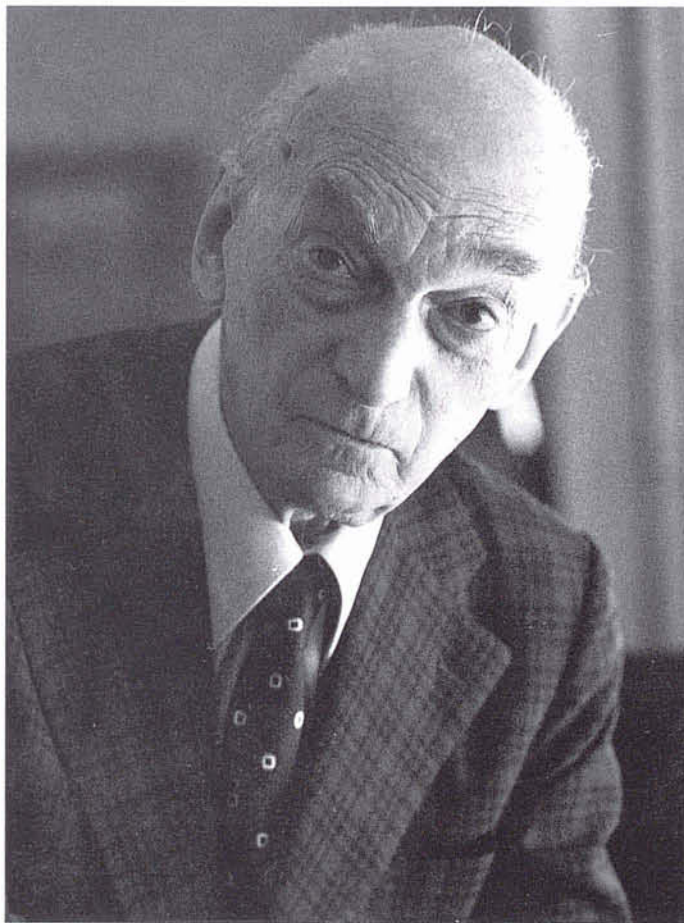


FREDERIC MOMPOU



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MOMPOU IN 1975

MOMPOU (BARCELONA, 1893-1987) IS ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING COMPOSERS IN THE HISTORY OF CATALAN MUSIC. THIS YEAR IS THE CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH.

MONTSERRAT ALBET MUSICOLOGIST

For Catalan culture 1993 is a year in which a number of very special centenaries coincide: that of the painter Joan Miró, those of the poets Carles Riba and J.V. Foix and that of the musician Frederic Mompou. Mompou is one of the most outstanding composers in the history of Catalan music, with an extensive production ranging over more than half a century, whose originality is raising more and more interest, especially amongst young people, who are seduced by the beauty and coherence of his work. His pieces for voice and piano and for piano alone are the most significant aspect of his creation, undoubtedly one of the most important realised for piano in the whole of the twentieth century. Sometimes the importance of this instrument is so great that it appears to us as if it were an extension of the musician; indeed, for him, the piano is a precious auxiliary, irreplaceable in establishing contact with the material.

For sixty years Mompou worked rigorously and continuously, stimulating our sense of hearing with the simplest means. A handful of notes are enough to produce the "Mompou sound". The key word in his style is "recommencing", starting from scratch. In this way he created a primitive music, one shrouded in mystery and magic, one which at the same time is the music of a visionary who successfully reveals the meaning of things that are humble and forgotten, and which, in the hands of the composer, become alive and full of meaning. Frederic Mompou was born in Barcelona on 16 April 1893, in the Poble Sec district. His childhood was spent in industrial areas, districts full of noise and sound. His father, Frederic Mompou, came from Ginestar d'Ebre, in the Camp de Tarragona region; his mother, Josefina Dencausse, and her family came from Tarbes, a French town, the capital of the Hauts Pyrenées Department. His father and uncle had moved to Barcelona in the mid-nineteenth century to set up a branch of the bell-foundry the Dencausse family had in Tarbes. The new foundry stood at the foot of Montjuïc. The fascination for sound that Mompou felt as a child might have originated in these bells and their harmonious sounds. On his frequent visits to the foundry, the child felt drawn to the sounds that rang through the great



PICTURE BY JOSEP MOMPOU

workshop and he would try to identify the exact note produced by each of the instruments. "I like chords that have the resonance of a bell". Not only did Mompou preserve this love for the sound of bells, he even took his inspiration from it when he created his own characteristic metallic chord, whose role is similar to that played by the mystic chord of the Russian Scriabin. Years later, Mompou said of this chord of his, "It is the symbol of all my music".

In 1911 Mompou made the inevitable journey to Paris that all the Catalan artists of the time dreamt of. He spent some twenty years in the French capital, in three periods of unequal length, which he alternated with Barcelona. He said that the solitude of large urban agglomerations let him live his inner life more fully: "I enjoy life and I search for solitude, but the solitude of the large cities".

The earliest of Mompou's works to have survived are *Impressions íntimes* (1911-1914) and *Pessebres* (1914-1917); *Scènes d'enfants* (1915-1918) and *Jeunes filles au jardin*. During 1916 and 1917 he wrote *Suburbis*, where, in a way that is poetic and realistic, he captures a series of images or impressions that had struck him in his walks around the outlying districts of Barcelona. A bit later, Mompou cultivated a new side: *Cants màgics* (1919), his first published composition, which can be considered a forerunner of *Charmes* (1920), a piece shrouded in mystery, and of *Fêtes lointaines* (1920), the great festival of memory.

Frederic Mompou's international career began in 1920 during his second stay in Paris, after the pianist Ferdinand Motte-

Lacroix, his former teacher, performed *Scènes d'enfants*, *Cants màgics* and *Quatre gloses sobre cançons catalanes* in the French capital for the first time. This concert motivated an article on Mompou in *Le Temps*, signed by the famous Parisian critic E. Vuillermoz, who praised the composer's innovative work.

The composer's wish is present in this work: the wish to recover the lost years, just as, when a child, he hid all sorts of toys and other items in the family garden in the Putget, with the sole object of rediscovering them years later and thus denying the passage of the years and seeing the past become present.

From 1932 to 1942, Mompou crossed the desert, as Schöenberg, Falla and so many others had done. In the forties he began the triptych *Combat del somni*, based on poems by the publisher Josep Janés: *Damunt de tu només les flors*, *Aquesta nit un mateix vent*, *Jo et presentia com el mar*, the first of which forms part of the repertory of the majority of *lieder* singers today. During those years, Mompou also continued his collection of *Cançons i danses* begun in 1921. Although it is composed almost entirely on traditional Catalan subject matter, this is no justification for labelling Mompou a nationalist musician. On this subject, Mompou himself said, "It annoys me that I should be described as a nationalist composer. All my music is impregnated with the Catalan spirit, by means of specific characteristic chords or resonances. I have never used a single piece directly".

It is admirable how, by very simple means and procedures, like the introduction of a chord or the modification of a rhythm, popular elements suddenly acquire the "Mompou sound".

In 1959, Mompou began work on his masterpiece *Música callada*, inspired in the work of the poet and mystic Saint John of the Cross. The lines "*la música callada, la soledad sonora*" were for Mompou the starting point for the maximum expression of his music: "These four notebooks contain the whole essence of my music (...). These pieces reflect my search for the concrete form".

These words could be a homage to the musician who died on 30 June 1987 at his home on Passeig de Gràcia in Barcelona. ■