

THE ALBÉNIZ CONCERTO

A 'new' Romantic concerto

Stephen Goss's concerto for guitar and orchestra after the piano music of Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

By GUY TRAVISS

XUEFEI YANG'S new concerto recording for EMI Classics comprises her much-anticipated version of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* and the first recording of a new concerto by Stephen Goss based on the music of Isaac Albéniz. The CD was recorded in Barcelona in July with Eiji Oue conducting the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra (Orquestra Simfònica de Barcelona i Nacional de Catalunya). In addition to the concertos, the CD also features solo works by Rodrigo and Albéniz. All the music on the album resonates closely with Barcelona. The Aranjuez concerto had its first performance there 70 years ago, and the city has strong associations with the life and work of Albéniz.

EMI commissioned Stephen Goss's new concerto to mark the 150th anniversary of Albéniz's birth. After initial discussions, Goss decided to write a full-blown romantic guitar concerto based on four specific piano pieces – *El Albaicín* and *Evocación* from *Iberia* (1905-07), and *Cataluña* and *Aragón* from *Suite Española* (Op.47). 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 cadenza, placed between the third and fourth movements, uses material from all the movements. The musical language and orchestrational approach of the piece remain firmly rooted in Albéniz's stylistic idiom, occasionally making references to the music of Debussy, Falla and Rodrigo. Goss's starting point was a question: 'If Albéniz had written a guitar concerto, what would it have been like?'

The concerto represents the most recent of five collaborative projects between Yang and Goss (Head of Composition at the University of Surrey, UK). Three fifths of that history is concerned with Chinese music, a theme marked from the very beginning of their relationship with *Raise the Red Lantern* (2004), based on Chinese films, for an album of Chinese-based music on GSP. Composer and performer first met on an occasion when guitarist Jonathan Leathwood was performing Goss's *Oxen of the Sun* in London in 2003, a piece commissioned by Leathwood for ten and six-string guitars played simultaneously. At the time Yang was looking to commission works for herself and recalls being 'attracted to the atmospheric, evocative and delicate soundscapes painted in Steve's music.' Yang subsequently commissioned Goss to write a further three pieces. *The Chinese Garden* (2007), based on Chinese folksongs, was written for Yang's second EMI album, *40 Degrees North*, and first performed at London's Wigmore Hall. In 2008 Goss made an



In studio with Eiji Oue (conductor) and Jorn Pedersen (producer).

arrangement of Sarasate's *Navarra* for two violins (David Garrett and Valeriy Sokolov), guitar (Xuefei Yang) and orchestra for the *Classical BRIT Awards* at the Royal Albert Hall, which was subsequently recorded on the *Best of the Classical BRITs* CD. After *The Albéniz Concerto* was completed in 2009, Yang commissioned *The Autumn Song* (2009) for cello and guitar for her concert tours with Natalie Clein. This beautiful but melancholic piece is based on stories about the Great Wall of China. The first performance took place at the Macau Festival in China followed by tours in Europe. All in all, Yang has given around 200 performances of Goss's music since they began to collaborate in 2004.

The collaborative model is intrinsic to Goss's work as a composer, a creative process we identify with much of the guitar's core repertoire from the last century: 'The history of the guitar's twentieth-century repertoire is a history of collaboration' [Leathwood, p.8.]. The way in which composer and performer come together to produce just a single piece, and very little thereafter, is a consistent feature of many of the past collaborative engagements Leathwood is referring to. This is understandable, since collaborations are generally the result of commissions which supply funding for a specific project and purpose, and therefore we frequently find one-off works by composers assigned to a particular dedicatee. Collaborators may repeatedly work together over a period of many years if opportunities present themselves, although this type of ongoing relationship is perhaps less common. For Goss

however, collaborating with one performer over the course of five pieces is not untypical: 'Collaborative relationships are complex and sometimes difficult. When you find someone you can collaborate with well and the end result is good, then there is a great temptation to collaborate with that person again. There is a kind of guarantee, you trust that person. There are pianists, cellists, flautists and guitarists I have done four or five collaborations with. You find yourself going back to the same performers. The next time you work with someone it takes the overall process further.' There are many aspects of the collaborative process that allow the composer to adapt their writing to the performer they are working for. Although the exchanges between composer and performer are often made to address practical matters, such as technical idiosyncrasies, the process has much more to do with realising the work itself as a performance item; it's about composer and performer working towards a version of a work represented on the page. This is the crux of the issue where Goss is concerned: 'If the collaborative process is about anything, it's about getting to the essence of the music and understanding how it needs to sound. It's understanding the music rather than understanding the notation. One of the really good things about working with Fei is that she really gets what the essence of the music is. I find it particularly gratifying when the performer makes the piece his or her own. They go off and perform the piece many times, and eventually it becomes their piece rather than mine.' Goss is used to multiple performances of his works: David Russell performed *El Llanto de los Suenos* (2007) in every one of his solo recitals for a year, Michael Partington has performed his *Sonata* (2006) over 70 times and recorded it twice, and Jonathan Leathwood has performed *Oxen of the Sun* (2003-04) around 100 times. From the performer's perspective, on the subject of collaboration, Yang gets straight to the heart of the matter when she succinctly states: 'I can't communicate with Albéniz, but I can communicate with Steve'. Goss adds: 'Listening to Fei play Albéniz had a huge influence on the piece, she has recorded his music a lot and I have heard her play it in many concerts over the years. My whole approach was very much coloured by my imagination of Fei playing Albéniz in a concerto context'. There is clearly an environment of give and take in their collaborative relationship as Yang elucidates: 'When Steve was writing the concerto, I was encouraged to make many suggestions and to feedback all my thoughts and ideas. I might say "this passage might sound more beautiful up the octave" or "please can I have this melody instead of the orchestra getting it" and Steve would (usually) oblige.'

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Following the critical and commercial success of *40 Degrees North* in 2008, EMI and Yang began discussing plans for her next recording when the idea of the concerto disc surfaced: 'We thought that it would be great to do the *Aranjuez*, the obvious first choice, but also something new to place alongside it.

I thought that Albéniz could work really well for guitar and orchestra, but then there was the question of who is going to do the arrangement?' In fact it was Stephen Johns, vice-president of EMI Classics and the person overseeing her next recording, who put Goss's name forward based at least in part on the arrangements of Chinese folk songs he had previously supplied to Yang among their other work together. Initially Goss came up with two ideas; one was simply to do arrangements of Albéniz pieces for guitar and

orchestra, and the other was to do a concerto. Yang and others involved were quick to support the notion of an Albéniz concerto: 'EMI backed the idea of a concerto and so did I, it seemed more creative and a great pairing with the *Aranjuez*.'

The concerto repertoire for guitar is comparatively rich, but there is little of note between Giuliani's three concertos of the early 19th century and the *Aranjuez* concerto composed in



In studio with Jorn Pedersen (producer) and Steve Goss.

1939. This commission provided Goss with the perfect opportunity to fill that gap in the repertoire: 'With Albéniz's music you get that wonderful rich late romantic harmony infused with Spanish folk music and French impressionism. There really isn't anything similar in the concerto repertoire. Thinking beyond this collaboration, it was a great opportunity to provide guitarists with a Romantic concerto to play.' In a sense, today the conditions are right for an Albéniz guitar concerto, since the format demands a level of virtuosity from the soloist that would have been difficult for contemporaries of Albéniz to meet. Albéniz did however have some of his works arranged for guitar in his lifetime, but the idea of the guitar being the instrument it is now with virtuoso players such as Yang was unknown at that time. Still, even now we recognise the difficulty of mastering reworkings of Albéniz's music: 'The influence of Andalusian guitars on Albéniz is sufficiently obvious to invite transcription for guitar. [Many pieces] sound most convincing in transcription, but call for an advanced technique' [Robert Spencer, p.429.]. We can easily find a place for a work such as the Albéniz concerto, but we can also identify other areas where the guitar concerto repertoire is lacking. Goss shares his thoughts on the subject: 'In many ways what the guitar needs now is a big American concerto by a Steve Reich or a John Adams.'

The original brief of arranging some of Albeniz's music for guitar and orchestra presented Goss with several possibilities, all of which resonate strongly with the composer's known stylistic diversity and compositional aesthetic, as Leathwood attests: 'With an ambivalent attitude towards notions of author-

ship and originality, Steve has made no secret of his use of samples and models from other composers past and present. Sometimes the work of others is echoed in a relatively recognisable form; at other times it is apparent only to those in the know, occluded as it is by filters or other distortions in the compositional process' [Leathwood, p.14.]. In this instance, we can see that Goss has taken up one extreme of Leathwood's description, for the resulting work is based entirely on four of Albeniz's piano pieces. The use of whole-scale structures in this way can be found elsewhere in Goss's work, again something Leathwood identifies when considering his own collaboration with the composer on *Oxen of the Sun* [Leathwood, p.20.]. We can also find examples among his compositions where pre-existing pieces have been transformed in some way and become components of new musical structures (for example, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, 2005, for violin, cello, piano and bass clarinet, *The Raw and Cooked*, 2004, for two guitars, or *Portraits and Landscapes*, 2010, for piano).

The music of Isaac Albéniz often evokes the sound of the guitar; so it comes as a surprise to most 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



Xuefei Yang inside Barcelona Auditori.



Barcelona Auditori, with orchestra, conductor Eiji Oue and composer Steve Goss.

known. Still, it is a point that escapes entries under Albéniz's name in Grove and OCM among other key reference texts, which prefer instead to focus on his reputation as a pianist during his own lifetime. This is not to say these writers disagree with or are otherwise unaware of what has happened to the composer's music since his death (while not forgetting that references of this kind predominantly concern themselves with biographical content), but rather a failure to acknowledge the issue demonstrates the segregation of solo guitar works from mainstream canonic repertoire. Albéniz's synonymity with the guitar is widely recognised, and it is with this thought that we can attribute a special significance to the notion of an Albéniz guitar concerto; a work for guitar and orchestra with greater potential for showcasing to a more pervasive audience that Albéniz's catalogue is increasingly subsumed under titles featuring guitar.

Having decided on a genre as a means to rework a selection of Albéniz pieces, for Goss the central issue then became another question: 'How can I turn Albéniz's piano music into something which sounds as if it has always been a guitar concerto?' A forgery passed off as the genuine article? More of a fabrication than, say, Deryck Cooke's Mahler 10 or Anthony Payne's Elgar 3 completions: Albéniz didn't leave an incomplete guitar concerto in the way that Mahler and Elgar left incomplete symphonies.

This idea has a complementary basis, as those who experience Albéniz through the guitar rarely suspect the music's piano origin. Because of this, there already exists a model for Albéniz forgeries for Goss to capitalise on: 'People imagine Albéniz as a guitar composer, so the idea of an Albéniz guitar concerto is one that an audience can take on board'. Presenting the concerto in the guise of an original Albéniz work is something Goss further describes as 'a natural extension of the counterfeit solo guitar pieces that form a major part of the repertoire.' But

Steve - "I tried to write myself out of the concerto so that people might believe that it could have been written by Albeniz"

these arrangements of Albéniz's music were not intended to mislead listeners from the very beginning, rather we understand them as such today because they have come down to us divorced from their intended instrument. So to give the concerto original status from the very beginning, as opposed to gradually acquiring this identity over time, is to raise compositional considerations from the outset: 'It's funny, I often wonder what Albéniz would think of the fact that so many guitarists play all his piano music now, or that his music is performed widely at all. And what would he think about a concerto? The danger for me, of course, was to imagine myself as an equal partner with Albéniz instead of remaining a servant to his music. Consequently, I tried to write myself out of the concerto so that people can go and hear it and believe that it *could* have been written by Albéniz. There is nothing in the orchestration or the harmony that couldn't have been done in Albéniz's time.'

Albéniz and the guitar is one issue, but orchestrations of Albéniz form another: 'What's interesting about Albéniz's music

is that some of the best orchestrations of his music were done by other people and not by Albéniz himself [Goss]. Albéniz's great achievement is the twelve-movement piano suite *Iberia* (1905-07), perhaps best known today in its orchestral arrangement by Enrique Fernández Arbós – conductor of the Madrid Symphony Orchestra and contemporary of Albéniz. Arbós's arrangement does not include a guitar, and versions featuring the guitar would not appear until the early 1990s when guitarist-composer Leo Brouwer orchestrated three movements for Julian Bream and Steve Gray made three other arrangements for John Williams' *Iberia* CD released in 1992. Brouwer's *Iberia Suite* (1993) was one of several references for Goss to consider: 'Brouwer's orchestrations of Albéniz are as much about Brouwer as they are about Albéniz; he shows us Albéniz's world through a Brouwer prism. It's fantastic, but that is not what I am trying to do. What Tony Payne did when he completed Elgar's Third Symphony was extraordinary; it sounds like Elgar had finished the piece himself, you can't hear the joins. That was my model, a more archaeological approach'. Various orchestrations of Albéniz's music have existed since the time of the composer himself, it's a concept Albéniz and his contemporaries would have been used to, as Dussel notes in his comments on a selection of Albéniz arrangements: 'In all these cases arrangements for other instruments or groups of instruments – arrangements made by the composer himself or by various different arrangers in the course of the decades – were the rule rather than the exception. The consequence of this variety is an astonishing colourfulness of instrumentation' [Dussel, p.2.]. At times these new instrumental



Steve Goss and Xuefei Yang.

forms extend beyond arrangements and transcriptions into what we might consider recompositions, a line that when crossed often catalyses debate for artistic integrity: 'People who know Albéniz's music well may be surprised to hear what I've done with it, my versions might irritate people, they might even offend people when they hear some of the liberties I have taken.' How we respond to these matters is of course entirely dependent on our own musical aesthetic, but it's a point on which Goss takes a firm position: 'For most of the second half of the 20th century, there was a culture of treating a score more like scripture than music, almost as if it was a holy relic: the notion of trying to recreate things exactly as they once were or were intended to be. Okay, if you go and see an actual relic, such as a painting or a sculpture, and you were to touch them then you might cause permanent damage, but that is a very different thing from making changes to a piece of music, or reinterpreting a play. In other arts (dance, theatre and cinema in particular) radical reinterpretations and reworkings are the norm: think of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* or Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*. Music is gradually catching up with this approach, Uri Caine's reworkings of Mahler, Beethoven, Schumann and Wagner spring to mind as an example, but there are countless others. Many of today's most prominent composers,

“Quotations mean very little when taken out of context”

such as Thomas Adès or Wolfgang Rihm, draw on old music as a starting point for their work. We live in an age that has recycling and conservation at its core; it's unsurprising, therefore, that this zeitgeist is reflected in the arts.'

The choice of Albéniz pieces to use for the concerto was crucial. This meant an arduous task for Goss as he would need to review and process Albéniz's entire musical output, ranging 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. 'Steve was keen to make sure he arranged pieces that I loved to listen to', chips in Yang, 'we decided very early on that we had to have something from *Iberia*, as it is a work that means a great deal to both of us'. Of course the most pressing issue was to work out from the pieces that had been shortlisted which would actually sit together as a concerto: 'I was searching for pieces



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which had thematic similarities, in order for the movements to appear interconnected; also, a balance of keys, a balance of ideas, a balance of weight with lightness, fireworks with emotion, and so on. I wanted to have the widest possible gamut of characters, moods and tempi.' And it was by this process that Goss was able to discern some complementing factors in Albéniz's music: 'The principal reason for choosing *Aragón* as the finale was that its main theme is very close in contour and character to themes in two of the other movements (*El Albaicín* and *Evocación*).' To fully integrate the components of the concerto, there is a cadenza. Here, all the movements appear cross-related and interrelated to bring everything together. It is within the cadenza that themes from all the movements are mixed up to suggest that they have always belonged together as part of the same composition. Illusion and artifice it might be, but *The Albéniz Concerto* is a very satisfying and convincing listen. Perhaps the last word should go to Professor Walter Aaron Clark, author of the definitive biography of Albéniz in English, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic* (1999, OUP).

'[Goss's] idea to recast these numbers as a guitar concerto is brilliant, both in conception and execution. I think he has captured the spirit and essence of the works and given us new perspectives on them. Goss has done something wonderful for Albéniz's music with this remarkable concerto.'

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The Albéniz Concerto was first performed by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra on 24 October 2009 at the Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool. The conductor was Shi-Yeon Sung and Xuefei Yang was the soloist. The next performance is in Dublin on 7 January 2011 when Xuefei will be joined by the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra. The EMI recording of *The Albéniz Concerto* was released on 1 November. The score, guitar part and piano reduction are published by Cadenza Music.

Further details can be found here:
www.stephengoss.net
www.xuefeiyang.com
www.emiclassics.com
<https://cadenza-music.com>

Collaborations between Stephen Goss and Xuefei Yang

Raise the Red Lantern (2004) for guitar (16 mins)

Commissioned by Xuefei Yang and GSP Records San Francisco. First performance 19 April 2004, Wigmore Hall, London. Recorded by Xuefei Yang on *Si Ji* (GSP1028CD © 2005). Published by Cadenza Music © 2004

The Chinese Garden (2007) for guitar (12 mins)

Commissioned by Xuefei Yang for China Now 2008. First performance 16 April 2008, Wigmore Hall, London. Recorded on *40 Degrees North*, EMI Classics (5099920632229 © 2008). This CD won Best Instrumental Album in the 2008 Canton Radio Awards in China. Published by Cadenza Music © 2008

Navarra (arr. Goss 2008) for two violins, guitar and orchestra (4 mins)

Commissioned by EMI for the Classical BRIT Awards. First performance 8 May 2008, Royal Albert Hall, London. First broadcast performance 15 May 2008, ITV1. David Garrett and Valeriy Sokolov - violins, Xuefei Yang - guitar, David Charles Abell - conductor, London Concert Orchestra. Recorded on *The Best of the CLASSICAL BRITs*, Various Artists, The BRIT Trust (MOS2009TMS1 © 2009)

The Albéniz Concerto (2009) for guitar and orchestra (28 mins)

Commissioned by EMI Classics for Xuefei Yang and the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra. First UK performance 24 October 2009. Shi-Yeon Sung - conductor, Xuefei Yang - guitar, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

The Autumn Song (2009) for cello and guitar (7 mins)

Commissioned by Natalie Clein and Xuefei Yang for their concert tours in 2009 and 2010. First performance 13 October 2009, Macau Festival, Macau, China. UK premiere 3 February 2010, Wigmore Hall, London

References

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Grove Online: *Albeniz*, accessed 24/4/2010

Clark, W. A., in Latham, A., 2002: *Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford University Press, New York) pgs.20 & 21.

Leathwood, J., 2009: *The Anxiety of the Dedicatee, Two Studies in Composer-Performer Collaboration* (University of Surrey) pgs.8, 14 & 20.

Spencer, R., 1963: *Musical Times*, *Spanish Guitar Music* (Vol. 104, No. 1444) p.429.