

"We dedicate this article in memoriam to Pierre Huybregts (1934-2003), talented pianist who introduced me to the world of Mompou, and with whom I presented many of his songs."--Joseph Rawlins

Catalonian composer Federico Mompou (1893-1987) was one of the most introverted and enigmatic Spanish composers of the 20th century. His fame and recognition rest in the singular beauty he poured into his voice and piano compositions. Not even his excessive humbleness nor lack of interest in promoting his own works could prevent the musical world from recognizing his unique artistic talents? During his lifetime he received many prestigious honors, among which were the titles Chevalier des Arts et Lettres and Officier de l'Academie. He also was a member of the Societe Internationale de Musique Contemporaine. Due to the sensual and spiritual quality of his music, his works still are much enjoyed and cultivated today. Historian Wilfred Mellers stated:

Even Mompou's littleness, his timidity are part of his integrity. He wouldn't want one to claim much for him; and in truth it is not much if I say that for me his songs mean more than all the rest of modern Spanish music rolled together with the singular--and towering--exception of Albeniz's Iberia. (2)

HISTORY

When Federico Mompou was about 9-years-old, he heard composer Gabriel Faure in concert. Mompou was quite impressed, and this early experience had an initial and lasting effect upon his desire to be a pianist and composer. Soon after this concert, he began musical studies with Pedro Serra at the Liceu Barcelones and learned to play the piano. Seven years later, and thanks to a letter of recommendation from the famous pianist-composer Enrique Granados, Mompou left for Paris to continue his musical studies. Due to his humble and unpretentious personality, he never utilized the letter of introduction. But his playing must have impressed his audience, since he became a private pupil of pedagogue Isidor Philipp and pianist Fernando Motte-Lacroix. Mompou also undertook the study of harmony and composition with Marcel Samuel Rousseau, better known as a composer of operas and ballets. The young pianist found a place in the city of lights and established himself there from 1911 until 1941. (3) When the Paris sojourn came to an end in 1941, he returned home to Barcelona, where he settled for the rest of his life.

PIANIST AND COMPOSER

In his early years of studies, Mompou never dreamed he would make a name for himself as a composer. But while still working with his teachers in France, the young Catalonian became a well-known pianist among his colleagues, playing in private musical circles and for soirees. Like so many Spaniards before him, such as Manuel de Falla, Ricardo Vines, Pablo Casals, Joan Miro, Pablo Picasso, Apelles Fenosa, Celso Lagar, Enrique Granados, Manuel Turina and Issac Albeniz, Mompou established himself in "that sonorous garden of France, where all genus of plants and flowers were cultivated ... and due to its artistic and intellectual acme, attracted so many talented young artists." (4)

Mompou made his debut as a composer due to the sponsorship and persistence of his friend Agustin Quintas, who had earlier heard and admired Mompou's piano compositions. Through the encouragement of Quintas, he published his first piece *Cants magics* (Magic Chants) with the national Spanish music publisher Union Musical Espanola in 1920. (5) Pianist Pierre Huybregts corroborates musicologist Irving Schwerke's statement: "Up until this time (1920), Mompou was known solely as a pianist; with *Cants magics* [Magic Chants] he entered the ranks of composers." (6) This early composition contained one of Mompou's musical trademarks--the musical device of bell-like sonorities. This is both curious and significant, because Mompou's grandfather was a bell-maker, and the influence and use of bell-like chords pervades his musical style. Numerous examples can be cited in his songs and piano pieces.

The publication of *Cants magics* generated enthusiasm among music critics, due to the music's originality, incomparable style and captivating effect. The composition is divided into five sections or movements. The first begins with very strong, loud chords that slowly diminish and introduce a beautiful chorale. An obscure and solemn theme opens the second section, but is followed by an agitated section that suddenly yields to the initial theme in a double time. Both the third and fourth sections evoke a funeral procession, with melodies and mysterious arpeggios. The last movement envelopes us in the sonorous world of Mompou, filled with resonances and exquisite harmonies. (7)

The apparent simplicity in Mompou's music is also a reflection of his personal habits and character; careful, patient, prudent and introverted. Author Wilfrid Mellers perceives in the composer a highly personal flavor and suggests that the folk tune-like melodies and overall unpretentiousness of his style reveal the artist's nostalgia for a child-like simplicity. Mompou's overall musical style is not complex; the notes on the page are sparse. As Schwerke points out: "He knows how to make a reclamation with what at first sight must seem an insignificant number of notes." (8) Just as the use of a minimum number of notes is an important philosophical concept for composer Anton von Webern, so the same concept can be applied for an understanding of our composer. Whether it is an atmospheric piano piece, or a union of poetry with music in a song, Mompou creates the desired mood in a unique manner; Schwerke remarks: "[He] makes an immediate conquest of the heart and there is no exegetical system or method of chemical analysis nice enough to discover his secret." (9) Mompou writes "music in miniature," in which every detail is stated precisely, but effectively, just as a miniature painting is detailed and exact. The composer writes just what needs to be communicated without any superfluous redundancy.

During an interview, Mompou was asked about his method of composition, and he replied:

"Ah, the inspiration. That's the secret. I don't know from where it comes, but that's one of the secrets of art. It's a form of medium in the spiritual world. I receive the messages, but I don't know where they come from ... they come at unexpected moments. You must learn to wait. It demands a great patience. You cannot sit down at the table and start to compose. You have to hear it. I never start to compose from the title out. Just the contrary. I start to imagine a work and from there out I compose. First the music, then the title at the end.... Should I be deaf I could not compose because I compose from the piano. I have to hear what I am doing. Sometimes I compose when I'm very distracted.

My 'Prelude for the Left Hand,' for example. I was just talking with a friend and improvising with my left hand on the piano, and that's how I discovered the idea to compose for the left hand, and I found the theme on the spot." (10)

INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCE

Federico Mompou composed slowly, waiting for just the right inspiration, and it is his ability to transform the muse of the moment to the music score that possibly makes his music so significant and unique. The beautiful melody from "Girls in the Garden" ("Jeunes filles au Jardin") from *Scenes d'enfants* was conceived while watching young children playing in a park. Schwerke says:

"Here is nude music, lovely and chaste. Its innocence is ingenious. It is free of disguise and dissimulation.... Of the few modern composers who may be called poets of the piano, Federico Mompou ... he treats [the piano] as an intimate, singing voice, whose function is to communicate the subtleties of emotion, not as an enemy to be overcome and subdued by muscular onslaught and dizzying pyrotechnical drives. He never makes noise, always makes music." (11)

Throughout the years, the reception of Mompou's works by the critics has been at times divided and contradictory; all recognize his unquestionable musical personality, but at times attributed some elements of his style to the influence of other contemporary French composers.

One of the first reviews in Paris by Emile Vuillermoz stated:

"Here's a musician of quality. One of those rare artists that transforms everything he touches, and pours out sortileges and magic evocations from the most simple of musical elements; he is one of those beings that have been created to extract the harmonic soul of all sounds disseminated in nature ..." (12)

The Catalan composer's position in the history of Iberian music is discussed by Roger Prevel:

"It seems to us that Mompou's work is honorably situated within the great tradition of Spanish music, along with composers Cabezon, Victoria and Guerrero, followed by Pedrell, Albeniz, Granados, Falla and Turina.... We could also add that Mompou is a very independent Catalan composer, slightly alongside the margin of Les Six (13) and contemporary to the members of this group." (14)

In 1952, musicologist Meller added:

"Federico Mompou is almost the only living composer known to me who reveals what I have called the reality of Spain as opposed to the picture-post-card version; and I think it is not an accident that he should be a Catalan.... So far as I know, he has written only short piano pieces and songs.... The music he has written in the 1940s differs in no essential way from the music he wrote during the first World War; nor does it seem possible that so limited a convention could be capable of development. One cannot even say that his later works are more expert than his early ones, although one might maintain that his later works include his best music in so far as the songs appear to be of a later date than most of his piano pieces." (15)

Mompou has a strong melodic sense that captivates the listener. Many of his melodies reflect the influence of the Catalan folk tunes; his melodic line is usually comprised of short phrases of two or four bars. In his *Combat del somni* (three songs written in 1941, 1946

and 1948), his melodic gift comes to the fore. "Damunt de tu, homes les flors, "the first of the set, presents a flowing vocal line and provocative harmonies in the piano interlude. (16) In this first song of the cycle; Mompou uses the piano with intervallic variation between the stanzas, always with slightly altered melodic and harmonic implications. Regarding these three songs, Meller says:

"In the direct nature of their melodic appeal and also in the discreet richness of the piano parts they recall some of the later songs of Poulenc, another composer who has created a genuinely popular style and has written fine songs in the tradition of the cafe concert and the ballade. Yet Poulenc is buoyant and sentimental whereas Mompou is melancholy." (17)

Mompou's harmonies suggest impressionist influences of Debussy, thus Huybregts states: "At times Mompou reminds one of Debussy, but of a Debussy whose impressionistic vagueness has been carried to even more abstract harmonies, the essence of Mompou's musical vision." (18) When asked if he had been called the "Spanish Debussy," Mompou replied:

"Yes. But still I never composed like Debussy. Debussy created his own world delicate work, a lot of pastel colors. I did the same. Debussy was attracted by ambiance. Debussy composed for two persons, not three. I compose only for one. I don't want to compose for great concert halls or for the virtuosity. It's just theme music, like the pastel colors of impressionists. They are just there for a small public. It's not so brilliant as other romantics." (19)

However, Mellers believes that Mompou's naive melodies suggest the influence of Satie. The earlier reference to the songs of Poulenc seems to tie in nicely, especially in light of the following citations. In the first place, Poulenc greatly admired Debussy's music, and the much-publicized reaction of Poulenc and Les Six against the music of Debussy is overstated. Poulenc says:

"Despite an attack of anti-Debussyism out of self defense at the time when I came to know Satie, in 1917, Debussy has always remained my favourite composer after Mozart. I could not do without his music. It is my oxygen. Moreover the reaction of Les Six was directed against the imitators of Debussy, not against Debussy himself. It is always necessary to repudiate, for a time, at the age of twenty, those whom you have idolized, for fear of being overgrown with ivy." (20)

Poulenc says of his own style, "It was without doubt Debussy who awakened me to music, but it was Stravinsky who later served as my guide. On the harmonic plane I owe much to Ravel, enormously also to Satie...." (21)

It is not surprising, then, to find in Mompou's music a triangular amalgamation of influences from the styles of Debussy, Satie and Poulenc--composers who, at first glance, might seem highly incompatible. Yet, in the music of Mompou there emerges a freshness and uniqueness that incorporates elements from these composers and blends such characteristics with those from Mompou's Spanish roots to produce works that are highly individual, personal and charming. The harmonic boldness found in Mompou's songs, on the whole, is more complex and dissonant than in his piano pieces. Huybregts states:

".... With an infallible instinct can he (Mompou) obtain the greatest mass of sound with the most economical means. This happens as a result of a stretching of the hand and the spacing of the parts as well as by using the resonance of the harmonizations. Mompou's

harmonies are never absolutely consonant nor ever absolutely dissonant. All it needs is an almost-nothing, a halftone, an aberrant note and the almost perfect chord stays 'imperfect,' ... Mompou loves the added sixth, the dissonant chords above which vibrates the pedal of the 'tonique' or "dominante," affirming the permanence of the basic sound." (22)

An important metamorphosis is Mompou's recognition of the performer's prerogative in the interpretation of Mompou's own compositions. Huybregts explains:

"In his first writings Mompou's sheet music abounds with indications as to how to interpret his music. This means that Mompou attempted to force the performer to stick to the composer's views on interpretation. This of course also meant severe restrictions on the freedom of the performing artist. Realizing this, Mompou stopped giving indications and wrote only the notes, except in certain cases, such as on one of his best pages: 'Sing with a little more coarseness.' Finally, realizing that such suggestions can be the source of more misunderstandings than anything else, Mompou relies on the performer's use of the rubato; the magic of the moment. The rubato (23) is illustrated by Liszt's famous evocation of a tree with the immobile trunk and the branches moving with the wind.... Really though, this illustration is rather pale for Mompou's purposes. The rubato secret, according to Mompou, no doubt is to play this music with a great exaggeration of the contours, by dividing the attack on either hand, by accelerating here and by slowing down later on--all this within a very personal vision of the essence, the design of the line so often interrupted but always reflecting the same understanding of the musical discourse." (24)

In addition to the previously mentioned cycle, *Combat del somni* (*Combat du reve*), a number of Mompou's songs deserve special mention. *Deux melodies* ("Pastorale" and "It Rains Above the River"), based on poems by Juan Ramon Jimenez, are delightful. The first set of *Comptines* (I, II, and III), published in 1931, "are slight nursery songs comparable with some of Poulenc's early music, though again with an undercurrent of melancholy..." (25) The second volume of *Comptines* (IV, V, and VI), published in 1943, makes use of French, Castilian Spanish, and Catalan texts with charming musical adaptations. The *Quatre melodies*, written between 1926 and 1928 and published in 1931, are all lovely; this volume consists of "Rosa del cami" ("Rose du chemin"), "Cortina de fullatge" ("Rideau de feuillage"), "Incertitud" ("Incertitude") and "Neu" ("Neige"), with Mompou's own Catalan text translated from the original Mathilde Poems. Mellers believes "Neu" to be Mompou's most poignant piece. He says:

"'Neu' ... is ... unforgettable in its simplicity of utterance.... This song is not an exercise in folksy style; it is something much more remarkable, an art song that has acquired something of folk art's direct simplicity. Or perhaps, one may say that it is a modern urban folk-song that springs from a deeply rooted malaise. Its loneliness is the reflection of a predicament of our time; it is also as old as Spain." (26)

Among the pieces for piano solo, more than 30 compositions, there are four important piano cycles entitled *Musica callada* (*Quiet Music*). (27) These pieces were inspired by the mystic Spanish writer San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591); in one of his verses Mompou found the title for the composition.

"The tranquil night flanking the early Aurora, the quiet music, the sonorous solitude, the feast that recreates and enamors." (28)

According to Clara Janes, these verses "expressed and also defined Mompou the man, the intimate Mompou, the last Mompou, the Mompou that already existed in the seed since his birth, and that only through the continuous passing of the years became evident." (29)

His collection 15 Songs and Dances, published between 1918 and 1972, was mostly written for piano solo, with the exception of the 13th, written for guitar and 15th, written for organ. In these pieces we rediscover Mompou's originality, his musical instinct and inspiration. According to Mompou, the idea when writing these coupled song-dance set, was to evoke the lyricism in the first, in contrast to the rhythmic pulsation of the second. Many reflect the folklore the composer always loved. They are truly rich and colorful; some are lullabies, other evoke the country fiestas, the religiosity, the ceremony and the nostalgia of his Catalan heritage. Number 6 is filled with virtuoso piano passages, where one can perceive some Argentinean, Cuban and Brazilian influences. (30) In numbers 5, 6 and 10 he utilized melodies extracted from the work *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria* by King Alfonso X the Wise.

In his six piano miniatures entitled *Charmes*, composed between 1920-1921 and published by Max Eschig, we find the following magicians' spell-like titles, such as 'encantamientos' para dormir el sufrimiento, para penetrar las animas, para inspirar amor, para la recuperacion ..., para evocar imagenes del pasado, and the last para conjurar la felicidad. (31) These magic spells are directly borrowed from Mompou's aesthetic and his belief in the magical powers of music.

The other group of nine small pieces *Impresiones Intimas* [Intimate Impressions], composed between 1911 and 1914, also were published in 1920, the same year as his first published work *Cants magics*. Even though Mompou stated that they were influenced by the music of Gabriel Faure, in them we can discern characteristics of the music of Debussy or Ravel (32)--even in his descriptive titles: "Sad Bird," "The Boat," "The Cradle," "The Secret" and "Gypsy."

Among his two sets of piano variations, the most ambitious *Variations on a Theme by Chopin* (1938-57) are based in the *Prelude in A major, Op. 28*. The post-impressionistic group *Suburbis* [Suburbs] (1916-17) is a music-picture or homage to the city of Barcelona; its people, streets, shops and unique personality. The six pieces *Fiestas Lejanas* [Faraway Fiestas] (1920) were published by Salabert and they are closer to the harmonies of Debussy, filled with contrasting but delicate sonorities. Composer Xavier Montsalvatge said about the *Preludes* (1927-1944): "they should be considered as one of his best musical creations." (33) While the three pieces entitled *Pesebres* or *Mangers* (1914-17) reflect the religious devotion of the composer, his *Childhood Scenes* (1915-18) illustrate the candid imagination of the poet of the piano. Both sets are influenced by the idea of Mompou's primitivism and by his studies concerning the sentiments in music. At an early age, Mompou was captivated by the affective dimension and the aesthetic aspect that he perceived in sounds and in music. In his *Estudio del Sentimiento* or *Studies of Sentiment*, a very personal notebook or diary, he noted ideas that eventually led him to his personal form of musical expression and to his musical notation system. Among these pages we can discover the following definition: "To express is to displace every single sensible musical note to its exact metronomic place; a floating movement against the strict beat following our own sensibilities." (34)

Federico Mompou is undoubtedly one of the great composers of Spain and the 20th century. His contribution to vocal and piano music literature is significant and, in part, due to its quality and singularity, traits that separate him from the rest of composers of this

period. His exquisite melodies, simple and melancholic, reflect the longing and possibly the searching the depths of his own soul. In tribute to the composer Montsalvatge commented:

"But Federic escapes from any precise definition, in many respects his personality totally separates him from other great composers [Albeniz and Granados].... The manner he faced compositional problems would not vary with the passing of the years, he maintained an immutable attitude sometimes passive, at other times agitated, waiting for a miracle in which the notes and chords just emerged spontaneously from his piano, and that he could just trace with his fine sharpened pencil, and capture those sounds that sympathized with his sensitivity and could built the fine architecture of his musical scores. For this reason, the music of Mompou has not lost the early clarity of expression, the simplicity of his language, and his always youthful musical accents and resonances." (35)

Mompou was a pacific rebel who repudiated all rule and artistic canon that would oppose his artistic temperament or would contradict his human ideals. His idiosyncrasy emanates from Mompou the man, who declared:

"I composed only for myself. I hate bravura music, the big things. I am a simple person.... I compose on the moment, when I feel the inspiration. I don't think of being listened to by thousands of people or just one person. I just compose because I have the inspiration and the need to compose." (36)

Quite simply put, Mompou is Mompou--there is no other music quite like his; whether for voice or piano, musicians are urged to investigate this marvelous wealth of material. In them, they will discover wonderful musical creations, sure to delight both the performer and listener. Reiterating Scherke's observation, Mompou "makes an immediate conquest of the heart, enough to discover his secret. His secret is called 'inspiration.'"

NOTES

(1.) Federico Mompou was born in Barcelona April 16, 1893 and died June 30, 1987. All his acquaintances and close friends shared a common observation about his persona; for example, in an interview before a concert in New York City in 1978, pianist Alicia de Larrocha commented that Mompou never promoted himself nor his music (New York Times, 24 March 1978, sec. III, p. 6). In the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980 ed., s.v. "Mompou," Lionel Stalter states: "... but his abnormally shy and retiring disposition led him to give up any idea of a concert career and devote himself to composition."

(2.) Wilfred Mellers, "Mompou's Elegy," *Chesterian* 26, No. 169 (1952): 54.

(3.) Except between 1917 and 1921, when Mompou returned home to Spain due to the war.

(4.) Words by don Manuel de Falla found in, "La musica en Paris hacia 1900 o el cosmopolitismo," Francois Lesure, Federico Mompou (Madrid: Fundacion I. Albeniz, 1993) 26. [Translations in Spanish by author Hernandez]. For a vivid panorama of this period refer to Elaine Brody, "The Spaniards in Paris," *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1987), 168-189.

- (5.) That same year he published his "Impresiones Intimas" [Intimate Impression] (1911-14) for the same publishing house. Up to this period Mompou had written various other pieces for both solo piano and for voice and piano; among them, "Escenas infantiles" [Scenes from Childhood] (1915-18), "Pesebres" [The Mangers] (1914-17), "Suburbis" [Suburbs] (1916-17) and "La hora gris" [The gray hour] (1915) for voice.
- (6.) Pierre Huybregts, "The Music of Mompou," Lecture at the International House, New York City, 5 Nov. 1980. The Belgian pianist Huybregts (1932-2003) who knew Mompou, recorded the major piano works for Orion and Centaur Records. Irving Schwerke, "Federico Mompou: Spanish Poet of the Piano," Kings Jazz and David: Jazz et David, rois (Paris: Presses Modernes, 1927).
- (7.) Pierre Huybregts, liner notes, Spanish Piano Music, CD, Centaur Records (CRC 2060), 1980.
- (8.) Schwerke, "Federico Mompou," 176.
- (9.) Ibid.
- (10.) Barbara Kober, "Inspiration Called Secret to Musical Composition," Washington Star, 26 July 1978: A2.
- (11.) Schwerke, "Federico Mompou," 176.
- (12.) Emile Vuillermoz in Federic Mompou (Madrid: Fundacion Isaac Albeniz, 1993), 112. Originally published in Temps, 22 April 1921. This Parisien music critic supported Mompou since his first auditions. Vuillermoz was also a classmate of Ravel in Faure's music courses and author of various books on music.
- (13.) In 1920, Henri Collet called "Les six" to the group of young French composers Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Louis Durey, Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger and Germaine Tailleferre. Their music was influenced by the simplicity of the works of composer Erik Satie and by the artistic ideas of Jean Cocteau.
- (14.) Roger Prevel, La musica y Federico Mompou (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1981), 185.
- (15.) Mellers, "Mompou's," 47.
- (16.) This song is a favorite of tenor Jose Carreras, who has sung it many times in concert.
- (17.) Mellers, "Mompou's Elegy" 53-54.
- (18.) Huybregts, Spanish Piano Music.
- (19.) Kober "Inspiration Called Secret."
- (20.) Pierre Bernac, Francis Poulenc: The Man and his Music (New York: Norton, 1977), 35.
- (21.) Ibid.
- (22.) Huybregts, Spanish Piano Music.

(23.) From the Italian rubato (robbed) is a frequent musical marking that allows the performer certain rhythmic flexibility; during this instance the composer authorizes the player to accelerate or prolong the pulsation of the rhythm of a phrase according to his/her own taste.

(24.) Huybregts, Spanish Piano Music.

(25.) Mellers, "Mompou's Elegy," 53. Also note that Mompou composed an oratorio for baritone, chorus and orchestra entitled "Improperios" (1964) and the cantata for children's choir "L'Ocell daurat" (1970). For the stage he composed the ballets "House of Birds" (1954) and "Perlimpinada" (1955).

(26.) Ibid.

(27.) Published by Salabert in Parrs, 1959, 1962, 1965 y 1967 respectively. Mompou also wrote the song "Cantar del Alma" (1951) based on a text by poet San Juan de la Cruz.

(28.) The verses are from Cancion XV; "La noche sosegada/en par de los leuantes de la aurora,/la musica callada,/la soledad sonora,/la cena que recrea y enamora." included in "Canciones entre el alma y el esposo." San Juan de la Cruz, Cantico Espiritual, Serie Clasicos Castellanos 55 (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1962) 12.

(29.) Clara Janes, Federico Mompou: vida, textos, documentos (Madrid: Fundacion Banco Exterior, 1987) 261; and also about these compositions Tomas Marco, "Los clamores de Federco Mompou," Sociedad General de Autores de Espana. Federico Mompou (1893-1987): homenaje internacional en el centenario de su nacimiento (Madrid: Tave, 1994) 7-16.

(30.) Pierre Huybregts, liner notes, Federico Mompou. CD, Centaur (CRC2055), 1988.

(31.) From the French, incantation, magic or evil spell; freely translates: "enchantments to calm suffering, to penetrate the souls, to inspire passion, for recovery, to evoke images of the past, spell for happiness."

(32.) Richard Peter Paine. "Frederic Mompou." The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2nd edition, 2002, 912-913.

(33.) Xavier Montsalvatge, "Frederic Mompou: una personalidad solitaria, admirable, imposible de calificar," Frederic Mompou: Semblanza (Madrid: Fundacion I. Albeniz, 1993) 32-35.

(34.) Estudio del sentimiento. Extracts included in Jan& Federico Mompou, 78.

(35.) Montsalvatge, "Frederic Mompou," 35.

(36.) Kober, "Inspiration Called Secret."

(37.) Schwerke, "Federico Mompou," 176.

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