

**ERNESTO HALFFTER ESCRICHE**  
**(1905-1989)<sup>1</sup>**

**by Nancy Lee Harper ©2005**

The name of Ernesto Halffter Escriche will forever be linked to that of his mentor, Manuel de Falla (1876-1946). Born during Spain's Silver Age<sup>2</sup>, he lived an intense intellectual life during a special and privileged cultural epoch. His extraordinary creativity and innate happiness<sup>3</sup> saw him through the unusual peaks and valleys of his life. A great musician in his own right, he, like Falla, came from a mixed heritage: his being Prussian, Catalan, and Andalusian; Falla's being Valencian, Catalan, Italian, and Guatemalan. Like Falla, he had many brothers and sisters and received his first piano lessons from his mother. And like Falla, who had suffered in his youth when his father faced financial ruin, so too did Ernesto bear the impact of financial hardship imposed by his own father's misfortune. Falla and Halffter were both conductors and fine pianists. For both, contact with eminent composers in Paris had a decisive impact on their musical development and careers. Both left Spain for foreign lands because of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, they both would return – Falla to be interred in the Cádiz Cathedral and Halffter to continue his own work and the legacy of Falla.

Here the similarities end. Fiery Sagittarius, Falla was born in the southwest coastal city of Cádiz, while Ernesto, the earthy Capricorn, was born in mountainous Madrid. Falla, because of his ethical scruples, had to struggle with the perfection of each composition. Halffter was a natural, spontaneous talent who was enormously prolific as a composer. Halffter married and fathered a son, while Falla came close, choosing instead to adopt a filial stance with Ernesto. Falla lived an ascetic, controlled life. Halffter lived for the moment. When Falla - the leader, defender, and creator of new musical paths - was unable to finish his masterpiece, *Atlántida*, Halffter did, not once, but twice.

The third of six children born to Ernesto Halffter Hein and Rosario Escriche Erradón, Ernesto saw the light of day on 16 January 1905 in the Spanish capital. His formal education was done at the *Colegio aleman*,

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<sup>1</sup> This short article originally appeared on ILAMS website, [www.ilams.org](http://www.ilams.org) in 2005. Since then, it has been revised and corrected with very grateful appreciation to the composer's son, Manuel Halffter.

<sup>2</sup> Spain's Silver Age extended from the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 until the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and had principal objectives of creating a new modern national expression through inspiration from Spain's Golden Age, which for music, was found in its great polyphonic treasures of Victoria, Morales, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Halffter in *Ernesto Halffter (1905-1989), Músico en dos tiempos*, edición de Yolanda Acker y Javier Suárez-Pajares, Granada, Fundación Archivo Manuel de Falla (Junio-Julio) and Madrid, Residencia de estudiantes (Octubre-Noviembre), p. 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Ernesto and his Portuguese wife, Alicia Câmara Santos, took up residence in Lisbon in February 1936.

Halffter, from an early age showed a proclivity and precocity for music, especially for composition, imagining his first piano piece, *El Cuco* (1911), which was eventually written down by Guillermo González during a summer course in Segovia after having been played by the composer.<sup>5</sup> Even at this tender age of six he was writing small opera libretti to produce with his older brother, Rodolfo (1900-1987). The first of several song cycles (*Cinco canciones* on verses of Heine) was composed in 1920. The formal presentation of his own music to the Madrid public took place on 27 March 1922 at the Hotel Ritz, when his Hungarian professor, Fernando Ember, presented works by him and by Rodolfo, which attracted the attention of music critic, Adolfo Salazar (*El Sol*). In that same year, Ernesto composed *Marche joyeuse (Marcha alegre)*, which was published with a cover design by Salvador Dalí.

In 1923, Ernesto met Manuel de Falla, twenty-eight years his senior, who would have a profound influence on the direction of his life and work. Halffter's String Quartet,<sup>6</sup> *Peacock Pie*,<sup>7</sup> *Tres piezas para orquesta*,<sup>8</sup> *Sonatina-Fantasia*,<sup>9</sup> *Un cuento de Leonidas Andreief*,<sup>10</sup> *Suite ancienne*,<sup>11</sup> and *Sérénade, Valse, Marche/Tres piezas infantiles*<sup>12</sup> for piano duo were composed during this memorable year. Still only a teenager, Halffter would also have his first book published, *La ópera contemporánea en Alemania: Max von Schillings y su 'Mona Lisa'* (Madrid: J. Amado, 1923). Often in a precarious financial state, Halffter was greatly aided through the intervention of Falla who would persuade Max Eschig to publish Halffter's

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<sup>5</sup> From private correspondence with the composer's son, Manuel Halffter, 17 November 2009: *El cuco* remains unpublished.

<sup>6</sup> Premiered by Quinteto Hispania, Sala Aeolian, Madrid, 7 June 1923.

<sup>7</sup> Premiered by guitarist Andrés Segovia, Teatro de la Comedia, Madrid, 17 December 1923.

<sup>8</sup> According to the composer's son, Manuel Halffter (private correspondence on 17 November 2009), the work was to have been premiered by Orquesta Lassalle (José Lassalle), in Valencia, Spain, on 28 June 1923. However, the concert was cancelled. Manuel Halffter says that he has never seen "manuscripts, copies, or drafts" of the first two pieces of this work. The third piece, "Canción del Farolero" is published by Editions Max Eschig.

<sup>9</sup> Premiered by Budapest Quartet, Asociación de Cultura Musical, Madrid, 12 December 1923.

<sup>10</sup> Although sources indicate the premiere of this work by the Quinteto Hispania, in Madrid in 1923, Manuel Halffter that he never heard this work and never found any trace of it on the programs of Quinteto Hispania in his father's estate (private correspondence on 17 November 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Work for wind instruments. Manuel Halffter affirms that he never heard this work and never found any trace of it in his father's estate (private correspondence on 17 November 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Version of *Peacock Pie* for piano, 4 hands, and premiered by pianists Ricardo Viñes and Henri Sauguet, Paris, Feb.-March, 1926. Although a controversial issue, it would appear, according to sources that there was an orchestral version, *Enfantines*, to have been premiered in Paris in 1925. Please see Acker/Suárez-Parajes *op.cit.*, "Catálogo cronológico", p. 118,

works. Falla, then at the height of his creative powers and composing his masterpieces, *El retablo de maese Pedro* and the Harpsichord Concerto, embarked on the creation of the chamber orchestra, *Orquesta Bética de Sevilla*,<sup>13</sup> in which he invited Halffter to be its official conductor. Falla personally taught Halffter how to conduct, giving him lessons in front of a mirror. Initially successful, Halffter's relationship with the OBC soon soured because of Halffter's lack of administrative and financial prowess. During this time, Halffter received a scholarship to continue his studies in Paris (1924) with Ravel. He continued to reveal his remarkable creative talents, composing his masterpieces *Sinfonietta* (dedicated to Falla<sup>14</sup> and which won the Spanish National Music Prize in 1925), and his ballet *Sonatina*.<sup>15</sup> Many other works followed, including his Piano Sonata (1926-1932)<sup>16</sup> music for silent films and talking films,<sup>17</sup> as did his marriage to the Portuguese pianist, Alicia Câmara Santos (1928). Parents of a son, Manuel (b. 29 June 1938 and so named for his godfather, Manuel de Falla), the Halffters eventually separated. Many trips ensued in the early years of their marriage due to Ernesto's professional engagements - to England, France, Argentina and Cuba - all surrounded with financial uncertainty. In yet another attempt to solve this economical dilemma, Halffter accepted a post as Director of the Superior Music Conservatory of Sevilla in the early 1930's, a post to which he was ill-suited and which left him no time in which to compose. He suffered several dry spells in his compositional career, even early in his profession.

Halffter's compositional style, which was initially stamped with neo-Scarlattian tendencies and the delicate perfume of the Spanish renaissance, championed "spirited brilliance and 'everyday music-making' (to quote Cocteau)."<sup>18</sup> Naturally his early tendencies also reflected the obvious influences of Falla, *Les Six*, and Ravel, but retained a rugged individuality

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<sup>13</sup> The chamber orchestra, which debuted with Halffter as official conductor on 11 June 1924 at the Teatro Llorens in Sevilla, was to be of soloist calibre and had a central mission to perform and diffuse contemporary Spanish music.

<sup>14</sup> Work for orchestra and violin, 'cello, and bass soloists. Composed between 1923-1927 and premiered by Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid, with Halffter conducting, at the Teatro de la Zarauela, 5 April 1927.

<sup>15</sup> Piano version premiered by José Cubiles, Madrid, 16 Nov. 1927. Concert version premiered by the Orquesta de Lassalle, Halffter conducting, Palacio de la Música, Madrid, 11 Feb. 1928. Complete version premiered by Théâtre Femina, Paris 18 June 1928, by Compañía de Antonia Mercé "La Argentina" with decor by F. Beltran-Masses.

<sup>16</sup> Premiere by Leopold Querol in May 1934 in a concert of the Asociación de cultura musical de Madrid.

<sup>17</sup> Halffter's film scores include: *Carmen* (1925), *Bambú* (1945), *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1947), *El amor brujo* (1949), *Nuestra Señora de Fátima* (1951), *Historias de la radio* (1954), *La mujer de otro*, *La Princesa de Eboli* (1954), *Todo es posible en Granada* (1954), *Viaje romántico a Granada* (1955), *También hay cielo sobre el mar* (1955), *La mujer de otro* (1967), and *Los gallos de la madrugada* (1970).

<sup>18</sup> Enrique Franco "Ernesto Halffter (Escriche)" in *The New Grove* (1980), vol.8, p. 47, London: Macmillan.

due to his extroverted nature of "expansiveness, abandon, lucidity and grace".<sup>19</sup>

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) stole the dreams not only of the artists, musicians, writers, etc., of the "Generación del '27"<sup>20</sup> - the Gongorists - but also of their composers, the "Grupo de los Ocho".<sup>21</sup> Their disbursement and displacement to various parts of the world distilled the compositional chaff in ways that would have been totally unforeseen just a decade earlier where so many of their performances and exchanges took place in Madrid's student residence, Residencia de Estudiantes (*Resi*). The cultural renaissance of Spain's Silver Age came to a cruel halt.

Moving to Lisbon, Halffter's nineteen years in Portugal<sup>22</sup> produced many works, such as the *Rapsodia portuguesa* for piano and orchestra (which uses many Portuguese folksongs and bears allegiance to Falla's *Noches en los jardines de España* and Ravel's G Major Concerto)<sup>23</sup>; *Llanto por Ricardo Viñes* (which strongly resembles Falla's *Pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas*)<sup>24</sup>; *Seis canciones portuguesas* for voice and piano<sup>25</sup>; the incidental music for *Dulcinea* (1944)<sup>26</sup> and for *Electra* (1949); as well as the ballets *La blanca paloma* (1952-53), *Fantasia galaica* (1956), and *El cojo enamorado (Romancillo por chufas en nueve escenas)* (1955). Later, the scenic music of *Don Juan Tenorio* (1956), a chamber opera in one act entitled *Entr'acte* (1964), and a series of religious works inspired by Falla's *Atlántida*, such as *Canticum in memoriam P. P. Johannem XXIII* (1964), the *Elegia en memoria de S. A. S. Principe Pierre de Polignac* (1966), *Dominus pastor meus* (1967), and *Gozos de Nuestra Señora* (1970) would be composed. With Falla's residency in Argentina from 1939 until his death in 1946, Halffter's contact with him was by post. At the request of the Falla family in 1951, Halffter undertook the mammoth and polemical project of completing Falla's scenic cantata, *Atlántida*,<sup>27</sup> working on it from 1954-

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> This wide group of creativity included such personalities as Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Falla, amongst others, and was instrumental in invoking the ideals of the Spanish renaissance in the figure of the poet Luís de Góngora (1561-1627).

<sup>21</sup> Spanish counterpart to the French, *les Six*, these young Spanish composers included: Rodolfo and Ernesto Halffter, Gustavo Pittaluga (1906-1975), Salvador Bacarisse (1898-1963), Fernando Remacha (1898-1984), Julián Bautista (1901-1961), Juan José Mantecón (1897-1964), and Rosa García Ascot (1902-2002).

<sup>22</sup> In February 1936, just a few months before the onset of the war in July, he took up residence in Lisbon. From 1942-1952 he was music professor at the Instituto Español de Lisboa.

<sup>23</sup> Premiered by Marie Antoinette Lévêque de Freitas Branco in Lisbon, 20 June 1940, with the Orquesta Filarmónica de Madrid.

<sup>24</sup> Premiered by Helena Sá e Costa, Radio Portugal, subsidised by the Instituto Español de Lisboa on 20 Dec. 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the songs have been also orchestrated.

<sup>26</sup> Premiered at the Teatro Nacional de Lisboa, January, 1944.

<sup>27</sup> The concert version was premiered on 24 November 1961 in Barcelona. The scenic version was premiered at La Scala in Milan on 18 June 1962, while the second and final version was premiered in Lucerne for the centenary of Falla's birth.

1960, with posterior further revisions, until the work was heard in its final version premiere in 1976.

Eventually Halffter would become influenced by the second Viennese school and post-Webern tendencies, causing him to re-consider his own stylistic evolution, which, in some ways, resembled that of Poulenc, rather than of Falla. Nevertheless, like Falla, tonality remained supreme for him. His career is interspersed with many film scores (some of which received prizes), piano pieces, orchestral works and scenic works, as well as transcriptions or arrangements of his own works, of others, and especially of Falla's. His chamber music output, beyond the works previously cited, include *Fantasia española* (1952-53) for cello and piano; *La niña de los Luceros* (1959); *Madrigal* in three versions: for violin and piano (1969), viola and piano (1997), and guitar solo (1997); *Pastorales* for flute and harpsichord or piano (1973); *Doredianas* (1974); and diverse works for voice and/or choir and piano or orchestra.

In 1963, Halffter received the Great Cross of Alfonso X the Wise. For the 25th anniversary of Falla's death, Halffter returned to Argentina, where he conducted Falla's works and visited his home in Alta Gracia, Córdoba. In 1972, Halffter was elected to the prestigious Spanish Academy of Fine Arts<sup>28</sup>, presenting his inaugural address, "The Enduring Mastery of Manuel de Falla", on 12 June 1973.

Halffter continued to compose until the end of his life. His Guitar Concerto for Narciso Yepes was premiered in Madrid on 13 December 1969. Such works as *Tiento para órgano* (premiere: 1973), *Fanfare, Pregón e Himno* (1974)<sup>29</sup>, the ópera *La leyenda de Tanausú* (begun in 1980), *Sonata: Homenaje a Domenico Scarlatti* (1985), the *Nocturno otoñal. Recordando a Chopin* (for the Artur Rubinstein Exposition in 1987) and the *Homenajes* (1988) to Turina, Mompou and his recently deceased brother, Rodolfo, mark his final chapter, full of musical events from conducting works of Falla to receiving (for the second time) the Spanish National Music Prize in 1983, to teaching a summer course in Cádiz (August 1983), to being the recipient of the Fundación Juan March's homage on 14 December 1983. At his death in 1989, several works remained uncompleted.<sup>30</sup>

Halffter's legacy will always be linked to that of Falla. Who can forget his transcriptions for piano or for orchestra of Falla's *Siete canciones populares españolas*? Or his works reflecting the Fallaian spirit of Don Quixote? Or the inspiration drawn from Falla's religious-hued memorials reminiscent of Spain's Golden Age, especially that of the enormous legacy

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<sup>28</sup> Halffter was elected on 10 April 1972 to the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, replacing cellist Juan Ruiz Casaux.

<sup>29</sup> See author's review of Halffter's work, which was written for the inauguration of the Salvador Dalí Museum in Figueras, in *MLA Notes*, (Brandeis University, USA) March-April, 2001, p. 754-756.

<sup>30</sup> See Acker and Suárez-Pajares for a complete list of his works, as well as Acker's excellent biographical sketch from which much of this information is drawn.

of *Atlántida*? Known as Falla's "only disciple", Halffter, who dedicated so much of his life in service to Falla, died on 5 July 1989, in his native city of Madrid, the same city that had rebuked Falla but which, in turn, provided fertile ground for Halffter's creativity.

"Se la lleva ya de España,  
que era lo que más quería,  
su marido un marinero genovés.

¡Adios, murallas natales,  
coronas de Andalucía!  
Ya lejos: ¡Ay, cómo tiemblan los campanarios de Cádiz;  
Los que tanto me querían!"

*Marinero en tierra*  
- Rafael Alberti -