Alborada del graciosos

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, strings.

Duration: 9 minutes.

THE COMPOSER – MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937) – Ravel made five attempts to win the coveted Prix de Rome (an annual award for outstanding student artists) between 1900 and 1905. None bore the desired result and the cumulative experience of the five “failures” contributed to Ravel’s ongoing distaste for cultural authority. His membership in the informal collective known as Les Apaches (loosely meaning “The Outlaws” in French) and founding role in the Société Musicale Indépendante cemented his outsider status.

THE HISTORY – As a child of a Swiss father and a Basque mother, Ravel was always “a man apart” in Paris. His closely held affinity for his maternal heritage was especially evident in the original piano version of Alborada del gracioso in 1905. It was part of a suite called Miroirs (Mirrors) and, like the Une barque sur l’océan movement, Alborada was later orchestrated by the composer. Ravel’s easy mastery of the Spanish musical character was once affirmed by none other than Manuel de Falla, who complimented his lack of reliance on direct folk tune quotations, but Ravel didn’t really need the support. Unlike most of the composers of fin-de-siècle Paris, Ravel’s Spanish fascinations were familial, not social. Alborada del gracioso translates loosely as “The Jester’s Morning Song” and the piano version was dedicated to M. D. Calvocoressi, a music scholar and supporter of Ravel’s. The point of a troubadour’s alba in old Spain was to warn lovers of the approaching dawn so they could hasten away, but Ravel’s application of the jester archetype adds a welcome air of outlandishness to the typically somber proceedings. As a spirited solo work, Alborada was (and is) considered quite difficult and, in Ravel’s deft orchestrator’s hands, the orchestral version (1918) projects a similar reckless energy. From the strumming guitars of the opening to the wild abandon of the ending, Ravel transports the listener to a bygone place and time that were, for him, more about blood ties than exotic curiosity.

THE WORLD – Elsewhere in 1905, Norway declared its independence from Sweden, Franklin Delano Roosevelt married his 5th cousin (once removed) Eleanor Roosevelt and the first of two 20th century revolutions began in Russia.