

# Issues in the English Critical Reception of *The Three-Cornered Hat* \*

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Another great night at the Russian ballet! I have never seen the Alhambra [theatre] looking more brilliant, or filled with a more enthusiastic audience than at the premiere of 'The Three-Cornered Hat' on Tuesday. The uniform scheme of Peace decorations ... enhanced the nobility of one of the finest auditoriums in Europe. As for the enthusiasm—it defies description. It was tremendous. There is no other word.<sup>1</sup>

The overwhelming success of *The Three-Cornered Hat* at its premiere in London in 1919 came at the end of the Ballets Russes' euphoric first post-war season. The dire wartime economic situation of the company had led Serge Diaghilev to embrace a broader public than the previous aristocratic clientele, beginning the season at the elevated music hall surrounds of the Coliseum. It was this new class of balletomanes that embraced Diaghilev's productions and provided the audience for English ballet in the following decade. Through an examination of the contemporary press, this paper will explore some of the issues underlying the popular and critical success of the ballet in London, and especially of Manuel de Falla's score.

Unlike most of the Ballets Russes productions, *The Three-Cornered Hat* had not been the brainchild of Diaghilev, but had evolved gradually from an earlier project that Falla had worked on. In 1916 Gregorio and María Martínez Sierra had staged a mimed adaptation of Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's social comedy, *El sombrero de tres picos* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*), to a score for chamber ensemble by Falla. Diaghilev, who had been keen to incorporate a Spanish work into the Ballets Russes' repertoire,<sup>2</sup> seized on the potential of transforming this mimic

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\* I am deeply indebted to the work of Carol A. Hess, who is a pioneer in the area of Falla reception and a generous colleague. For her work on *El sombrero de tres picos*, and especially its reception in Spain, see 'Manuel de Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat* and the Right-Wing press in pre-Civil War Spain,' *Journal of Musicological Research* 15 (1995): 55–84; *Manuel de Falla's 'The Three-Cornered Hat' and the Advent of Modernism in Spain*, diss. University of California at Davis, 1994; and *Neoclassicism, Race, and the Politics of Identity in Pre-Civil War Spain: The Music and Thought of Manuel de Falla*, manuscript of monograph in process of publication. My thanks to the Archivo Manuel de Falla (Granada) and its staff, especially Concha Chinchilla.

<sup>1</sup> 'See them Dance the Jota,' *Sporting Times* 26 July 1919. For information on the Ballets Russes' post-war seasons in London, see Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: OUP, 1989) 329–44.

<sup>2</sup> *Las Meninas*, a ballet based on a Velázquez painting (choreography by Massine, music by Gabriel Fauré), was first staged by the Ballets Russes on 25 Aug. 1916, during the company's first visit to Spain. At that time Diaghilev had also expressed interest in making a ballet adaptation of Falla's *Noches en los jardines de España* [*Nights in the Gardens of Spain*]. The company also rehearsed works entitled *España* (to Maurice Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*) and *Triana* (to 'Triana' from *Iberia* by Isaac Albéniz) in Rome in 1916, both of which were choreographed by Massine and designed by Natalia Gontcharova, although they were never produced.

farce into a piquant ballet, combining both mime and dance. Falla's score was expanded to include full dance numbers and some more flamenco elements (in line with Diaghilev and Leonide Massine's wishes to explore this dance style which they had encountered during their extended stays in Spain).<sup>3</sup> Pablo Picasso was also recruited to provide the scenery and costumes.

The critic of *The Stage* gave the following concise summary of the action:

There is little, if any, originality about this tale set in eighteenth-century Spain. It is the familiar story of the husband, the wife, and the lover, the characters in this instance being a miller and his spouse and an amorous and elderly corregidor—in other words, the governor of the province—the said corregidor being sadly fooled at the finish ... [in] an invigorating mix-up finale ... [which] takes the form of a lively Jota.<sup>4</sup>

For almost a century the 'jota' had served as a marker of Spanishness in countless *españolades*,<sup>5</sup> and there is little doubt that by 1919 the English public was prepared for a major orchestral score by a Spanish composer. Writing for the *Athenaeum*, Edward J. Dent made the following observations:

From a musical point of view Spain has for generations been a sort of Ruritania, an imaginary country which existed only as a department of the theatrical costumier's warehouse. Thanks to Albeniz, Granados and others, we are at last beginning to realize that Spain has a musical life of its own ... De Falla arrives at an opportune moment. He finds here in London an audience ready prepared with a knowledge of his Spanish predecessors, and with a knowledge, too, of Stravinsky and other non-Spanish composers whom he has evidently studied to some purpose.<sup>6</sup>

In the three years preceding the premiere of *The Three-Cornered Hat*, the London public had been exposed to numerous concerts of Spanish music. The political alliances forged during World War I had served to promote interest in modern music from Latin and Slavic countries, and critics like Richard Capell drew several analogies between the present state of Spanish and of English music, noting that 'Both schools produced noble and distinguished work in Renaissance music. Both were in rather low water in the greater part of the 18th and 19th centuries. Both countries now seem on the verge of a great musical revival.'<sup>7</sup>

The direct impetus for the upsurge in performances of Spanish music was the death of Enrique Granados on board the *Sussex*, which was torpedoed by a German submarine in the

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Budwig, 'The Evolution of Manuel de Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat* (1916-1920)', *Journal of Musicological Research* 5 (1984): 191-212. Diaghilev and Massine travelled to Southern Spain with Falla in 1916 and 1917, and in the company of Joaquín Turina and the Ballets Russes in 1918.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Russian Ballet,' *Stage* 24 July 1919. The critic also commented on the similarity of this genre with that of the story by Carlo Goldoni used as the basis of *Les femmes de bonne humeur*, a work included by the Ballets Russes in their 1919 London season (choreography by Massine to music by Domenico Scarlatti orchestrated by Vincenzo Tommasini).

<sup>5</sup> Falla's 'Jota' was singled out for special attention in the popular press with headlines like 'Alhambra Dance Sensation: Spectators Electrified by the Jota. The Super Romp' (*Daily Express* 23 July 1919) and the previously cited 'See them Dance the Jota'. The popular press also repeatedly made jokes on Falla's name, like 'Of course he's de falla for the job' (*Daily Sketch* 24 April 1919).

<sup>6</sup> Edward J. Dent, 'Music. A Spanish Ballet,' *Athenaeum* 1 Aug. 1919.

<sup>7</sup> 'Music Notes: Manuel de Falla's Ballet,' *Daily Mail* 19 July 1919.

English Channel in 1916. On 28 October 1916 a concert marking Granados' death was held as part of the Queen's Hall Symphony Series, including his *Dante* on the programme. A year later a performance by Henry Wood of five Granados dances, in Wood's own orchestrations, produced the following critical remarks: 'The immediate appeal they made to every musical sensibility brings with it fresh pangs of regret that the composer was the victim of a vile German outrage on humanity. Such music should be in the repertory of every good orchestra.'<sup>8</sup> Between 1916 and 1918 numerous orchestral works by Granados, Joaquín Turina and Isaac Albéniz were first performed in London and Spanish music received extensive critical attention in the musical press,<sup>9</sup> even from normally pro-German, anti-nationalist critics like Ernest Newman.<sup>10</sup>

The directness of Falla's music and its anti-Romantic means of expression impressed post-war critics with modern tendencies. In their minds this set Falla apart from composers such as Albéniz and Granados, who were classed as late Romantic nationalists. Dent claimed that:

Albéniz and Granados were both largely under German influences, like most nineteenth-century composers, and their German idiom, while on the one hand it serves to make their ideas clearer to musicians who have never crossed the Pyrenees, relegates them on the other hand so completely to the past that modern audiences are inclined to find them somewhat tediously conventional.<sup>11</sup>

Falla had also stressed his aversion to German formalism in an interview published in the *Daily Mail* just prior to the premiere of *The Three-Cornered Hat*: 'Most nineteenth-century music is to be mistrusted, and as regards the classical symphonies and sonatas, the teacher's one duty is to utter warnings against them.'<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, *The Three-Cornered Hat* is more often compared to the music of Stravinsky, and the critic of *The Russian* rightly claimed that:

Falla's music is that of a composer altogether new to London ... The value of the most modern harmonic devices is also perfectly understood by him, and he has something of Stravinsky's complexity of texture ... however, this must on no account be mistaken for weakness. The fine way in which he occasionally suggests local colour is enough to prove it. But, of course, there is also a good deal of castanet noises which seems to be inseparable from Spanish music.<sup>13</sup>

Dent, however, pointed to Falla's Spanish temperament mediating the impact of Stravinsky:

Intellectual the music still remains, and the more so by contrast with the barbaric style of Stravinsky. Even when he is obviously imitating certain effects in 'Petrouchka,' De Falla has more affinity with Scarlatti; he cannot be grotesque without a certain Latin

<sup>8</sup> *Musical Times* 58 (Aug. 1917): 465.

<sup>9</sup> In 1916 and 1917 *The Musical Times* ran a series of articles by Georges Jean-Aubry on Granados, Albéniz and Falla.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Newman, 'The Granados of the "Goyescas",' *Musical Times* 58 (Aug. 1917): 343-47.

<sup>11</sup> E.J. Dent, 'Music. A Spanish Ballet,' *Athenaeum* 1 Aug. 1919: 691.

<sup>12</sup> 'To the Young Composer: Senor Manuel de Falla and German Formalism,' *Daily Mail* 18 July 1919.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Russian ballet's new triumph,' *Russian* 31 July 1919, 12. A leading Stravinsky critic, Boris de Schloezer, later expressed his thoughts on the affinities between Falla and Stravinsky in a letter to Falla dated 30 December 1923 (Archivo Manuel de Falla, Granada).

urbanity and dignity. His music is intensely civilised; he employs Spanish rhythms and melodies, but he has no desire to affect primitive simplicity.<sup>14</sup>

The purported verisimilitude and reliance on authentic sources in *The Three-Cornered Hat* (be they folk melodies and dances or regional costumes) was conditioned by a modernist aesthetic of stylisation. Even though Falla's music was seen to be employing certain elements which had afforded local colour to Spanish scores (especially the castanets which were added at Diaghilev's insistence), some critics distinguished *The Three-Cornered Hat* from other representations of Spain. Falla's score received widespread critical acclaim and was deemed to be employing a colourful and accessible modern language—which made him palatable to both the 'moderns' and the popular audiences, as is implied by the critic of *The Stage*:

The music of Manuel de Falla ... is eminently sane and illustratively melodious. It is modern to a degree, which means that it is never aggressively Spanish, as Spanish music is sometimes popularly regarded.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, *The Russian* found Picasso's costumes to be 'wholly delightful for everyone, the colours happily avoiding the conventional ultra-vididness of stage Spanish displays.'<sup>16</sup>

In pre-publicity, however, Diaghilev had insisted on portraying the work as authentically Spanish, even down to its choreography, which he claimed was the result of Massine's long stay in Spain.

What [Massine] shows us is not the Spain of the conventional theatre, but the true Spain studied on the spot ... One whole Winter Massine spent all the time he could spare in the cafés of the people and the little frequented places of Spain in order to get the real thing ... Massine's own dance in the ballet has met with great appreciation from his Spanish collaborators who have seen it at rehearsal.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the enormous success of Massine's 'Farruca' and 'Spanish dancing' in *The Three-Cornered Hat*, the London-based Spanish critic Pedro Morales had his doubts about the ability of the English public to embrace authentic Andalusian dancing.

There is something inherent in the English people that prevents them from grasping the sense of the real Southern Spanish dancing, independent of local colour and surroundings; perhaps because there is nothing acrobatic in it. It's ideal is inner emotion, rhythmical stability, ecstasy.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to take advantage of *The Three-Cornered Hat*'s popularity, Diaghilev presented a staged work entitled *Cuadro Flamenco* to his London audiences in 1921. This work incorporated authentic flamenco dancers and musicians although, for a variety of reasons, which included

<sup>14</sup> Dent, 'Music. A Spanish Ballet' 692.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Russian Ballet,' *Stage* 24 July 1919. The aggressive local colour of Spanish scores was deftly parodied in Lord Berners' contemporary orchestral showpiece, the *Fantasie Espagnole*.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Russian Ballet's New Triumph,' *Russian* 31 July 1919: 12.

<sup>17</sup> "'The Three-Cornered Hat'. The New Russian Ballet. M. Diaghileff and Plans for the Future,' *Observer* 27 July 1919.

<sup>18</sup> Pedro Morales, Preface to Carl Van Vechten, *The Music of Spain* (London: K. Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1920) xvii–xviii.

the mixed reception of the unmediated Andalusian dancing and musical styles, this spectacle had a chequered existence.

Apart from the issues relating to Spanishness and local colour, English writers most often commented upon the question of humour in *The Three-Cornered Hat*. In this respect it was the directness of characterisation and psychological insight in Falla's music that was raised most extensively. Several critics asserted that it was in the field of humour that Falla had gone beyond the majority of contemporary composers and they perceived Falla's humour—not apparent in his Spanish peers—to embody for the first time in Spanish music an essential element of the Spanish character.<sup>19</sup> Comments abound on the passages of 'musical onomatopaeia,' or the imitation of everyday sounds in the orchestra.<sup>20</sup> Also cited were effects like the use of the opening motive of Beethoven's fifth symphony to denote the Corregidor knocking at the door, although this received mixed reactions and was compared to Ethel Smyth's similar employment of the motive in her recent opera *The Boatswain's Mate*. The aged senile Corregidor's first entry was also remarked upon by several critics for its wit, as was the passage in which he courts the Miller's wife.<sup>21</sup> This was seen by Leigh Henry as a more 'cultivated' type of jesting, in which the

[C]ourtly artificial grace of the theme, with its old-world flavour, has a ludicrous effect when associated with the actual decrepit capers of the old *roué*. Nor can one help feeling that de Falla's mockery extends to the conventional formalism of the eighteenth-century music; both theme and mechanical harmonisation are so ridiculously bald and banal when contrasted with the pulsingly human, albeit erotic, character of the rest of the ballet music.<sup>22</sup>

Humorous passages that are more purely farcical and less dependent on parody were pointed out, such as the flute theme accompanying the flirtation between the Miller's wife and the page.<sup>23</sup> Henry went further, arguing that with Falla humour is an intrinsic part of the music itself, and 'is actually contained in the sound-texture of his thematic and harmonic writing' and that these 'themes and phrases are amusing in themselves, [and] are aurally humorous. And therein lies the differentiation of the humour of *The Three-Cornered Hat* from that of other humorously intended music.'<sup>24</sup>

In terms of the overall production, the most salient feature of *The Three-Cornered Hat* for the critics was its artistic coherence.

Where this ballet ... stands out, is in the perfection of the union between the music and the action ... This ballet shows more fully than any other the possibilities of the future

<sup>19</sup> See especially Leigh Henry, 'The Diaghiliev Season at the Alhambra: The Production of "The Three-Cornered Hat"', *Musical Standard* 2 Aug. 1919.

<sup>20</sup> See especially 'Musical Wit: De Falla and Ravel,' *Times* 26 July 1919.

<sup>21</sup> Manuel de Falla, *El sombrero de tres picos* (London: Chester, 1921), Part 1, No.30.

<sup>22</sup> Leigh Henry, 'The Three-Cornered Hat,' *Musical Opinion* 43 (Nov. 1919): 122–23.

<sup>23</sup> Falla, *El sombrero*, Part 1, No.8.

<sup>24</sup> Henry, 'The Three-Cornered Hat' 123. Henry contrasts this with the musical redundancy and self-referential nature of Strauss's tone poems and Gilbert and Sullivan's practice in their comic songs and claims that 'it is in the discovery of this direct method of employing the expressive qualities of sound, without supplementary indication, that de Falla has gone beyond all his compatriots—indeed beyond the majority of contemporary composers. In doing so, he has vindicated his claim to a place among the evolvers of musical history—a place beside Eric Satie, Mousorgsky and Stravinsky.'

when everything—music, story, dancing, and scenery—may be borne together around one central idea.<sup>25</sup>

Ralph Wright urged the moderns, musicians and artists, to work and experiment in this new art together: 'Both of them have been chafing at their bonds, wanting to express more than their art alone seemed capable of expressing, and here, it seems, is their opportunity.' The unity of the work was also stressed by the critic of *The Times*, who claimed that 'through it all one was conscious, in an inarticulate way, of great strength and certainty of plan; all the material that was brought in was used to build with.'<sup>26</sup> Many critics found the work satisfying because of its gradual build-up to the final 'Jota', which not only forms the most extended ensemble tableau, but introduces the full orchestra and provides greater variety of colour through the costumes. The critic of *The Sporting Times* stated: 'Considering that the ballet only performs for half an hour, its effect is wonderful; but that is because it is artistically cumulative.'<sup>27</sup>

*The Three-Cornered Hat* played an important role in breaking down theatrical conventions in England. The ballet confirmed for many critics Massine's capacity to blend mime and dance,<sup>28</sup> and it was noted that under his influence the Ballets Russes'

range of expression is expanding on every side, conventions of the ballet are being dropped and new methods continually being introduced. The dancing itself is becoming freer and freer, and more and more understanding of the pure line of a pose is being shown.<sup>29</sup>

More controversial were Picasso's sets, which eschewed strict representation in favour of a faintly cubist rendition of a Spanish village.<sup>30</sup> Ralph Wright commented that Picasso's 'simplification of the setting for the ballet itself is delightful ... Work of the sort, however, much [as] one may dislike it in a picture gallery, is in exactly the right mood here.'<sup>31</sup> While some critics were aware of Picasso's obvious attempts at moderation, Dent was dismissive of the set (although he admitted that its virtue lay in forcing the spectator to be imaginative),<sup>32</sup> in contrast to the Australian critic W. J. Turner who stated that 'it was one of the finest scenes mounted in any theatre.'<sup>33</sup>

The Ballets Russes production of *The Three-Cornered Hat* sparked renewed discussion of the possibility of creating an English ballet.<sup>34</sup> Increasingly, during the 1920s, ballet was seen as a viable artistic enterprise, competing with opera as the pinnacle of nationalist endeavor. In an article entitled 'An English Ballet. How We Could Create an Art of Our Own,' Ernest Newman argued that this genre should grow 'naturally and inevitably out of our English life and manners

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Wright, *Everyman* 27 July 1919.

<sup>26</sup> "'The Three-Cornered Hat': Russian Ballet at the Alhambra,' *Times* 23 July 1919.

<sup>27</sup> 'See them Dance the Jota,' *Sporting Times* 26 July 1919.

<sup>28</sup> Henry, 'The Diaghilief Season at the Alhambra.'

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *Everyman* 27 July 1919.

<sup>30</sup> Picasso's sets for *The Three-Cornered Hat* were among the first to incorporate cubist techniques on the London stage. His more overtly cubist designs for *Parade* (1917) were not staged till later in London.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Everyman* 27 July 1919.

<sup>32</sup> Dent, 'Music. A Spanish Ballet' 692.

<sup>33</sup> W.J. Turner, 'A Week's Music,' *Daily Herald* 29 July 1919.

<sup>34</sup> This was commented on in several articles, including Dent, 'Music. A Spanish Ballet.'

and humours.’<sup>35</sup> He claimed that ‘our own greatest school of miming is the music-hall, and the realist English ballet, as I see it, [should develop] out of the music-hall rather than out of the dancing academy.’ *The Three-Cornered Hat* was offered as an example of how mime and humour could be incorporated. While appreciative of Massine’s ‘genius for invention’ he felt that there was ‘no compulsion on the modern realistic ballet to be as puppet-like and spasmodic as M. Massine makes it.’ The contention that the English ballet should follow the art of Picasso in its settings was even more forcibly dismissed by Newman: ‘Those of us who have not seen much to admire in the drop-scenes of “The Three-Cornered Hat” ... do not want English imitations of these.’

*The Three-Cornered Hat* remained Falla’s best known work in England and it has been staged more often in London than anywhere else. Its popularity facilitated performances of much of Falla’s music in London,<sup>36</sup> transforming him into the foremost Spanish composer of his generation and securing him a contract with Chester, the leading English publisher of modern composers.<sup>37</sup> The work also consolidated Massine’s reputation as a choreographer (the role of the Miller being one of the most often performed in his career) and was instrumental in making Picasso’s work more accessible to the general public.

The ballet was fondly remembered by English commentators into the 1950s, and this is not surprising given the fact that it remained in the repertory of various companies over a period of thirty years. These included Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and its 1930s successor under the management of Colonel de Basil, various companies formed by Massine, and the 1947 Sadler’s Wells revival under the direction of Massine, all of which maintained Picasso’s scenery and costumes. Three decades after its first production critics still lauded Falla’s employment of humour, *The Three-Cornered Hat*’s modern leanings and its artistic coherence, traits that resonated in the English ballets created in the 1920s and ‘30s.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘An English Ballet. How We Could Create an Art of Our Own,’ *Evening Standard* 8 Sep. 1919.

<sup>36</sup> In the following two years there were performances of *Noches en los jardines de España*, *El amor brujo* and the *Siete canciones populares españolas*.

<sup>37</sup> This contract was agreed to during Falla’s 1919 stay in London, as a result of Jean-Aubry’s intervention.

<sup>38</sup> Fernau Hall, *Modern English Ballet: An Interpretation* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1950) 320 and Caryl Brahm, *A Seat at the Ballet* (London: Evans Brothers, 1951) esp. 102–04.