

program notes for
Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*

The first guitar concertos were written for the early romantic guitar at the beginning of the 19th century. Performers like Mauro Giuliani and Ferdinando Carulli used them to show off their skills and the possibilities of their instrument.

But the guitar fad that produced those works quickly faded. When Spanish guitarist Regino Sainz sat down to a fine Parisian supper with his countryman Joaquín Rodrigo in 1938, more than a century had elapsed since the last significant guitar concerto had been composed. Sainz begged Rodrigo to bring the classical guitar concerto into the twentieth century with a composition for the modern classical guitar accompanied by a modern orchestra.

Now Rodrigo seemed an unlikely choice for the task. Blinded by ophthalmic diphtheria at age three, he had overcome his visual handicap to acquire a first rate musical education. He became a fine pianist. And using a braille notation system, he had also become a promising composer. But Rodrigo was no guitarist, a big problem in writing for that idiosyncratic instrument.

Nonetheless, Rodrigo rose to the challenge and completed the requested work in 1939. He named his composition after the Aranjuez region of Spain that he and his wife enjoyed visiting. It was premiered in 1940 by the performer who had inspired it, Regino Sainz, accompanied by the Barcelona Philharmonic Orchestra.

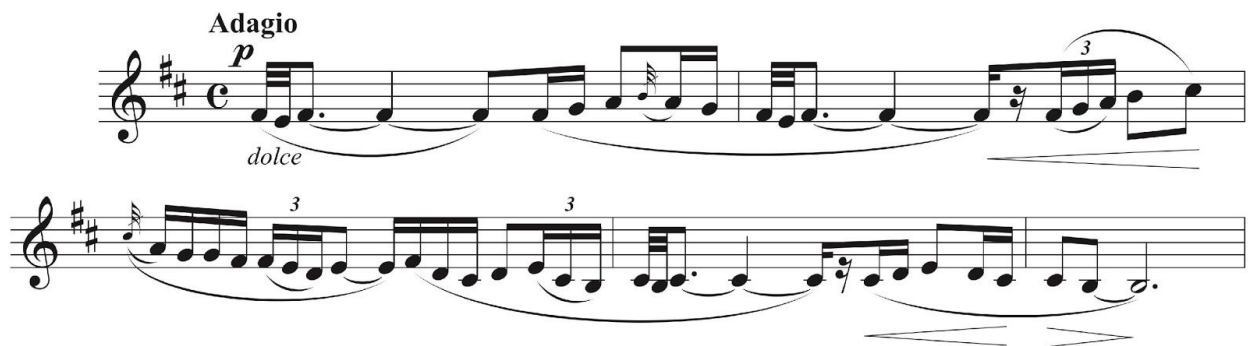
The concerto has the classical three-movement layout. The first is marked *Allegro con spirito*. It starts with the guitar alone strumming an ever louder D major chord, which is played in higher and higher positions on the fretboard. The low “E” string of the guitar has been tuned down a step to “D” to give the chords more resonance and to make it possible to play a D major chord on all six strings. The retuned string also allows low register passagework like the descending D major scale at the end of the guitar’s opening section.



The opening chords of *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

The strumming is in a hemiola rhythm in which the second measure crams three strong beats into the same length of time the first measure has two strong beats. Later on the movement introduces a couple of tunes—a staccato melody for the orchestra and a lyrical one for guitar—but the hemiola rhythm recurs frequently and acts as a unifying element.

The *Adagio* second movement is the heart of the concerto. It is centered around a melancholy legato theme introduced by the English horn accompanied by strings and strummed guitar. The



guitar then claims the melody for itself. Lacking the English horn’s capacity for sustaining notes, the guitar extends notes of the melody with repeated notes and elaborate ornamentation. The orchestra and soloist then take turns expanding and refining the tune. This dialogue is interrupted twice for solo guitar interludes: an extended passage in the instrument’s lowest register and a virtuosic cadenza. The movement ends quietly after an intense restatement of the theme by the orchestra.

Theme of the second movement.

The brief, light-hearted third movement is marked *Allegro*. It seems almost an afterthought to the intense second. Its opening staccato guitar melody sets the mood and becomes the main melody in the rondo-like structure of the movement.

Concierto de Aranjuez has been a great success. It is probably the best known twentieth-century Spanish composition of any sort. It has been recorded over 100 times. It established Rodrigo’s reputation as a composer and led to a number of important commissions, many of them for more guitar music.

The pensive second movement is especially popular and turns up regularly in “greatest hits” compilations. Even jazz trumpeter Miles Davis has recorded a version of it.

The *Concierto* has inspired many other composers to write their own guitar concertos. But Rodrigo’s work, which led the way, remains the gold standard, the favorite of both audiences and performers.

William F. Long