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“Variety within Logic”: Classicism in the Works of Isaac Albéniz.

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Abstract

The characteristic view we usually have of Isaac Albéniz is as a champion of late-Romantic and early-modern *españolismo*, a composer who first defined the Spanish style in the 1880s with his ever-popular *Suite española no. 1* and *Recuerdos de viaje*, then went on to redefine this style under the influence of French modernism as he experienced it in his adoptive city of Paris during the 1890s and early 1900s. Through the two decades of his career as the leading peninsular exponent of a Spanish national style in serious art music, Albéniz drew repeatedly on the inexhaustible supply of regional folklore available to him, not so much through printed collections but through direct experience and recollection, garnered during his extensive travels through Spain as a concert pianist during the 1870s and 1880s. However, reducing a complex artist like Albéniz to such a simple formulation is hazardous and, in fact, highly misleading. There are many facets of his musical personality, and aside from Romanticism and modernism, one must add classicism to the list of traits that distinguished his output. In this article, I wish to explore not the Romantic or modernist in Albéniz but rather the classicist, and finally to see how, in his *Iberia*, these three components of his artistic personality merged to create one of the great masterpieces in the piano repertoire.

Keywords: Albéniz, Sonatas, *Suites anciennes*, *Iberia*, classicism, Romanticism, modernism.

Resumen

La vista característica que generalmente tenemos de Isaac Albéniz es como un paladín de los fines del españolismo romántico y principios del españolismo moderno, un compositor quien definió por primera vez el estilo español durante los años mil ochocientos ochenta con su eternamente popular *Suite española no. 1* y *Recuerdos de viaje*, y después pasó a redefinir este estilo bajo la influencia del modernismo francés como lo había experimentado en su ciudad adoptiva de París durante los años mil ochocientos noventa y mil novecientos. Por las dos décadas de su carrera como el máximo exponente peninsular de un estilo nacional español en la música artística formal, Albéniz se basaba repetidas veces en la fuente inagotable de folklore regional que tenía a su disposición, no tanto por colecciones impresas sino por su experiencia y recuerdos directos, recogidos durante sus viajes extensos por España como pianista de concierto durante los años ochocientos setenta y ochenta. Sin embargo, reducir a un artista complejo como Albéniz a una formulación tan sencilla es peligroso, y de hecho sumamente desorientador. Hay muchas facetas de su personalidad musical, y aparte del romanticismo y el modernismo, uno debe de añadir el clasicismo a la lista de rasgos que se destacaron en su producción. En este artículo, no deseo explorar ni el romántico ni el modernista en Albéniz sino el clasicista, y por último para ver cómo, en su *Iberia*, estos tres componentes de su personalidad artística se fundaron para crear una de las grandes obras maestras en el repertorio del piano.

Palabras clave: Albéniz, Sonatas, *Suites anciennes*, *Iberia*, clasicismo, romanticismo, modernismo.

The characteristic view we usually have of Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) is as a champion of late-Romantic and early-modern *españolismo*, a composer who first defined the Spanish style in the 1880s with his ever-popular *Suite española no. 1* and *Recuerdos de viaje*, then went on to redefine this style under the influence of French modernism as he experienced it in his adoptive city of Paris during the 1890s and early 1900s. His transition from *costumbrismo* to *impresionismo* paralleled similar developments in the visual arts, as reflected in the paintings of his compatriots Ignacio Zuloaga, Darío de Regoyos, and Joaquín Sorolla.

Through the two decades of his career as the leading peninsular exponent of a Spanish national style in serious art music, Albéniz drew repeatedly on the inexhaustible supply of regional folklore available to him, not so much through printed collections but through direct experience and recollection, garnered during his extensive travels through Spain as a concert pianist during the 1870s and 80s.

However, reducing a complex artist like Albéniz to such a simple formulation is hazardous and, in fact, highly misleading. There are many facets of his musical personality, and aside from romanticism and modernism, one must add classicism to the list of traits that distinguished his output. In this article, I wish to explore not the romantic or modernist in Albéniz but rather the classicist, and finally to see how, in his *Iberia*, these three components of his artistic personality merged to create a warhorse of the piano repertoire.

On April 20, 1904, the year before setting to work on *Iberia*, Albéniz wrote in his diary that “the ideal formula in art should be ‘variety within logic.’”¹ This sums up his approach to composition, especially in *Iberia*, but it was an approach that evolved over time, as the result of considerable study and effort, as well as of his fundamental nature as an intellectual and artist.

Definition of terms

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary for me to define what I mean by Classicism and Romanticism. In the context of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century music, of course, classicism refers to a predilection for music of the eighteenth century, i.e., Viennese classicism in the works of Mozart, Haydn, and early Beethoven. It can also apply more generally to the entire eighteenth century, including the Baroque, especially the compositional techniques and dance forms of that period. This is certainly the sense in which Neoclassicism is intended, and it is this more inclusive definition I apply here. In general, the classical esthetic itself implies a preference for symmetry, order, harmonious proportions, self-restraint, objectivity, and a willingness to create within clearly defined limits. It implies a rational worldview, and though it does not necessarily exclude conventional religious sentiment and conviction, it tends towards skepticism about the claims of religion in general. Classicism is more concerned with our present reality in the natural world rather than with an imaginary realm of the supernatural.

Romanticism implies a subjective worldview, one often leading to world-weariness and pessimism. A concomitant escapism contributes to a preoccupation with places remote in time and

¹ “[L]a fórmula ideal en arte debería de ser ‘variedad dentro de la lógica.’” Albéniz’s diary is located in the Museu de la Música, Barcelona (Mm), carpeta 4.

space, an absorption in sights, sounds, and sensations for their own sake, and a longing to break through barriers of convention and custom to arrive at deeper insights into the nature of reality itself. Romanticism frequently involves an element of fantasy and a preoccupation with extreme states of being. It also embraces the supernatural and various forms of transcendentalism.

Of course, Friedrich Blume believed that the Classic and Romantic in Western music history were two phases of one larger style period.² Certainly there is no radical break between them, and much of what characterizes the Classical period persists into the Romantic. One such continuity is a fascination with folklore, the songs and dances of the countryside. What changes in the nineteenth century is the significance this repertoire has for composers who draw upon it. In the Classical period, folklore was seen as the expression of people who lived close to nature and who were the authentic representatives of traditional culture. Folklore was quaint, colorful, and evocative. In the nineteenth century, under the influence of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), creative artists increasingly deployed folklore as a marker of national and racial identity, nation and race being two of the major preoccupations of the 1800s. In the opinion of Albéniz, however, variety is the Romantic element contained within the logic of classicism, a philosophical stance that grew out of his personal experience.

Biographical background

The general outlines of Albéniz's life are well known,³ but there are particular elements that contribute to our exploration of his classicism, as defined above. First, he was raised in a Masonic household, as his father was a lodge member. Freemasonry was and remains a secret society embracing rites and rituals of a quasi-religious nature. But despite apparently irrational aspects of Freemasonry, it was actually an organization that encouraged free thought and progressive independence from the dogmas of organized religion and absolutism. It is well known that many of the most progressive thinkers of the eighteenth century were Freemasons, especially in the United States: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson are just three outstanding examples. Of course, so were Haydn and Mozart, though they were not skeptical of Christianity in the way that Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson were.

We do not normally associate Freemasonry with Spain, but it played an important cultural and historical role there as well.⁴ Though Albéniz never became a lodge member, he seems to have inherited from his father something of the liberal ideology of Freemasonry and its skepticism about traditional religion, i.e., its tolerance for spiritual beliefs and practices other than Christianity. In fact,

² Friedrich Blume, *Classic and Romantic Music: A Comprehensive Survey*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), vii. "'Classicism' and 'Romanticism' are just two aspects of one and the same musical phenomenon and of one and the same historical period."

³ Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; paper 2002); Spanish trans. by Paul Silles, *Isaac Albéniz, Retrato de un romántico* (Madrid: Turner, 2002). See also this author's recent work, *Isaac Albéniz: A Research and Information Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴ See Jacinto Torres Mulas, "Música y masonería en España," in J. A. Ferrer Benimeli, ed., *La masonería española entre Europa y América: VI Simposium Internacional de Historia de la Masonería Española*, 2 vols. (Zaragoza: Gobierno de Aragón, Departamento de Educación y Cultura, 1995), ii, 769-813.

though Freemasons are all deists, Albéniz himself seems to have become something of an atheist during the course of his intellectual development. For instance, in later years he wrote in his diary that:⁵

Those who search for God, those who discuss him, seem to me like those who wish to find a three-legged cat; they forget that it has four, and that God does not exist except in the here and now, that is to say while we live, think, and express ourselves; thus we *are* God, and everything else is songs!!!

Once, while observing a religious procession in Budapest, he saw the crowd beat a man for not taking off his hat as the sacrament passed. Albéniz found such behavior simply “stupid” and wrote disapprovingly in his diary of the “high degree of religious intolerance” on display in this incident.⁶ Even as he approached death in May 1909, he noted to a visitor that though he visited a nearby church every day, he still had no faith. Not surprisingly, he deplored anti-Semitism. He was an ardent Dreyfusard and supported the Jewish officer in the French army wrongly accused of espionage.⁷

In other words, Albéniz was a rationalist, and his rationalism was apparently grounded in a philosophy that reached the zenith of its influence in the eighteenth century. Now, I am not suggesting that faith and reason are incompatible or that religious people are, by definition, irrational. I *am* saying that Albéniz’s stance towards religion was characteristic of the Enlightenment, not of his Romantic idol Liszt. It comes as no surprise, then, that Albéniz wrote only one extant sacred work during his entire career, a lovely setting of Psalm 6, upon the death of his patron Alfonso XII in 1885.⁸ None of his piano works, songs, or stage works take up religious topics in any sustained or serious way.

Finally, his relationship to folklore makes it difficult to label him as a nationalist composer. Nationalism implies a political stance and not merely a detached interest in national folk culture. The purpose of nationalist music is not merely to celebrate folkloric traditions but to hold them aloft as evidence of national uniqueness, superiority, and destiny. Though Spanish rhythms and melodic types permeate so much of Albéniz’s output, it is difficult to find appeals to national superiority in any of his music. After all, he was highly critical of the politics, culture, and religion of his homeland, and he chose to spend the final fifteen years of his life as an expatriate. Would any true nationalist have written, as Albéniz did in his diary, that “The idea of Fatherland can be considered an excusable egotistical sentiment, but never as a virtue”?⁹ Definitely not. All of this suggests that Albéniz’s ideological relationship to folklore had much in common with that of the eighteenth century.

⁵ 21 February 1901 (Mm, car. 4). “Los que buscan á Dios, los que le discuten, me hacen al efecto de los que quieren encontrar tres pies al gato; olvidan que tiene cuatro, y que Dios no existe sino actualmente, es decir mientras vivimos, pensamos, y nos expresamos; entonces somos Dios, todo lo demas son canciones!!!”

⁶ 20 August 1880, in Budapest (Mm, car. 4).

⁷ See Clark, *Portrait*, 198.

⁸ Recovered, edited, and published by Jacinto Torres (Madrid, Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 1994). See Jacinto Torres, “Un desconocido ‘Salmo de difuntos’ de Isaac Albéniz,” *Revista de Musicología* 14, no. 1-2 (1991): 167-212. An oratorio by Albeniz, entitled *El Cristo*, is lost.

⁹ 28 February 1904, in Nice (Mm, car. 4). See Clark, *Portrait*, 218.

Musical background

Indeed, looking at purely musical parameters of his career, we see numerous indications of a predilection for eighteenth-century genres and forms. And these purely musical indicators of his classicist tendencies surface paradoxically during the very period in which he was writing the Spanish-style pieces for which he remains best known.

During his career as a concert pianist in the 1870s and 80s, he placed special emphasis in his programming on eighteenth-century works by J.S. Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. This seems perfectly natural to us now, but it was rather unusual at the time, especially in Spain.¹⁰ For instance, when he was examined upon completion of his studies at the Brussels Conservatory in 1879, one of the pieces he performed was a *Capriccio* by Scarlatti. He was also required to realize figured bass at sight. So capably did he fulfill these requirements that he graduated “*avec distinction*.”¹¹ Albéniz was also an outstanding interpreter of Bach, and after his 1899 performance of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto in Nancy, the director of the conservatory there said that his was an “incomparable interpretation.”¹²

In 1886, Madrid journalist Antonio Guerra y Alarcón published the first biography of Albéniz,¹³ providing a list of his repertoire at that time. The prominence of works by Bach, Handel, Couperin, Rameau, and Scarlatti is conspicuous, as is the abundance of pieces by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Table 1: Baroque and Classical Works in Albéniz’s Repertoire in 1886
(according to Guerra y Alarcón)

Composer	Works
Bach	<i>Chromatic Fantasy, Italian Concerto, English Suite</i> , ten diverse pieces.
Handel	Two suites, prelude and fugue, gavotte, and allemande.
Scarlatti	Twelve works, including sonatas, toccatas, capriccios, and pastorales.
Rameau	Two suites for harpsichord.
Couperin	Ten pieces for harpsichord.
Haydn	Four sonatas and a prelude and fugue.
Mozart	Three concertos, a fantasy, five sonatas, and three minuets.
Beethoven	Two concertos, six sonatas, a fantasy, two collections of bagatelles.

¹⁰ Enrique Granados also placed a lot of emphasis on Bach in his programming and teaching, though somewhat later. See Francesc Bonastre, “La labor de Enric Granados en el proceso de la recepción de la música de Bach en Barcelona,” *Anuario Musical*, no. 56 (2001): 173-83. Also see Walter Aaron Clark, *Enrique Granados: Poet of the Piano* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 70, 74, 168, 170.

¹¹ See Clark, *Portrait*, 38.

¹² “[I]nterpretación incomparable.” In a letter from Joseph Guy-Marie Ropartz to Albéniz now in the Biblioteca de Catalunya, Sección de Música, Epistolario de Albéniz. See Clark, *Portrait*, 198.

¹³ Antonio Guerra y Alarcón, *Isaac Albéniz: Notas crítico-biográficas de tan eminente pianista* (Madrid: Escuela Tipográfica del Hospicio, 1886; reprint Madrid: Fundación Isaac Albéniz, 1990).

In the 1890s, he continued to explore the music of earlier periods while studying (and later teaching) at the Schola Cantorum, where he apparently immersed himself in music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This influence shows up especially in his opera *Merlin*, with its modal harmonies and use of actual Gregorian chant.¹⁴ Albéniz's antiquarian fascination went hand in hand with a rational and intellectually engaged exploration of music science, also apparent in his continuing improvement in orchestration with the assistance of Paul Dukas and Paul Gilson.

His new intellectual approach to composition caused him to disparage those whom he perceived not to be doing likewise. For instance, after attending a performance of *Cavalleria rusticana*, Albéniz criticized the work and its composer:

In all of it one sees nothing more than an excellent nature, but one that study has not developed. It would be futile work to search through the entire score for any didactic detail of interest: in a word, the workmanship is as minimal as can be.¹⁵

His music

How does this play out in his music? This love of the eighteenth century is reflected in several works of his from the 1880s. Their titles alone are a clear indication of his fascination with classicism, and this sets him apart from most of his contemporaries in Spain, though Granados would eventually travel down this same path, a decade later.

Table 2: Works by Albéniz in an Eighteenth-century Style¹⁶

Title	Remarks
Menuet (T. 73)	In <i>Dix Pièces en un recueil</i> , Paris, Leduc, 1922.
"Minuetto a Sylvia," <i>Doce piezas características</i> (T. 86B)	Madrid, Romero, 1889.
<i>Siete estudios en los tonos naturales mayores</i> , op. 65 (T. 67)	Madrid, Romero, 1886.
Sonata no. 1 (T. 57)	Only the Scherzo is extant. Barcelona, Guardia, 1884.
Sonata no. 2 (T. 65)	Lost.
Sonata no. 3 (T. 69): 1. Allegretto, 2. Andante, 3. Allegro assai.	Madrid, Romero, 1887.
Sonata no. 4 (T. 75): 1. Allegro, 2. Scherzino (Allegro), 3. Minuetto (Andantino), 4. Rondó (Allegro).	Madrid, Romero, 1887.

¹⁴ "Veni redemptor genitum," in the first act. See Clark, *Portrait*, 184-85.

¹⁵ 3 June 1897, in Prague (Mm, car. 4). See Clark, *Portrait*, 167.

¹⁶ T. numbers correspond to Jacinto Torres, *Catálogo sistemático descriptivo de las obras musicales de Isaac Albéniz* (Madrid: Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 2001). See also Clark, *Research and Information Guide*, for a works list based on this catalog.

Sonata no. 5 (T. 85): 1. Allegro non troppo, 2. “Minuetto del gallo” (Allegro assai), 3. “Rêverie” (Andante), 4. Allegro.	Madrid, Romero, 1887.
Sonata no. 6 (T. 88)	Lost.
Sonata no. 7 (T. 89)	Only the Minuetto is extant. Madrid, Unión Musical Española, 1962.
<i>Suite ancienne no. 1</i> (T. 62): 1. Gavota, 2. Minuetto.	Madrid, Romero, 1886.
<i>Suite ancienne no. 2</i> (T. 66): 1. Sarabande, 2. Chacone.	Madrid, Romero, 1886.
<i>Suite ancienne no. 3</i> (T. 76): 1. Minuetto, 2. Gavota.	Madrid, Romero, 1887.

Suites anciennes

The *Suites anciennes* were published in Madrid by Romero in 1886-87, at the same time as the more famous *Suite española no. 1*. These are replete with such “antique” dance forms as the gavotte, minuet, sarabande, and chaconne. The sarabande and chaconne bear a distinction that ties them to Albéniz’s cultural heritage: both were dances of Hispanic origin, arriving from the New World as the *zarabanda* and *chacona* and gaining notoriety for their lasciviousness. Only after they made their way to Italy, France, and the rest of Europe did they acquire the courtly elegance with which we associate them today. The obvious source of inspiration for these works was the music of Bach and other Baroque masters.

Siete estudios en los tonos naturales mayores

In his *Catálogo sistemático-descriptivo de las obras musicales de Isaac Albéniz*, Jacinto Torres informs us that Albéniz composed his *Siete estudios en los tonos naturales mayores* in the spring of 1886. He may have been motivated to compose such an academic and pedagogical work in order to secure a teaching post at the Madrid conservatory.¹⁷ In any case, the probable model for this work is, of course, Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The seven major keys here are arranged in ascending fifths starting on C, i.e., C, G, D, A, E, B, and F. Albéniz labeled this collection First Series, which indicates that he intended to compose other such collections, perhaps based on minor, sharp, and flat keys. All of these pieces are etudes to the extent that they work on particular technical problems and exhibit a pedagogical purpose, though they remain musically expressive.

Sonatas

Albéniz’s sonatas are of special interest because, as William S. Newman asserted, “the craftsmanship in harmony, scoring, and voice-leading” in them are “beyond reproach.”¹⁸ Albéniz wrote his seven sonatas during the 1880s, although only nos. 3, 4, and 5 are complete. Nothing remains of nos. 2 and 6, while 1 and 7 contain only a single movement, a scherzo and minuet, respectively. The three complete sonatas were published by Romero in 1887.

¹⁷ See the liner notes by Jacinto Torres for the CD *Albéniz: Complete Piano Music - Volume 2*, Miguel Baselga, piano, BIS, CD-1043, 2000, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ William S. Newman, *The Sonata after Beethoven* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 353.

Sonata No. 4 is dedicated to his “beloved Maestro” Count Guillermo de Morphy. The sonata-form opening movement is noteworthy for its rhythmic propulsion and lyric sweep, while the succeeding Scherzino begins with a playful fugato. Like the Scherzino, the Minuetto third movement is laid out in ABA form and is the musical equivalent of a fine porcelain figurine in its graceful melodic contours and tasteful harmonic setting. The bravura Rondo reminds one of Chopin’s études in its parallel-octave melodies and vaulting arpeggios. This beautiful work alone would cement Albéniz’s reputation as the leading Spanish composer of keyboard sonatas since Antonio Soler (1729-83), but the others are every bit its equal in craftsmanship and elegance.

In the words of Torres, “In one way the radical change that appears in the work, turning away from the drawing room and achieving a universal accent which he himself proclaims, implies an intermediate period of cosmopolitanism which he identifies with these works of abstract, neutral somewhat academic and impersonal expression.”¹⁹

Albéniz’s Mature Style

These are, of course, fundamentally classical traits. Albéniz’s fascination with the sonata and with sonata form in particular merges in the 1890s with his *españolismo*, which itself now takes on the character of Impressionism. In the 1890s, under the influence of the conservative Franck circle in which he moved (Fauré, Chausson, Dukas, d’Indy, etc.), he found a way to merge his penchant for sonata form with his evolving Spanish style, absorbing along with these the Impressionism of Debussy. His “second manner,” as he described it, produced works of extraordinary complexity and sophistication, the first of which was *La vega*, composed in 1897.

La vega is a hauntingly melancholy evocation of the plains of Granada, suggesting as it does the *petenera* and the obsessive repetition in the guitar of a descending minor tetrachord, over a sustained pedal in the bass. Yet, underneath all of this nostalgia and melancholy is a very logical sonata structure, with principal and secondary themes, an extensive development section, and a recapitulation. It is his longest single work, and its formal organization has been carefully worked out to support the weight of thematic exposition and elaboration he places on it. In its length, complexity, and formal organization, *La vega* is a direct precursor to Albéniz’s most important achievement in composition, *Iberia*.

Iberia is the highest expression of Albéniz’s dictum that art is variety within logic. Nine of the twelve movements of the *Iberia* collection are in sonata form: “Évocation,” “Rondeña,” “Almería,” “Triana,” “El polo,” “El Lavapiés,” “Málaga,” “Jerez,” and “Eritaña.” The profusion of colorful harmonies, rhythms based in folklore, evocations of *coplas* and *cante jondo*, and the post-Lisztian virtuosity the work demands create a musical canvas of extraordinary richness and texture. And yet, all of these elements cohere precisely because beneath the colorful, at times riotous, surface there lies a carefully thought-out formal structure that organizes Albéniz’s many inspirations into a satisfying and comprehensible whole. Debussy said that, in *Iberia*, Albéniz “throws notes out the

¹⁹ “La inspiración ‘clásica’ de Isaac Albéniz,” liner notes for *Isaac Albéniz: Sonatas para piano n.º 3, 4, 5. L’Automne*, Albert Guinovart, piano, Harmonia Mundi CD HMI 987007, 1994, p. 5; reissued 2003 (HMA 1957007). English translation by Christine Losty.

window,” implying a certain prodigality. But that is merely a superficial impression.²⁰ Beneath the apparent prodigality is a very logical working out of ideas within a carefully constructed framework.

Conclusion

There was always a conservative, cautious, classicizing streak in Albéniz’s musical temperament. Thus, he generally avoided gratuitous displays of digital derring-do in his music, and on stage he retained a dignified reserve devoid of Romantic posturing. The cerebral northerner coexisted with the sentimental southerner; the fearless performer, with the self-doubting composer. In the event, this turned out to be a productive combination, as it drove him to expand the domain of his compositional craft.

However, from another point of view, this is an artificial dichotomy. As Blume asserted, the Classical and Romantic periods are phases in one larger style period. In this sense, then, there is no contradiction between these facets of his musical personality. Rather, they are complementary parts of a unique and beautiful whole, which produced some of the best and most important music in the Spanish tradition.

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²⁰ See the *Bulletin français de la Société Internationale de Musique* 9, no. 12 (December 1913): 42-44. Debussy reviewed a concert of the Concerts Colonne-Société des Nouveaux Concerts presented on October 29, in which Spanish musicians performed Spanish works.