the Spanish Institute in New York on the influence of Falla on his generation.

Among the works written shortly after he had made his home in Madrid, a special mention is due to *Fanfare, Pregón e Himno* for the 1974 opening, in Figueras, of the museum of his old time friend Salvador Dalí, and the revision of his *Concierto para guitarra y orquesta*, undertaken with the guitarist Elliot Fisk. The original version had already been premiered in 1969 with Narciso Yepes as soloist. In 1973 he was elected to the Spanish Academy of Fine Arts, and for this occasion, *Pastorales* for flute and piano, was first performed.

The Last Years

My father continued to compose until his death in 1989. In 1985, he wrote *Sonata, Homenaje a Domenico Scarlatti*, and in 1987, *Nocturno otoñal* for piano, a heartfelt homage to Arthur Rubinstein, whom he admired so much and who played some of his early piano pieces. His last work, in 1988, was *Homenajes*, a series of three homages to Federico Mompou, Joaquín Turina, and his recently deceased brother, Rodolfo.

In 1983, he received, for the second time, the Spanish National Music Prize. In this same year, he taught a summer course in Cádiz on Falla's music, in particular the completion of *Atlántida*. So, his final years were full of musical events and, as he used to say: "At my age I am still a music student with the same enthusiasm of my early years."

Posthumous Events

In 1997, the Archivo Manuel de Falla in Granada and the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid jointly organized an exhibition on my father's life and work. This was a large exhibition presenting several manuscripts, letters, photographs, and memorabilia. This exhibit was presented the following year in New York, at Lincoln Center, as a monographic homage, the first of its kind entirely dedicated to a solo Spanish composer. In 1999, the Teatro Colón included this travelling exhibition in the season's musical events.

In 2005, the centenary of my father's birth, a bio-bibliographical exhibition and a recital of his works, hosted by the Cervantes Institute in New York, completed the celebration of this event, already marked by an all-Halfster concert performed in December 2004 at Merkin Concert Hall in New York.

Also in 2005, the Royal College of Music in London participated in the centenary, and his music was the subject matter of two lectures and a piano recital. Spain celebrated the centenary with several concerts of his works in the 2005 Festival de Música Española in León; works for voice and piano and chamber music at the Juan March Foundation in Madrid; concerts and recitals at the Residencia de Estudiantes; and performances of his works by thirteen different Spanish orchestras.

Recordings

A selective recording list should include *Sinfonietta*, conducted by Ataulfo Argenta, Enrique García Asensio, Adrian Leaper, Richard Knapp, Muhai Tang; *Sonatina* (orchestral version), conducted by Adrian Leaper, and the piano-solo version by Mirian Conti, Guillermo González; *Rapsodia portuguesa* by Marguerite Long and Charles Munch (first version) and Adrian Leaper and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Gran Canaria and Victor Pablo Pérez and the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife (second and definitive version); *Complete Music for Piano Solo* by Adam Kent; *Piano Music* by Guillermo González; and *Integral de Canto y Piano* by Elena Gragera y Antón Cardó.

Other than these modern references, musicologists would be interested in the old Orquesta Bética's recordings remastered by the label Almagora and those related to Falla's works by Spanish and foreign orchestras conducted by my father.

The Archive

The Archivo Ernesto Halffter contains:

- Concert playbills
- Copies of his published scores
- Correspondence
- Drafts
- Files of his film scores
- Files of Orquesta Bética de Cámara
- LP's and CDs
- Manuscripts
- Monographs and essays on his life and work
- Personal library
- Photographs
- Posters of his concerts
- Press clippings
- Press reviews

At present this is a private archive. For further information, visit www.ernestohalffter.com.