JOAQUÍN RODRIGO

This interview took place in 1992, shortly before the 91st birthday of the most celebrated Spanish composer since Manuel de Falla. Joaquín Rodrigo was in London with his daughter Cecilia. There had been a reception at the Spanish Institute to mark the publication of his wife's book, *Hand in hand with Joaquín Rodrigo* (by Victoria Kamhi de Rodrigo, Latin American Literary Review Press, Pittsburgh, 1992). The next morning I went to his hotel with my colleague Thérèse Wassily Saba, armed with the usual paraphernalia of tape recorder, camera, flashgun. The maestro was visibly tired, and barely responded to questions. There was no need to worry, however, because Cecilia, a devoted daughter if ever there was one, knew all the answers. For instance, to my question about which of his very many guitar pieces meant the most to him, his sleepy response of 'No se' ('I don't know') was speedily translated by his daughter into a list of three works beginning with the *Aranjuez* Concerto and including *Invocación y Danza* and, if my memory is correct, *Tres piezas Españolas*. It was amusing, but it was also touching.

Joaquín Rodrigo was born on 22 November 1901 (St Cecilia's Day) —not, as several reference books would have it, 1902. In 1991 the Sociedad General de Autores de España in association with the Spanish Ministry of Culture and the Quincentennial Society of Spain paid homage to Spain's most distinguished living composer in the form of an international festival of his music, the first time in Spanish history that a living composer has been honored in this way. The festival took place in 15 musical capitals of the world, culminating in a closing concert on 12 September 1992, given as part of the World Fair Exhibition in Seville.

To be able to compose at all is a tremendous achievement for someone who has been blind from the age of three years. The cause was diphtheria, a disease that killed many children before an efficient preventative was found later in the century. But it led the young Joaquín Rodrigo towards music, and at the age of eight he began to study sol-fa, piano and violin; harmony and composition began later, at 16. Few non-afflicted members of an audience ever reflect on the exceptional will power that such an undertaking entails.

In 1927 Rodrigo went to Paris to study with Paul Dukas. He became known as a pianist as well as a composer, and was the friend of Falla, Honegger, Milhaud, Ravel and many others. He married the pianist Victoria Kamhi in 1933.

Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

Guitarists know Rodrigo chiefly for five concertos and a considerable number of other works for guitar, although not many of those have found their way into the general repertoire. Of these, Rodrigo said, he has a special feeling for the *Tres Piezas Españolas*, *Tríptico* and *Invocación y Danza*, the last of which won a prize in Paris and turns up regularly in recitals and competitions. Among the five concertos, the *Aranjuez* (1939) of course is the most popular, but the *Concierto Andaluz* (1977) is getting more and more performances — partly because the number of guitar quartets is increasing by leaps and bounds, and partly because people like the work.

'I was in Vienna last week,' said Cecilia Rodrigo, Joaquín's daughter. 'The Romeros Quartet played to about 2,000 people, the hall was full, and some people were standing, and after the *Concierto Andaluz* they were clapping for more than a quarter of an hour.' The concerto was an undoubted success, and so, added Cecilia Rodrigo, was the *Concerto Madrigal* (1969) for two guitars and orchestra. 'They are catching on, little by little,' she said. Strangely enough, although the *Concierto Andaluz* is popular in the United States and in Europe (particularly in the eastern countries and in Germany, though perhaps not so much in Britain), it has never been performed in Spain.

It is only comparatively recently that Cecilia Rodrigo, with commendable initiative and enormous energy, has been able to devote time to the promotion of her father's music. To that end she has formed her own publishing company — Ediciones Joaquín Rodrigo — and has begun the lengthy and often tedious process of retrieving the various copyrights from other publishers, some of whom have not been able to maintain her father's work in print. This venture has brought her into contact with more guitarists, and she is impressed by the network through which information is disseminated. 'Everyone knows one another, and everyone knows the music,' as she put it. It is this unstructured but complex organization that has enabled the first but unpublished version of *Invocación y Danza* to be performed by numerous guitarists despite the differences from the published version. Rodrigo himself prefers the original version; and his daughter would like it to be publicly known. How many guitarists can actually play the first version (it is widely held to have some impossible things in it) is another matter.

Rodrigo still composes, but he does not dictate any more: the work of dictation is extremely hard, needing a lot of concentration. He composes at the piano, recording the notes in braille, always standing up in front of his machine to do it. He returns to the piano for revision. It will mean a problem for future scholars, because only he can read his own manuscripts: not only are they in braille, but they are in a very personal form of braille, and not even another unsighted musician would be able to understand them. Deciphering Rodrigo's late manuscripts will be akin to deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls or Linear B.

'Audiences don't always realize what it means to compose when you are blind,' said Cecilia Rodrigo. 'There were times when he had to compose during the night, because in the daytime he worked and did other things. It was after ten at night, after dinner, that the copyist came, and my father would dictate until two or three o'clock in the morning. That went on year after year, day after day.'

Cecilia Rodrigo was trained as a dancer in the Royal Ballet in England. She opened her own ballet school in Brussels, but gave that up in order to become a publisher in 1987. It took her two years to establish what had to be done, and the publishing company was eventually was set up in 1989.

'I concentrated my efforts on recovering most of the catalogue which was in other publishers' hands. We recovered quite a lot in fact. We have most of the important symphonic works, we have the violin concerto, and quite a few works for guitar. A wide and large range.'

An important factor is the support provided by the Spanish Society of Authors, which makes it easier for the Rodrigos to attend and to exhibit at large events like the Frankfurt Music Fair, where Ediciones Joaquín Rodrigo had their own stand. Cecilia sees this as a shrewd investment; it means that Spanish music is overcoming a previous tendency towards isolation and is becoming much better known around the world. 'For me it's very easy, because most of this music is well known. But very often people couldn't find my father's music. They would ask for titles, and they were just impossible to find. I don't know what they were doing, these publishers.' It is by no means an uncommon story.

Part of the operation involves Ediciones Joaquín Rodrigo sending music to countries that would otherwise have difficulty in obtaining it — Cuba, for example, where a donation of music has been made to that country's Society of Composers. In the International Guitar Festival of Havana in May there was a concert devoted to Rodrigo's music that included the *Concierto Andaluz* for four guitars. 'We donated the scores, as we are doing in other countries such as Russia. It's a way of making the music known and promoting it. Before, I couldn't do this, because I wasn't a publisher and I did not have access to the scores. I can tell you that in only three years this way of working has produced an effect.'

She finds it hard to understand why publishers don't reissue the works. 'A publisher should always have the music available. Always! Even if it is not successful, if you have a contract, you must honor it.

'Thanks to the help of many people, I think I have been very successful. It is something that a composer cannot always do, because he is composing, he is doing his job. I think I was very lucky to be able to realize soon enough that I could do something. I mean, I think it was a little bit late — but not *too* late.'

Cecilia Rodrigo has recovered the whole of the Rodrigo section in the Max Eschig catalogue, some 22 works, many of them important. 'The *Concierto Andaluz* was formerly published by Salabert. We got the *Cello Concerto* back as well. I think we have done very well, and I am very happy. But everyone is

helping me. At the moment we are printing the *Violin Concerto.*'

Joaquín Rodrigo is one of those composers who understand the importance of a good title. Not for him the Opus 17 or the Study Number Seven or the Prelude in B flat minor; his titles convey the scents and sights of Spain, and they are memorable: *Aranjuez, Andaluz, Madrigal, Fantasia para un Gentilhombre, Invocación y Danza, Sonata Giocoso, Bajando de la Mesta.* Away from the guitar, it's the same story: pianists have *El Album de Cecilia, A L'Ombre de Torre Bermeja, Danza de la Amapola, Gran Marcha de los Subsecretarios, Preludio al Gallo Mañanero, Zarabanda Lejana*; and his orchestral works are no less colorful: *A La Busca del Más Allá, A Sagunto, Dos Piezas Caballerescas* (a version exists for four guitars, incidentally), *Homenaje a la Tempranica*, and many others. These works are not widely known, partly because they are often difficult to obtain, and partly because orchestras (not to mention guitarists and other instrumentalists) generally play safe and stick to what they know. Among guitarists, *Invocación y Danza* has caught on; it is a rewarding piece, full of poetry and subtle allusions to Falla, but one would welcome the opportunity to hear some of his other guitar works for a change. There are 24 altogether listed in the Catálogo General, not counting the concertos; guitarists generally play no more than five or six at the most. Why? Have they tried them all and found the other 17 deficient in some way? And if they haven't tried them, how do they know they are not missing a masterpiece? Why must guitarists be so unadventurous?

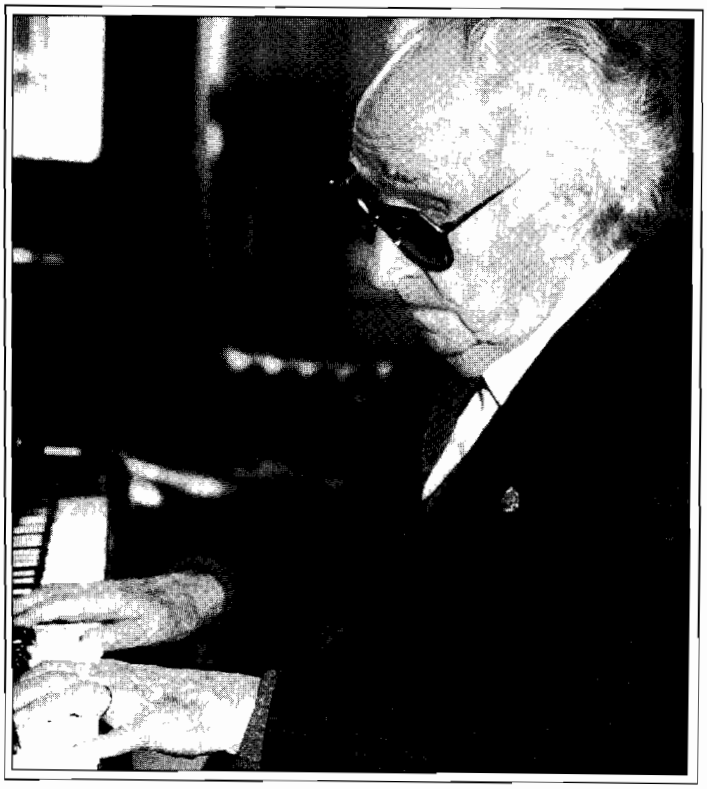

Photo by Colin Cooper

Joaquín Rodrigo has written a ballet called *Havana Real.* It has been performed in Germany and Spain and in Buenos Aires. It is not in the catalogue, but an orchestral suite is to be made out of it. In the ballet is a Romance for solo guitar, *Romance de Durandarte* (originally written for piano in 1955). 'Always the guitar everywhere!' said Cecilia Rodrigo with a laugh.

She does not, however, think that there will be any more guitar works, though 'He always says that he will never again write for the guitar, but he's been saying that for 20 or 30 years.' Why has he changed his mind so often? 'I think it is because he has so many guitarist friends. They approach him and ask him to write something. So he goes on writing.'

One of his most recent guitar pieces is *Un Tiempo Fue Italica Famosa*, five minutes long and written in 1981. It is published by Schott, with fingerings by Angel Romero.

Like Segovia before him, Rodrigo seems to travel rather more than one might expect of a nonagenarian. 'He feels a little bit lazy each time I tell him that we have to go somewhere,' said his daughter. 'But he's so nice and so easy to convince, and he usually says "Well, let's go!". But he doesn't complain much about going to London. It's become a habit: he's been so often that he doesn't mind.' Rodrigo's wife, Victoria Kamhi, had stayed home in Madrid on this occasion. Cecilia, an only child, was missing her, but her mother has some difficulty in walking now and, understandably, it places too much of a strain on Cecilia to accompany both parents on a trip abroad.

She thinks her father is often unaware of just how popular his music is. 'He has always been very humble, very modest, and now, with age, he can't realize any more how things are going. I tell him that such-and-such a work was played and there were so many thousand people in the audience, and he says "Really?" I say how many records have been sold, and he says: "It's impossible! I can't believe that."'

Joaquín Rodrigo is a worker. His early struggles would have defeated a weaker and less strong-willed man. Fame was not something that was actively sought, but something that came as a kind of by-product of his composition. Cecilia herself was not aware of the increasing fame as she grew up. 'I never

took much notice of his music, as a matter of fact,' she admits. 'It was so normal. I began to realize much later on. Now people are very kind to him. We often receive letters from English people, who don't know him but want to say how much they like his music.' And each instrumental work brings letters from instrumentalists, expressing their appreciation. The two Cello Concertos seem to have attracted a correspondence in this way.

There was a guitarist in Holland, said Cecilia Rodrigo, who wanted to transcribe the Cello Concerto *In Modo Galante* (1949) for the guitar, but Rodrigo said 'No. There is enough guitar already.' The *Concierto Andaluz* has been transcribed (from four guitars to eight guitars), but there had been no objection to that. It had been done for a guitar orchestra in Munich, Germany, who are recording it.

Talking about transcriptions, Cecilia Rodrigo said that she had been angry at some of the criticisms that had been made against the *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre*. 'They said that the music was by Gaspar Sanz and that Rodrigo had only made a transcription. It is not true; the Fantasia is such a personal and beautiful work.' Here Cecilia Rodrigo opened the book (*Hand in Hand with Rodrigo*) in order to quote something that Segovia ('a very clever man') had written to Rodrigo at the time of the first performance: ' I hadn't wanted to say anything, but being familiar with Gaspar Sanz's work, I did feel that the founding for the basis of the work you were starting was very weak. Fortunately, like a spider, you produced the thread you needed to weave your own work.'

Some weeks previously Rodrigo and his daughter had dined with Sir Michael Tippett. She had the impression that Tippett's music was played far more in Britain than her father's music was played in Spain. Spain, she felt, was backward in appreciating the genius of its own artists.

Could that in some way be a legacy from the turbulence of Spain's recent history? Cecilia did not want to talk about that; her father was non-political, and had been consistent in his non-political stance. 'People were wondering why, when so many other composers were leaving the country, he came back after the war. He was different, he writes differently from everybody else, he does things in his own particular way.' He was criticized for it, of course, and it was sometimes assumed that because he returned to live in Spain when many other prominent artists stayed away that he was a supporter of Franco. Nothing could be further from the truth, declared Cecilia Rodrigo. 'A letter from my father addressed to my mother states very clearly that he came back only because he wanted to return to his own country. He had been away for twelve years, studying and working with difficulty, and he wanted to come back. And that was all.' Spain, felt Cecilia, was a country where you were knocked if you became successful, and knocked as strongly as possible. Nevertheless, Joaquín Rodrigo had achieved success in Spain, not only for his music but for his qualities as a human being.

When the interview was over, Joaquín Rodrigo sat at the grand piano that stood in the hotel lounge and played the slow movement of the *Aranjuez*, missing out a few notes but going back, sometimes more than once, to correct them. When that was over, he launched into a Bach fugue, much more sure of himself and rapping out the voices firmly and clearly and without mistakes: an impressive performance by any standards. Rodrigo at 90 is not only a figurehead, an icon, but a living artist, still capable of producing good work. It seems certain that there will be no further guitar pieces. Before we say, automatically, 'What a pity!', we should reflect on what he has already contributed to the guitar. Few composers, dead or alive, have done as much.

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