



Avant-guarding Mompou

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Misunderstood and neglected in his lifetime, the solitary Catalan composer Federico Mompou is finally being championed for his meditative miniatures. Michael Johnson reports

The quiet, calming strains of the late Catalonian composer Federico Mompou seemed so nebulous that he was not taken seriously outside of Spain during his lifetime. 'There is no discourse, no argument, no development in this music', says Adolf Pla, a Spanish pianist and friend of the family. 'But the international public is now beginning to understand his profound meaning and accept him.'



Pla has a point. Recently, there are signs of a global Mompou revival as pianists discover him and master his finely balanced harmonies. Recital programmes and several new albums attest to his broadening appeal. Mompou, who died in 1987 at the age of 94, would be surprised and probably pleased to receive this recognition.

The attraction of Mompou's music is in its atmosphere and moods, not in Bach-like rigour or Beethovenian structures. His compositions rarely last more than three minutes, aiming to strip out superfluous notation and leave only the essentials. His music has been compared favourably to the works of Anton Webern and Alban Berg – but with tonality.

Mompou's harmony 'needs no more than an almost-nothing, a semitone, an aberrant note, and the almost-perfect chord to become "imperfect"... He never completely severs his original link to "sonorous voluptuousness", writes the French musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch in his notes accompanying the 2009 release of Mompou performing his own music: Mompou: The Complete Piano Works (Brilliant Classics 6515).

Arcadi Volodos, the Russian virtuoso now living in Spain, helped trigger the revival a few years ago with his recitals and album Volodos plays Mompou (Sony 88765433262). He reportedly had to cajole Sony Classics into backing the project, initially dismissed as 'bad business'. Planning an appearance at Vienna's Musikverein, Volodos was even urged to ditch Mompou from his proposed programme. The Viennese advised him: 'Give them Schubert!' Volodos insisted on his Catalonian discovery and has never looked back.

Volodo's delicate interpretations scored a surprise hit for Sony, prompting the label to admit they had underestimated the Catalan master. The album sold well and inspired

many international players including Daniil Trifonov, Stephen Hough, Benjamin Grosvenor, Guillaume Coppola, Judith Jáuregui and Ernest So, to present their own selections from Mompou's voluminous output. His miniatures have even started turning up on Yuja Wang's latest programmes.

Another notable Mompou interpreter is the English pianist Imogen Cooper, who brings an eerie lyricism and profound introspection to *Cançon y danzas* (Songs and Dances) Nos 1 and 6 on her 2019 album *Iberia y Francia* (CHAN20119). Meanwhile, Andrew Tyson's latest release on the Alpha label presented an interesting selection from Mompou's *Paisajes* (Landscapes) series (ALPHA546).

More recently still, the promising young Catalan pianist Maria Canyigueral has combined music by Mompou with eight Mompou-inspired miniatures she commissioned from European composers. Her album *Avant-guarding Mompou* was launched last month on the audite label (AUDITE20044). Canyigueral, who is now London-based following her Royal Academy studies, likens Mompou's spare compositions to 'a winter tree – raw and pure', full of vitality but not ornamented with leaves. 'I connect with them emotionally', she says. 'Mompou evokes beauty, good intentions, hope, joy. Mediterranean spirit, sincerity and sensitivity'.

Mompou developed his style partly as a result of childhood disorders that his biographer Pla believes might be diagnosed today as Asperger's syndrome. All his life he was uncommunicative and somewhat solitary. Mompou himself liked to say, 'I am a man of few words and a musician of few notes.' Son of a French mother and Spanish father, he demonstrated enough talent to be accepted at the Paris Conservatoire when Gabriel Fauré was at the helm. He ended up spending 20 years in Paris mixing with leading music personalities but never quite emerging on his own.

Why this late blooming? Is it perhaps understandable, considering that Mompou himself described his music as 'a weak heartbeat'? Pla believes it was ahead of its time: appreciating it requires an attitude of contemplation and meditation'.

Ernest So has reflected on Mompou's rebirth. 'I think seasoned listeners and pianists have overdosed on Liszt, Chopin and Rachmaninov, but are now seeking out different spiritual and cathartic experiences', he explains. 'I, for one, find performing Mompou a distinctly different experience from playing anything else.' An adoptive Catalan, So says he likes to pause zen-like at the piano and imagine the Catalan countryside 'before I let out the first chords'.

French pianist Guillaume Coppola is another fan, whose 2019 album *Musique de Silence* (Eloquence E1857) places Mompou's music in a wider historical context. He interweaves Mompou miniatures with pieces by Chopin, Debussy, Satie, Granados, Scriabin, Ravel, Dutilleux and Takemitsu. Coppola's dogged research reveals echoes of these composers hidden away in many of Mompou's works. Studying urtext and autograph scores wherever possible, Coppola analysed the pieces measure by measure, hearing sonorities and nothing shared influences. He focused on the 28 miniatures called *Música callada* ('Voice of Silence'), identifying resonances as well as free associations. For example, a Scriabin prelude comes before a Mompou gem marked 'Lento, plaintif', while a Satie *Gnossienne* precedes 'Secreto' from Mompou's 1912 collection *Impresiones intimas*.

About half of Coppola's selections are taken from *Música callada*, including the album's title, *Volodos* has called this oeuvre, which Mompou composed near the end of his days, 'without a doubt the summit of his achievement, the music he spent all his life moving toward'.

As Coppola devoted more time to his research, 'more subtle convergences occurred to me,' he writes in his booklet notes. 'The post-Romantic accents appear in some pieces, or clusters of resonant chords à la Dutilleux, or the diaphanous clours of Debussy, or the play of light of Ravel'. Out of them comes a warm feeling of peace.

Coppola has performed *Música callada* in recitals around France, barely stopping to pause between pieces. 'The public hears this music as a single work', he explains, 'and seems to love the flow'. The audience is asked to withhold applause so as not to disturb the quiet. Even the pianist needs to achieve inner peace before touching the keyboard. 'I breathe deeply and slowly, I push the diaphragm down, like a singer', says Coppola. 'I want physical relaxation so as to achieve supple movements. I put myself in a sort of bubble of silence and serenity.'

Volodos believes he has divined the power of Mompou's style. 'I would say he is not trying to be heard but rather is attempting to be united with the listener in musical silence... The listener can feel the solitude acutely – not as a void but as a source of plentiful spiritual tension'.

Voice of silence

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Pia has a point. Recently, there are signs of a global Mompou revival as pianists discover him and master his finely balanced harmonies, fleet programmes and several new albums attest to his broadening appeal. Mompou, who died in 1987 at the age of 94, would be surprised and probably pleased to receive this recognition.

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Mompou's harmony 'needs no more than an almost nothing, a sentence, an aberrant note, and the almost perfect chord to become "imperfect". He never completely severs his original link to "sonorous voluptuousness", writes the French musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch in his notes accompanying the 2009 release of Mompou's performing his own music: *Mompou: The Complete Piano Works* (Brilliant Classics 6515).

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Federico Mompou (1893–1987)



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Another notable Mompou interpreter is the English pianist Imogen Cooper, who brings an eerie lyricism and profound introspection to *Canciones y danzas* (Songs and Dances) Nos 1 and 4 on her 2019 album *Imogen y Francis* (CHAN20119). Meanwhile, Andrew Tyson's latest release on the Alpha label presented an interesting selection from Mompou's *Paisajes* (Landscapes) series (ALPHA546).

More recently still, the promising young Catalan pianist Marta Canyigral has combined music by Mompou with eight Mompou-inspired miniatures she commissioned from European composers. Her album *Arcadi guarding Mompou* was launched last month on the Audite label (AUDITE20044). Canyigral, who is now London-based following her Royal Academy studies, likens Mompou's spare compositions to a 'winter tree – raw and pure, full of vitality but not ornamented with leaves. I connect with them emotionally', she says. 'Mompou evokes beauty, good intentions, hope, joy, Mediterranean spirit, sincerity and sensitivity.'

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Ernest So has reflected on Mompou's rebirth. 'I think awestruck listeners and pianists have overlooked on Liszt, Chopin and Rachmaninov, but are now seeking out different spiritual and cathartic experiences', he explains. 'For one, find performing Mompou a distinctly different experience from playing anything else'. An adoptive Catalanian, So says he likes to pause now like at the piano and imagine the Catalan countryside 'before I let out the first chord'.



Arcadi Volodos: 'Mompou is not trying to be heard, but rather to be united with the listener in musical silence'

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Mompou: The Complete Piano Works (Brilliant Classics 6515)