

The Albéniz Concerto

Stephen Goss (2009)

A concerto for guitar and orchestra
after the piano music of Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

1. El Albaicín
2. Cataluña
3. Evocación
- Cadenza
4. Aragón

The music of Isaac Albéniz often evokes the sound of the guitar; so it comes as a surprise to most people that he never wrote a single note for the instrument. Today, paradoxically, it is through the myriad of guitar transcriptions of his piano works that Albéniz's music is mostly widely performed and known.

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of Albéniz's birth, I was commissioned by EMI to arrange some of his music for guitar and orchestra for a forthcoming recording by Xuefei Yang and the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra. After initial discussions, I decided to write a full-blown romantic guitar concerto based on four specific piano pieces. Each of these pieces has been transformed into a concerto-style movement; the overall movement plan of the concerto attempts to give the impression of an integrated piece rather than a selection of arrangements. The musical language and orchestrational approach of the piece, while remaining firmly rooted in Albeniz's stylistic idiom, make occasional references to the music of Debussy, Falla and Rodrigo.

The choice of which Albéniz pieces to use for the concerto was crucial. His music ranges from the popular salon pieces of the 1880s to the highly romantic, almost impressionistic music that he wrote in the last few years of his life. I was also searching for pieces which had thematic similarities, in order for the movements to appear interconnected. For example, the theme from the second slow episode in *Aragón* is almost identical to the second theme in *Evocación*.

The concerto starts with *El Albaicín* (from *Iberia* Book 3, 1906), Albéniz's stunning portrayal of the Gypsy quarter in Granada: flamenco influences suffuse the score. The movement is structured as a series of three alternations between a dance-like principal theme (highly motivic in character and reminiscent of a malagueña) and the freer copla-style secondary theme (which is imbued with the duende of cante jondo). Debussy was a great admirer of this piece and his orchestrational style is suggested in this new version. After this intense and emotional first movement, *Cataluña* (from *Suite española*, Op 47) is something of a palate cleanser. It is an earlier piece and one of very few pieces that depict Albéniz's native Catalonia.

Evocación (from *Iberia* Book 1, 1905) is the concerto's slow movement. A dark, melancholic Andalusian melody in the minor key, first heard on cor Anglais, eventually gives way to a more sunny second theme (reminiscent of a jota navarra) on the cellos and horns. The re-harmonisation of Albeniz's music draws out the pastoral character of this beautiful idyll. The extended cadenza, between the third and fourth movements, incorporates musical material from all the other movements and leads directly to *Aragón* (from *Suite española*, Op 47), the finale. The last movement is a virtuosic tour de force for both soloist and orchestra – a fast, rhythmic jota is twice interrupted by slower copla sections, before a sparkling coda brings the work to a frenetic conclusion.

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