

XAVIER MONTSALVATGE

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I have never been drawn to Spanish music and Spanish culture. I detest bull fighting for its cruelty and dislike dancers with castanets and heavy noisy shoes. I also dislike tap dancing particularly in films when a sumptuous orchestral arrangement being played at the same time to the irritating accompaniment of tap dancing. Was it Victor Borge who said that tap dancing should be in bare feet? The adoration of the guitar in Spain is probably over the top, and the music has too many clichés. Ravel's Spanish works do not appeal to me and Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* has been defined as not music but merely atmosphere.

However, there are few great Spanish composers such as Arriaga and Roberto Gerhard.

Xavier Montsalvatge was born on 11 March 1912 and died on 7 May 2002 and was a Spanish composer and music critic. He was one of the most influential music figures in Catalan music during the latter half of the 20th century. Although much of his music is recorded there are very few public performances.

Montsalvatge was born in Girona, and studied violin and composition at the Barcelona Conservatory. His principal teachers were Lluís Maria Millet, Enric Morera, Jaume Pahissa, and Eduard Toldrà. After the Spanish Civil War, Montsalvatge began work as a music critic when he joined the newspaper *Destino* in 1942, a publication he would eventually direct in 1968 and 1975. He wrote additionally for the daily *La Vanguardia* after 1962. Montsalvatge also returned to teach at his alma mater, becoming a lecturer in 1970, and then a professor of composition in 1978.

He was awarded Spain's Premio Nacional de Música for composition in 1985. He died of emphysema in Barcelona, aged 90.

Montsalvatge's style evolved over several different phases. At the start of his career, he was strongly influenced by the twelve-tone technique, an unfairly maligned system that calls for discipline which many composers and performers do not possess, and he was also influenced by Wagnerism, which dominated the Catalan music scene during the period represented by his *Sinfonía mediterránea* of 1949. He then rejected German styles of composition. In the following period, he found inspiration in the music of the Antilles (*Cinco canciones negras*, 1945; *Cuarteto indiano*, 1952). His steady contact with the French composers Olivier Messiaen and Georges Auric led to a crucial change in his style, which soon became characterized by free polytonality (*Partida*, 1958). The final phase of Montsalvatge's work revealed the influence of the avant-garde. It is his non-traditional music that shows the greatest promise.

Montsalvatge explored virtually all musical forms in his composition. His work ranges in scale from operas (*El gato con botas*, *Una voz en off*) to chamber music (*Cuarteto indiano*), in between which lie his orchestral works, such as the *Desintegración morfológica de la Chacona de Bach*, the *Laberinto Sinfonía de réquiem*, and the prizewinning *Sinfonía mediterránea*. He owed his international fame chiefly to one charming and outstanding work: the *Cinco canciones negras* for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, a blend of Antillean rhythms and themes; among them, the best known is the *Canción de cuna para dormir un negrito* (Lullaby to sleep a black child). He wrote film music and in 1987, his score for the picture *Dragon Rapide*, about Francisco Franco, was nominated as the best original music at the Goya Awards.

As we have said elsewhere, comparisons can be odious. Someone compared Montsalvatge's *Concerto Breve* with Ravel's *Piano Concerti in G* but the Spaniard's work has nothing to do with jazz and seedy Parisian nightlife, prostitution and gay bars.

Important works

Cinco canciones negras (1945) (Five black songs)
Concierto breve (1953) for piano and orchestra
Canciones Para Niños (1953) (Songs for Children)
Sonatine pour Ivette (1962)
Babel (1967)
Homenaje a Manolo Hugué (1971)
Serenata a Lydia de Cadaqués (1971)
Reflexions-obertura (1975)
Concert capriccio (1975) for harp and orchestra
Fantasía (1985) for harp and guitar
Simfonía de Rèquiem (1985)
Bric à brac (1993)

Choral works

Tres canciones negras (1946) for soprano, mixed chorus, and piano [1]

Operas

El gato con botas
Una voce in off
Babel 46 (opera, 2002 premiere)

Ballet

Perlimplinada, music in collaboration with Federico Mompou
Manfred (1945)

Music for cobla ensemble

Elegia a Juli Garreta (1946)
Madrigal en forma de sardana

There is a lot of piano music of varying quality with the usual cliches of excessive tinkling at the top of the piano, and repeated top notes. Much of this music does not convey purpose or any direction.

Someone opined that he was an important and influential composer but not a great one.

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