PROJECT MUSE®

Las claves madrileñas de Isaac Albéniz (review)

Walter Aaron Clark

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 533-535 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0318>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376414>

ference: some good, some mediocre, and a few that are terrible. Several topics in this collection seem promising, but do not always deliver what is promised, either through a lack of depth, spotty research, or examples that appear to have been offered during the conference that are not included in the text. For these reasons, I do not recommend that anybody bother to read the entire collection. The papers that are most worth reading are those by

Avram, Fineberg, Murail, Tüzün, Arrell, and Wannamaker. Also, the "Ethnomusical Perspectives" portion, while lacking in depth, could potentially spark more intensive study from other scholars. The few strong elements here are likely to make a difference in the body of scholarship on contemporary music—all labels aside.

NICHOLAS DEYOY

University of California, San Diego

FIN-DE-SIÈCLE AND MODERNISM

Las claves madrileñas de Isaac Albéniz. By Jacinto Torres Mulas with the collaboration of Ester Aguado Sánchez. Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2008. [235 p., 19 facsimiles of primary documents. ISBN 9788478127122. €30.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography.

On 18 May 1909, the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz died just short of his forty-ninth birthday in the French resort town of Cambo-les-Bains, in the French Pyrenees, where he had gone seeking relief from a chronic kidney ailment (Bright's disease) that had plagued him for years. The son of a Basque father and Catalan mother, he had entered the world in 1860, on the other side and at the other end of the Pyrenees, in Camprodón, Catalonia. It was here and in Barcelona that he spent the first eight years of his life, and he would return to the Catalan capital many times, even maintaining a residence in the suburb of Tiana. During the final fifteen years of his life, however, his principal residence was in Paris, where he imbibed French impressionism and composed one of the greatest of Spanish works for piano, the twelve *nouvelles impressions of Iberia*.

These few geographic and biographical details in many respects define how we understand Albéniz as a creative artist. He was a liberal and forward-looking composer, a son of Spain's most progressive region, and he developed into a figure of international renown, one as comfortable in London or Paris as he was in Barcelona or Granada. However, as crucial as Barcelona and Paris were to his growth as a performer and composer, one other city merits far more consideration than it has received as a crucible of his art: Madrid.

Albéniz spent the years 1868 to 1875 in Madrid, then moved again from Barcelona

to Madrid in 1883, remaining there until his departure for Paris and London in 1889. This final tenure there was a formative epoch in his evolution as a composer, and no study of his later masterpieces can tell us much of value without a clear and thorough understanding of precisely these six years. It may well be that only a *madrileño* could provide us with such a foundation, one on intimate terms with the city's cultural geography and history. Fortunately, such a scholar exists, one whose knowledge of the Spanish capital is matched by a profound comprehension of Albéniz's life and music, a comprehension cultivated over three decades of painstaking and groundbreaking research.

Jacinto Torres Mulas is professor of musicology at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música in Madrid. The author of numerous major articles on the composer, he also compiled the indispensable *Catálogo sistemático descriptivo de las obras musicales de Isaac Albéniz* (Madrid: Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 2001; ensuing T. numbers derive from this catalog), previously reviewed in this journal (*Notes* 59, no. 2 [December 2002]: 332–33). In this latest opus, he explores in depth Albéniz's connection to Madrid and the crucial impetus his residence there provided to his career.

It should be stated at the outset that, in his later years, Albéniz did not hold the capital city in high regard. He viewed it as provincial and backward, and he retained bitter memories of the savage treatment

local critics had given his zarzuela *San Antonio de la Florida*, T. 7, and his operetta *La sortija*, T. 5, at their Madrid premieres in 1894. Other frustrations and disappointments over the lack of interest in his stage works there would only deepen his antagonism. On top of this, his socialist political leanings and skepticism about religion placed him at odds with the conservative politics of the Spanish government and the religious culture of the nation in general. He was, in later years, definitely more at home in Paris than in Madrid. Eager to establish Albéniz's bona fides as a performer and composer of international stature, most commentators have devoted less attention to his Madrid years than they deserve. Torres has finally rectified this situation, in a fashion that is satisfying to both the casual reader and the most exacting scholar.

The first thing one notes is the beautiful presentation of the materials. The book and facsimile reproductions of original documents are in a case with individual sleeves for both. The elegant color scheme and design hearken back to the era in question and establish a certain rapport with it before one has read anything at all. The richly visual dimension continues into the text itself, which is illustrated with an abundance of images, including drawings, photographs, paintings, and reproductions of letters and other documents. Some of these we have seen before, but many of them appear here and in no other source connected with Albéniz. What we quickly discover is that this is not only an account of Albéniz but also of Madrid in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, it provides a valuable education for those interested in the history and culture of the capital during this period.

The phrase "Madrid keys" in the title refers to the three central chapters, cleverly entitled *Clave de Sol*, *de Fa*, and *de Do*; or *G*, *F*, and *C* (V, IV, I). The introductory chapter surveys the subject and establishes both the rationale and methodology for the book. As Torres points out, "Madrid principally served Albéniz as the crucible and springboard of his aspirations" (p. 13; my translation). Here he established important connections with leading figures of the local musical establishment, including musicologist Guillermo Morphy (secretary

to the king), *zarzueleros* Ruperto Chapí and Tomás Bretón, and violinist Enrique Fernández Arbós, as well as several important publishers, such as Benito Zozaya and Antonio Romero. More important, it was in Madrid that Albéniz responded to Felipe Pedrell's summons to use Spanish folklore as the basis for his music. Some of Albéniz's evergreen favorites—e.g., "Granada," "Cádiz," and "Sevilla," from the *Suite española* no. 1, T. 61; and "Rumores de la caleta" from *Recuerdos de viaje*, T. 72—emanate from this epoch, as well as several sonatas (e.g., T. 69, 75, 85) and songs (e.g., T. 36). Such a cornucopia compels our attention to the circumstances in which it came forth.

The G-major chapter concerns itself with Albéniz's first extended stay in the city, from 1868 to 1875. His father worked as a customs official and moved his family from Barcelona to the capital after the revolution of 1868, in order to take advantage of his political connections there. With the assistance of his father and his father's Masonic affiliations, Albéniz used Madrid as a base of operations for launching a concert career, appearing in programs around the country as "a phenomenon," in the words of one critic. He studied at the Escuela Nacional de Música (now the Conservatorio Real), though in a somewhat desultory fashion. In 1875 he left Madrid for the Greater Antilles with his father, concertizing for several months in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Formal studies at the Leipzig Conservatory lasted only a few weeks, but with the assistance of Morphy, he gained a grant from the king in 1876 for studies at the Conservatoire Royale in Brussels, from which he graduated in 1879 *avec distinction*. An aborted attempt to study with Liszt and another trip to Cuba preceded a short residence in Barcelona in the early 1880s, when he probably studied with Pedrell. He then moved to Madrid, and the ensuing productive period forms the substance of the "subdominant" chapter. Torres explores in considerable depth the context of Albéniz's first important compositions.

Although Albéniz never resided again in Madrid, he maintained connections there, and it continued to play an important role in his career. This is the subject of the "tonic" chapter, one that takes us up to the composer's tragically early demise in 1909.

Especially welcome in this chapter is the attention devoted to Clementina Albéniz, the composer's highly accomplished sister, who was herself a talented musician, one who gave Albéniz his first instruction in piano and later became a teacher at the Escuela de Institutrices de the Asociación para la Educación de la Mujer, a major educational institution for women. She emerges here from her brother's shadow, and Torres's portrait of her tells us important things about the status of women in Spain at that time and the role they played in education and professional life. Albéniz's correspondence with his sister also tells us important things about his views concerning their parents as well as Spain, its politics and culture.

A most welcome feature of this book is the representative sampling of nineteen letters and music manuscripts presented in facsimile. These provide the reader with the rare opportunity to enter the musicologist's world of primary sources, to hold between one's fingers the documentary evidence of an exceptional life in music. These facsimiles and their significance are the subject of the next chapter. Ensuing chapters present a chronology of Albéniz in Madrid, excerpts from the memoir of Arbós dealing with Albéniz, and the collaborations between Albéniz and Bretón as detailed in the latter's diary (see Tomás Bretón, *Diario 1881–1888*, ed. Jacinto Torres Mulas [Madrid: Acento Editorial, 1994]). The concluding chapter explores Albéniz's relationship with the Madrid press, a relationship that was complex and conflicted even during the best of times. The book concludes with a very helpful bibliography; even more helpful would have been an index, which is unfortunately lacking.

The book is available only in Spanish, and though this may prove a hindrance to some readers, the wealth of images and primary sources will be useful to all. Those who do read Spanish will appreciate Prof. Torres's elegant and pellucid prose. This landmark volume commemorates the centenary of the composer's death yet contributes an enduring testament to the central role Madrid played in the career of one of Spain's greatest composers.

WALTER AARON CLARK
University of California, Riverside

Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies. By Julian Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [xiv, 361 p. ISBN: 9780195372397. \$49.95.] Bibliographic references, indexes, illustrations, music examples.

Julian Johnson's *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* provides an exhaustive look at the processes of narrative in all of the composer's works, ranging from student compositions from his days at the Vienna Conservatory to the incomplete Tenth Symphony. Johnson views Mahler's narrative process as stemming from a series of dialectical relationships: those between genuine emotive authenticity and performed artifice; sincere, innocent expression and knowing irony; intuitive nature and considered construction; pure representation and analyzed critique; society and the individual; modernity and nostalgia; and Mahler's conflicted identity as German and Bohemian Jew. The book's eight chapters examine these relationships by way of their musical expression in a dizzying flurry of music examples that demonstrate the inherent tensions that saturate Mahler's music—those very qualities that once confounded his critics and now allow his music to resonate with listeners in the postmodern age.

Writing about Mahler's songs, Theodor Adorno observed: "What they narrate is musical content itself; they recite themselves" (*Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 76). Johnson sees this very process as artificial, describing this continuing interplay of irony and expression as "the paradoxical ways in which Mahler's music proposes itself as authentic expression, called forth from a mysterious origin, and yet also draws attention to itself as something made—as artifice" (p. 93). Johnson views this dialectical relationship between expression and irony as essential to Mahler's music. He describes the composer's work as having "specific expressive power [that] derives directly from its own anxiety about that power" (p. 4). In other words, every attempt to express genuine emotion is negated by the knowledge that the act of its own expression is in and of