

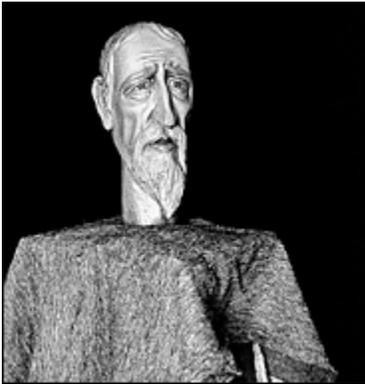
The New York Times

Arts

Don Quixote Adrift in Unreality Squared

By MICHAEL BECKERMAN

Published: February 22, 2004



A puppet show is taking place in a small marionette theater. It depicts the rescue of Melisendra, Charlemagne's daughter, from the Moors of Saragossa by her brave husband, Don Gayferos. Standing before the stage is a narrator, a young boy describing the action in a singsong soprano voice. As the puppet heroes flee, they are pursued by Moors.

Suddenly everything is confused. A member of the audience mistakes the show for reality, draws his sword and begins dismembering the marionettes, almost beheading the puppeteer in the process.

But wait. The audience member is himself a puppet — of Don Quixote — and so are the boy and the puppeteer. It is a puppet show squared, two mirrors held up to each other.

This spectacle within a spectacle, a half-hour theater piece by Manuel de Falla, "El Retablo de Maese Pedro" ("Master Peter's Puppet Show"), is the centerpiece of "Celebrating Don Quixote," a concert of Spanish music on Saturday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Ángel Gil-Ordóñez conducts the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra in a program that also includes Falla's Harpsichord Concerto (1926), with Pedro Carboné as soloist; Óscar Esplá's "Don Quixote's Vigil of Arms" (1924); and Roberto Gerhard's Dances From "Don Quixote" (1958).

"El Retablo de Maese Pedro" (1922), with a libretto adapted from Cervantes, is a fine introduction to Falla's later style. He made his reputation as a purveyor of flamenco-tinged music, flavored by the tunes and rhythms of Andalusia, in works like "La Vida Breve," "Nights in the Gardens of Spain" and "El Amor Brujo," with its famous "Ritual

Fire Dance." Like so many nationalist figures, Falla seemed to reject aspects of his earlier style in favor of a more distanced, even ascetic, approach, a meticulous synthesis of Spanish historical styles, Castilian folk idioms and international Neo-Classicism.

"`The Retablo' was seen in Spain to promote universalist ideals," the Falla scholar Carol Hess says, "while still preserving Spanish identity."

Falla's word "retablo," or "tableau," describes his piece perfectly. "Opera" would be overstating it. With its mixture of declamation, spoken dialogue, song and story, "Master Peter" has more in common with a medieval passion play or Stravinsky's "Soldier's Tale" than it does with Verdi or Wagner. It is eclectic both in its musical materials and in its theatrical forms, which range from sung drama to pantomime.

The boy's declamation (actually more like yelling) has several models, including early chant and street cries. There are historicist sections echoing music of the late Renaissance, as when Charlemagne enters, rudely urging Don Gayferos to rescue Melisendra. And there are wonderfully cinematic moments with their own fanfares, even a kind of proto-western soundtrack to accompany Gayferos's ride through the Pyrenees. When Quixote sings of his Dulcinea, the passages have the asymmetry of Mussorgsky and the vivid lyricism of Puccini. In all, it is a score of remarkable subtlety, variety and grace.

AN 1877 sheet music edition of Gounod's "Funeral March of a Marionette" depicts a shattered, blindfolded puppet with a drawn sword, flying above the funeral itself, a kind of eerie preview of the demise of that most beloved musical puppet, Petrouchka. For centuries, puppeteers have tried to create illusions of reality with cleverly made inanimate objects and a well-developed repertory of movements.

Twentieth-century puppet stories in particular tended to blend the world of the real and the unreal, the puppet and the human. This is true not only in "Petrouchka" but also in the most famous marionette tale, "Pinocchio," whose hero hovers throughout between boy and puppet.

Falla's puppets take us one better, imitating the audience as well. One implication is that we must be puppets, too, with puppet masters behind us, invisible.

As a boy, Falla created an astonishing imaginary city named Colón, after Christopher Columbus, with its own newspapers, elections, revolution and, of course, taxes. He also had a small theater, for which he wrote a production of scenes from "Don Quixote." Falla's return to the puppet medium years later must have owed something to the proximity of his friend Federico García Lorca, also a great lover of puppets, as well as to the Princesse de Polignac, who commissioned the work (along with Stravinsky's "Renard" and Satie's "Socrate") for her private marionette theater.

Falla suffered from an obsessive disorder. In a behavioral parallel to the musical fastidiousness of his later period, he brushed his teeth and washed repeatedly, often for

hours a day. His resort to puppetry must have afforded an enormous sense of escape: escape not only to a world of childhood and fantastic subjects but also to a realm where Falla towered, godlike, over the inhabitants and pulled their strings — in short, a world like his Colón, where he was in complete control. And it is noteworthy that this world is insulated from the rest of us by a second layer of puppets.

At the conclusion of the puppet show, as recounted by Cervantes, Quixote explains why he destroyed the marionette theater. "I tell you really and truly, you gentlemen who can hear me," he says in Edith Grossman's new translation. "It seemed to me that everything that happened here was actually happening. . . . For that reason I was overcome by rage, and to fulfill the obligations of the knight errantry I profess I wanted to give my help and favor to those who were fleeing."

He is also quick to apologize to the puppeteer, saying: "Although my error was not the result of malice, I wish to sentence myself to pay the costs: let Master Pedro decide what he wants for the damaged puppets, for I offer to pay him immediately in good standard Castilian coin."

So Quixote understands what he has done, and harmony is restored, at least temporarily.

But Falla's version offers no such resolution. Instead, it concludes with Quixote's half-mad paean to knight errantry; reality and illusion remain confused till the end.

Puppets are, at least in some sense, proxies for all of us. If, as it appears, the blurring of illusion and reality teased and tormented Falla throughout his life, that fact lends only greater power to "Master Peter's Puppet Show," one of the brilliant dramatic works of the early 20th century.

Michael Beckerman, a music historian and collector of marionettes, teaches at New York University.