

Ballet Music from “Le Cid,” Jules Massenet (1842-1912)

Jules Massenet was the most famous French opera composer in the late 1800s. His opera, *Le Cid* was based on a play by Corneille about a Spanish hero and was first performed in 1885. There are contradictory reports about its success, with most indicating it met with little or none. However, as every French opera must have ballet, the ballet music from *Le Cid* has lived on, becoming standard orchestral repertoire. Each of the seven movements is named for a region of Spain.

Popular at the time of its composition, French composers used a compositional technique referred to as exoticism, drawing on the sounds and characteristics of another country’s nationalist idiom. It is doubtful that Massenet, a French composer, used actual Spanish dances as the basis for his ballet music, but the instrumentation and rhythms certainly do remind the listener of Spain and its music.

Castillane is French for the Spanish region of Castile, meaning “land of castles.” The castanets, tambourines, and rhythms (including hemiolas) certainly give this movement a Spanish flair.

Andalouse, also French, is a term loosely associated with Spanish dances from Andalusia, including the fandango, malaguena, and polo. The rhythm opening this movement is reminiscent of the more famous habanera (a Cuban dance) from Bizet’s *Carmen* (Bizet was also French and *Carmen* is also a French opera drawing on Spanish idioms).

Aragonaise means derived from Aragon, a region of northeastern Spain.

Aubade is another word for alba, or “dawn song.” It has its history in refined love poetry of the medieval French troubadours and trouveres, but was also associated with the Spanish. Both nations had their version of the alba, which was usually performed at day break under the balcony or window of the person honored in the song. The harp and pizzicato strings are reminiscent of a guitar being strummed as a solo singer might accompany one’s self in an alba.

The **Catalane** is French for a typical Spanish dance from Catalonia, an historic region of Spain, encompassing the northeastern provinces of Girona, Barcelona, Tarragona, and Lleida. Massenet’s Catalane borrows the dotted eighth, sixteenth, two eighths rhythm from the habanera and features a dark and accentuated melody in the cellos.

The nearest association for **Madrilene** found is Madrileno, or citizen of Madrid, so it could be assumed that Massenet drew inspiration for this movement from the Spanish dances of Madrid. It begins very slowly with a duet between the solo English horn and a solo flute, both alternating a somewhat free melody giving way to a quick and rhythmic section accentuated by Spanish rhythms and castanets.

Navarraise apparently draws inspiration from the Spanish autonomous community of Navarra.