

When the premiere performance of *Boléro* took place in New York City, Louis Biancolli wrote the following: "Staged widely in Europe and America, *Boléro* was first performed in this country as a concert number at a Carnegie Hall concert of the Philharmonic-Symphony [*sic*] conducted by Arturo Toscanini. The date was 14 November 1929. The audience was scarcely prepared for the sensation. Few of the musicians suspected at rehearsals that they were working on a bombshell. The effect on the Carnegie audience was almost unprecedented. Many critics joined in the frantic storms of applause.... For the prime object of *Boléro* musically is the creation of nervous tension....A two-limbed melody of Spanish character, uttered first by the flute, after the drum has given out the rhythm, is reiterated by solo instruments in groups while the volume of sound increases steadily, inexorably....When it seems that human nerves can endure no more, the key shift comes with the impact of dynamite. This Philharmonic-Symphony debut made *Boléro* an American craze" (Julian Seaman, ed., *Great Orchestral Music: A Treasury of Program Notes*).

American music critic and lecturer Edward Downes (1911–2001) wrote: "Ravel's *Boléro* was an experiment consisting of what he called 'orchestral tissue without music.' In its deeply French combination of the utmost discipline, even rigidity of form, with an intensity of passion that threatens to tear the whole thing apart, the *Boléro* embodies another of the many paradoxes which made up Ravel's nature and were also a part of French tradition."

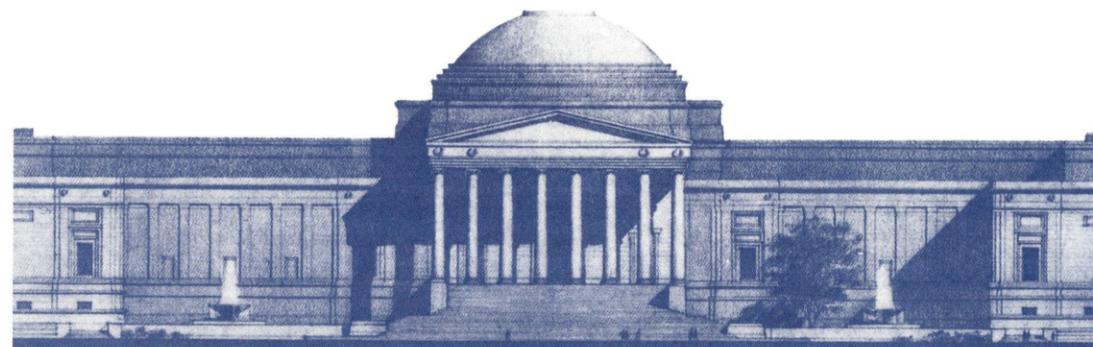
Programs notes by Elmer Booze

*For the convenience of concertgoers
the Garden Café remains open until 6:30 p.m.*

The Sixty-first Season of

THE WILLIAM NELSON CROMWELL and
F. LAMMOT BELIN CONCERTS

National Gallery of Art



2461st Concert

NATIONAL GALLERY ORCHESTRA

GEORGE MANOS, *conductor*

*Presented in honor of the 25th anniversary
of the opening of the East Building
of the National Gallery of Art*

Sunday Evening, 1 June 2003
Seven O'clock
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

his best and most refined work. Mendelssohn dedicated the symphony to Queen Victoria and applied the subtitle *Scottish*, remembering his reaction to the stunning milieu of the Holyrood Palace. He protested against any suggestion that he had created programmatic music, but many of his listeners would beg to differ. The brilliance and beauty of the symphony prompted the renowned German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (1830–1894) to write: “Among symphonies after Beethoven, Mendelssohn’s *Scottish Symphony* occupies the highest rank as a self-contained work of art.”

The four movements are played without pause, making the symphony a precursor of the *symphonische Dichtung* (symphonic poem), a one-movement work established as a genre by Franz Liszt. The shadowy introduction of the first movement (*Andante con moto; allegro un poco agitato; assai animato*) soon gives way to a more passionate undertaking that leads to what may be interpreted as a call of the Hebridean winds. The second movement (*Vivace non troppo*) is not designated a *scherzo*, although it exhibits the swiftness Mendelssohn’s *scherzi*. It is a dance in 2/4 time that alludes to folk music of Scotland, although Mendelssohn did not intentionally import Scottish folk melodies into this work. The poignant emotion of the third movement (*Adagio cantabile*) is extracted from its lyrical opening melody, which is varied and slightly elaborated each time it returns. The fourth movement (*Allegro vivacissimo*) explodes in a spirited dance with devilish energy. The movement has earned a universally accepted nickname, *The Gathering of the Clans*, as it is seen to epitomize the untamed soul and vivacity of the Highland people.

Le tombeau de Couperin (*The Tomb of Couperin*) began as a suite of six pieces for solo piano that Ravel initially entitled *French Suite*. It was also, ironically, his last significant composition for the piano. The work was to be a tribute to the French composer François Couperin le Grand (1668–1733), one of the great figures of French baroque music, and, more importantly, to the music of the eighteenth century. Ravel’s work on the suite was interrupted when he was drafted for military service in World War I. He resumed his work immediately after his discharge from the army and completed it in 1917, at which time

he changed the title to *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Six of Ravel’s friends were killed in the war and, as a tribute to them, he dedicated a movement to each one. Two years later, in 1919, Ravel orchestrated four movements from the suite.

The *Prélude* is a rich and sparkling statement of elegant, ornamental styling, as applied to Couperin’s rhythmic weaving and the musical spirit of the eighteenth century. The *Forlane* is a reiteration of a brilliantly decorated French courtly dance that had lascivious connotations. The effective simplicity of the *Menuet* supports Debussy’s assessment of Ravel as having “the finest ears in the world,” and the *Rigaudon*, under Ravel’s hands, “retains the simple rhythms, phrasing, and homophonic texture of music to be danced” (*Harvard Dictionary of Music*).

The *boléro*, as defined in the *Salsa* Web site, is “a slow, lyrical ballad, usually about romantic themes, love and yearning—an ideal dance for a flirt...The pains and pleasures of love are the subject of *boléro*, a style of popular song and dance practiced through much of Latin America for more than a century. In Cuba there is no love without a *boléro* (love song).” Ravel’s *Boléro* gained popularity in America through the orchestral version of a ballet score he wrote in 1928, on commission from a ballet company run by the Russian dancer and actress, Ida Rubenstein (1885–1960). Rubenstein initially asked Ravel to orchestrate six pieces from Isaac Albéniz’ *Iberia Suite*. The copyright protection on Albéniz’ work, however, prevented Ravel from carrying through with the transcription without permission from the composer. When Albéniz eventually gave his permission, Ravel politely declined, preferring instead to write an original work, the now famous *Boléro*. The ballet was performed at the Paris Opera in 1928, choreographed and danced by Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972), the sister of the great Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950). As part of the classical ballet repertoire, Ravel’s *Boléro* remains on the active list, even though it is performed less frequently than it was in the 1930s and 1940s. As an instrumental work, *Boléro* is quite popular in the two-piano version as well as in the often-performed orchestral version.