


Substantial Disruption



Blood and the Bolero

By Mike Tully

"I don't know what will become of this piece. Our brave critics will no doubt charge me with imitating Ravel's Bolero. Too bad - this is how I hear war."

— Dmitri Shostakovich

Ida Rubenstein strode onto the Paris Opera stage on November 22, 1928, and stepped onto a table. The set resembled a rustic Spanish tavern and several couples danced below a brass lamp hanging from the ceiling. They encouraged a female dancer to join them. A snare drum softly tapped out a modest rat, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat and Ida Rubenstein began to dance. "Ida portrayed a voluptuous dancer whose suggestive dance atop a table in a rustic Spanish tavern incites the men to dance with her until they lose further control of their 'senses,' and end up in a violent brawl," [wrote J. M. Lacey](#) for *Season Ticket* in 2010. The dance "caused a sensation," he said. "When the piece ended, Ida's provocative dance and Ravel's dynamic music caused a near-riot between the audience and the performers." "Ida narrowly escaped injury," he added.

Ida Rubenstein died in 1960 but "Ravel's dynamic music," the "Bolero," seems immortal. "White Rabbit," Grace Slick's epic psychedelic anthem, was inspired by the *Bolero*. Like Ravel's work, "White Rabbit" starts almost quietly, building on itself with increasing intensity until its orgasmic "Feed your head" crescendo. "Young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse," [wrote music critic Allan Bloom](#). "That is why Ravel's 'Bolero' is the one piece of classical music that is commonly known and liked by them." "Look, there's nothing wrong with people being happy," [said the late director Blake Edwards](#), "but there's more to life than turning on and screwing to Ravel's Bolero."

There is a dangerous urgency in the pulse of the *Bolero*, the knowledge that relentlessly winding toward an inevitable crescendo does not always lead to ecstasy, but sometimes to disaster. The *Bolero* is a hazardous addition to a road trip music collection. Put on the *Bolero* and, if you lose yourself in the music and don't pay attention to your driving, you may suddenly realize the white dashes form a solid line and the speedometer is reading three digits. The relentless pulse can do that to the listener. Drink in the *Bolero* and become its slave. Lose yourself in the music and court catastrophe.

We are living in a *Bolero* time. Donald Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong-un are tapping out a rhythm of threats and insults, each feeding the mad melody as it lurches toward its inevitable crescendo. Rat, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat. Kim defies the world and ignores economic sanctions as he orders escalating bomb and rocket tests. Trump retaliates by calling the North Korean leader names, first "Rocket Man," then, "Little Rocket Man." He even goes before the United Nations and threatens to "totally destroy" Kim's country. Rat, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat. If his intent was to personally insult Kim and elicit a response, he succeeded. The North Korean leader, in a rare video appearance to his nation, made it clear he took Trump's insults personally, calling him a "mentally deranged US dotard" who should be attacked "with fire" – echoing Trump's threat to attack North Korea with "fire and fury and frankly power the likes of which this world has never seen before." Rat, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat.

Both Trump and Kim have called each other madmen and accused the other of being on a "suicide mission." Most commentators seem to agree that neither of them is literally insane or suicidal and, for that reason, war is unlikely. But the drumbeat of warlike threats concerns many, one of whom [commented](#), "This is how war by miscalculation starts." Like the relentless pulse of the *Bolero*, the aggressive leaders crank the armature of war over and over and, unless one of them stills his hand, the cable will snap from the strain.

Both are fearful, especially the North Korean. Kim Jong-un lives in [constant fear of assassination](#) by a "decapitation team" working under the direction of South Korea and the United States. He travels constantly, hides his whereabouts, and has [molded his country](#) into a gulag of spies, with common citizens trained to identify and report "ideological impurity" that threatens his regime's survival. He has good reason to be frightened. A [recent interview](#) with a young, female defector paints him as a vicious dictator who takes young girls for sex slaves, forces supporters to witness horrific executions, and enjoys an opulent lifestyle while his countrymen starve. He rules by fear, not devotion, and lives in the shadow of death. If he believes war is the key to his political and personal survival, he will opt for war. And, while the bumbling Trump cannot match Kim's depravity, his regime is in jeopardy from investigations into the tangled relationship between his presidential campaign and Russia. Nothing restores legitimacy like going to war. Rat, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat.

"Those whom God wishes to destroy he drives mad," wrote Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. Trump and Kim are making statements riddled with madness, infected with threats of fire and fury and seasoned with personal insults. The crescendo is coming.