

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Miloš Plays *Concierto de Aranjuez*

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## **Rodion Shchedrin (1932- )**

### ***Carmen Suite***

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

It would be safe to say that George Bizet's *Carmen* is the world's most popular opera. Puccini's *La Boheme* and Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* are crowd favorites, but *Carmen* – a veritable hit list of memorable tunes – endears the veteran opera lover as much as those new to the art form.

The vibrancy of Bizet's score, and the tale of the strong-willed, ill-fated gypsy woman, resonated from the opera's premiere in 1875, an ideal synthesis of score, libretto, and psychological drama. So when the Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin began crafting music for a one-act ballet for the Cuban choreographer Alberto Alonso, he envisioned an homage to Bizet through a fresh color palette. It would become the prolific composer's most popular work.

Completed in 1967, the *Carmen Suite* is scored for a large battery of percussion and strings (no woodwinds or brass), which gives the music an incisive feel. It was written specifically for Shchedrin's wife, Maya Plisetskaya, a famous dancer at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Shchedrin borrows fragments from *Carmen* as well as two other Bizet works, *L'Arlésienne* and the *Fair Maid of Perth*.

A suite of 13 numbers, the music is “not simply a slavish obeisance to the genius of Bizet,” Shchedrin has said, “but rather an attempt at a creative meeting of two minds.” He was careful to respect Bizet's masterpiece by avoiding a pastiche, while allowing the opera's brightest tunes to shine through. Shchedrin's originality creates a *Carmen* in new clothes, especially in such well-known pieces as the *Habanera* and *Toreador Song*.

Not everyone found the suite as entertaining as the composer intended. Soviet censors, always looking to berate non-conforming Russian musicians, attacked Shchedrin for “distortions” that were “disrespectful” of a classic. None other than Dmitri Shostakovich, a friend of the composer and a man familiar with cultural oppression, defended the work and the censors relented. It has since become part of the orchestral repertoire worldwide.

Those “distortions” are precisely what make this iconoclastic suite so entertaining: fresh turns of phrase, explosive percussive effects and ringing chimes, abrupt hesitations, and tongue-in-cheek starts and stops. Just when listeners think they know where a melody is heading, it veers in a new direction, or appears out of sequence from the original opera.

“It's a very witty play of all the highlights of the opera, and with extended percussion,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “It's vibrant music, and full of quirky humor.”

### **Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805)**

#### ***Minuet in A, G. 275***

Duration: ca. 4 minutes

Music history is full of one-hit wonders, which in the case of Luigi Boccherini is a bit of a snub. He composed a daunting number of works – more than 500 – including quartets, quintets, concertos, sinfonias and sacred pieces, and despite most being polite curiosities, some are models of the light and airy galant style of the period. He was a tireless promoter of concerts, and helped develop the string quartet and quintet as major musical genres.

For all this musical bounty and sweat equity, Boccherini today is best known for a single work, the *Minuet*, a cloying little number heard in everything from solo guitar to full orchestra to television commercials and movies. This short piece in the bright key of A is light and effervescent, its sweet cantabile violin tune in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time buoyed by an insistent rhythm until it fades away on tiptoes.

The *Minuet* comes from his *String Quintet in E Major, Op. 11*, written in 1771, and, along with much of Boccherini's music, lay forgotten for a century. When publishers began introducing his work to a new generation of performers and listeners, they ushered in a wave of interest in the composer and his genial approach to creating music.

### **Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999)**

#### ***Concierto de Aranjuez for Guitar and Orchestra***

Duration: ca. 21 minutes

It took a blind Spanish composer, under the shadow of world war and the death of his unborn daughter, to write one of music's most aching melodies and help elevate the guitar to the status of a concert instrument.

Once a parlor favorite, the guitar took its rightful place on stage with the violin, cello and piano in 1940, when Joaquin Rodrigo introduced his *Concierto de Aranjuez*, now among the world's most-performed concertos. Although the guitar had been around for two centuries, its repertoire was mostly solo and chamber works. *Aranjuez* proved new possibilities for guitar and orchestra – a precarious marriage of sound – and prompted composers to write fresh pieces for this intimate, contrapuntal instrument.

Musically, *Aranjuez* is not innovative. The composer framed its conservative, neo-classical structure in the fast-slow-fast scaffolding of a Vivaldi violin concerto, and emphasized elegance over profundity.

But Rodrigo – who lost his eyesight at age 3 – is wholly original in his storyline, coloring, and in the exploration of the fingerboard. Each movement is crafted with an expressiveness that to sound natural requires a daunting technical command from the soloist. The famous adagio is, without question, music that haunts the ears.

Much has been written about the inspiration behind the piece, such as the beauty of the gardens of the Aranjuez region of Spain, a musical love letter from a happy marriage, and the pain Rodrigo and his wife, Victoria, endured after the stillborn death of their daughter in 1938.

“It's a cathartic way to deal with the loss of a child,” TFO Music Director Michael Francis explains as one possible motivation for the adagio. “People can really feel this music and the way he comes to terms with his loss. And his connection to the past, musically, is so eloquent and beautiful.”

The first movement in D major – which actually was the last section to be written – embraces its marking of *allegro con spirito* through flamenco-like chords called rasqueados, supported by a rhythmically agile orchestra and resilient string section.

The lovely adagio in B minor follows, one of the most beautiful nocturnes in the entire guitar literature. An English horn introduces the mournful three-note motif, handing it off to the soloist, who expounds on the theme using every fret and square inch of the fingerboard.

The music demands a balance between flesh and nail: legato fingerings as well as crisp scale passages, fiery chords and trills – all of which lead to an energized crescendo with full orchestra before the guitar quietly slips away. Many soloists end this movement with several high-pitched harmonics on the 12th fret.

The finale – a baroque-style dance played entirely in staccato – returns to the sunny key that opened the work, and Rodrigo exploits the guitar's range and counterpoint in what essentially is a virtuoso cadenza from start to finish.

Miloš Karadaglić, who performs the concerto with TFO, told Bachtrack, an online classical music magazine based in London, that *Aranjuez* is music for the senses.

“Whenever I work with orchestras and conductors, the first thing I say is that you have to just think of a really hot summer and the sound of the crickets and the sound of the birds, in every note that you have,” he said. “In the texture of the writing, it brings out such an amazing feeling that you can smell it.”

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***