

Isaac Albéniz and the Guitar

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*Though Albéniz wrote not one scrap of music for the guitar,
his legacy is inextricably bound up with it."*

Albéniz scholar, Walter Clark¹

Guitarists began their “re-appropriation” of Albéniz’s piano music in the form of transcriptions for their instrument almost from the moment it was written. Today, a casual perusal of publishing and recording catalogues, concert programs, and discographies reveals that only the music of Bach and Sor is more published, recorded and performed by guitarists. In fact, guitarists perform and record Albéniz’s piano music far more frequently than do pianists themselves; the discography provided in Walter Clark’s *Isaac Albéniz: A Guide to Research*² lists, for example, 26 guitar recordings of Albéniz’s *Zambra granadina* in contrast to only two for the piano. Clearly, guitarists have assumed the role of caretakers of this repertoire. Given this fact, it behooves us as guitarists—as musicians—to treat this music with an appropriate degree of respect; that is, we have an obligation to develop an understanding of Albéniz’s musical style and aesthetic and an appreciation of how his music works, on the guitar and otherwise. This article aims, then, to provide a starting point from which an informed approach to Albéniz’s music may be developed.

Before proceeding any further, though, it seems prudent to examine how Albéniz may have felt about the adoption of his music by guitarists. Although we have no direct commentary from him concerning the issue, three snippets of information do shed some light on the matter:

- 1) In a letter written to his friend Enrique Moragas, Albéniz describes the performance aesthetic of two great Spanish pianists, Joaquin Malats and Enrique Granados, along with a third musician—the guitarist Miguel Llobet:

Malats, a Catalan, interprets like an Andalusian; Granados, from Lleida, becomes absorbed like no one else in the melancholy of the Andalusian countryside; Miguel Llobet, the Barcelona guitarist who borders on the wondrous, surprises, not with Gypsy rhythms, but rather in the way he impresses upon the strings of his guitar a stamp of elegant authenticity that is amazing.³

¹ Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 285.

² Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: A Guide to Research*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 139-219.

³ Quoted in José María Llorens Cisteró, "Notas inéditas sobre el virtuosísimo de Isaac Albéniz y su producción pianística," *Anuario Musical* 14 (1959), 101. Cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 283.

- 2) The Catalan violinist Mariano Perelló, a close friend of Albéniz's toward the end of Albéniz's life, described a benefit concert organized by Albéniz which was held at the Sala Giralt in Tiana (near Barcelona) on September 14, 1906. Amongst other things, Albéniz and Malats performed piano duets together, and Miguel Llobet in the same concert performed Albéniz's *Granada* along with other (unspecified) transcriptions.⁴
- 3) In his *Tárrega, Ensayo Biográfico*, Emilio Pujol—perhaps Tárrega's most ardent disciple—quotes the Barcelona writer and poet Apel.les Mestres (a friend and librettist of Albéniz), who described an occasion on which Albéniz heard his music played on the guitar by Francisco Tárrega:

I recall writing on another occasion that when Albéniz heard him [Tárrega] play his famous *Serenata* on the guitar, he felt such emotion, and was so moved, that he could not help but exclaim: "This is what I had conceived!"⁵

It would appear, then, that Albéniz was not too upset about guitarists playing his music...



Albéniz (1) and Llobet (11) presumably in Barcelona c. 1906.

⁴ Perello was interviewed by Arturo Llopis in his "En el centenario de Isaac Albéniz," *Destino* (13 Feb., 1960), 13-17. Cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 254.

⁵ Emilio Pujol, *Tárrega, Ensayo Biográfico*, (Lisbon, 1960), 104.

The Albéniz “Guitar” Repertoire

Albéniz’s creative output may be divided into three periods: 1) a prodigious early period consisting almost entirely of piano music, initially in European salon style but becoming progressively more “Spanish;” 2) a period of primarily orchestral and theatrical works, with an increased authenticity in his now relatively few works for piano; 3) a final period, at the very end of his life, which produced the remarkably sophisticated and aesthetically authentic four-volume suite *Iberia*—one of the masterworks of the piano concert repertoire. The Albéniz repertoire adopted by guitarists derives exclusively from the first two periods—music composed during a span of only twelve years (and, if we ignore one, little played, early “guitar” piece, *Pavana-capricho*, only eight years):⁶

Barcelona (mainly non-nationalistic salon pieces)

1882 *Pavana-capricho* (pub. as op. 12)

Barcelona/Madrid (first nationalistic pieces)

1886 (age 26) 3-movement performance *Suite española*:
 Serenata [*Granada*]
 Sevilla
 Pavana-capricho

4-movement *Suite española*, op. 47:
 Granada, serenata
 Cataluna, curranda
 Sevilla, sevillanas
 Cuba, capriccio
 [*Asturias, Seguidillas, Aragon, Cadiz* “added” c. 1911]

1886-7 *Recuerdos de viaje*, op. 71:
 Rumores de la caleta, malagueñas

1888 *Doce piezas características*, op. 92:
 Torre bermeja, serenata

London (more authentically-nationalistic music)

1890 (age 30) *España, seis hojas de álbum*, op. 165:
 2. *Tango*
 3. *Malagueña*
 5. *Capricho catalán*

Serenata español [*Cádiz, canción*], op.181

Mallorca, barcarolla, op. 202

1891 *Zambra granadina, danse orientale*

⁶ Transcriptions of all of these works, along with the remaining items required to complete the original cycles, may be found in my edition *Isaac Albéniz: 26 Pieces Arranged for Guitar*. (Mel Bay Publications, 1999).

Paris (more sophisticated forms)

- 1891-4 *Chants d'Espagne*, Op. 232:
1. *Prélude [Asturias, leyenda]*
 2. *Orientale*
 3. *Bajo la Palmera*
 4. *Cordoba*
 5. *Seguidillas [Castilla]*

At the end of his life, Albéniz spoke of precisely this repertoire:

“This music is a little infantile, simple, spirited; but in the end our Spanish country is also somewhat this way. The public, then, have good reason to follow the spirit of *Còrdoba* or *Mallorca*, the copla of *Sevillianas*, of *Serenata*, of *Granada*...In all of these I now notice that there is less musical skill, less of the “grand idea,” but there is more passion, sunlight, and the taste of olives...These young works, like their small peccadilloes, hint at over-sentimental affectation...it seems to me they are like the *alicatidos* [ornamental tiling] of the Alhambra, those rare arabesques that do not attempt to say anything with their turns and forms, but that are like the air, like the sun, like the blackbirds or like the nightingales of its gardens, that which is worth more than all Moorish Spain, that is, although we might not want it, the real Spain!”⁷

A Brief History of Guitar Arrangements of Albéniz's Music

The first guitarist to arrange Albéniz's music almost certainly was Francisco Tárrega, an almost exact contemporary of Albéniz. Although apparently not published during Tárrega's lifetime, manuscript copies of *Pavana-capricho*, *Granada* and *Sevilla* survive. These three pieces actually make up precisely the three-movement grouping that Albéniz himself performed throughout Spain from around 1883 onwards (the first incarnation of the "Suite española").

Further arrangements were made by Tárrega's most illustrious pupil, Miguel Llobet, who in addition to performing *Granada*, as mentioned earlier, published arrangements of *Cadiz*, *Orientale*, *Sevilla* and *Torre bermeja*. Severino Garcia Fortea, Tárrega's closest student and duet partner during Tárrega's later years, produced a veritable flood of transcriptions (published by UME during the 1920s): among them, possibly the earliest guitar transcription of *Leyenda* (published by Casa Dotesio in Madrid sometime before 1919). Even Albéniz's masterpiece, *Iberia* (barely playable on the piano!), did not escape its almost inevitable guitaristic fate during the composer's lifetime: the *Trio Iberia* from *Granada* (a group that consisted of lute, bandurria and guitar—the latter played by none other than Angel Barrios) toured widely with the suite in arrangements the composer himself apparently greatly enjoyed.⁸

The most significant figure in the *propagation* of the Albéniz guitar repertoire, however, was undoubtedly Andres Segovia, particularly through his arrangement and, more importantly, his performances and gramophone recordings of *Leyenda* (published in Buenos Aires by Romero y Fernandez around 1920). In addition, Segovia played, recorded and, therefore, greatly

⁷ Quoted in José Montero Alonso, *Albéniz: España en "suite."* Retratos de antaño (Barcelona: Silex, 1988).

⁸ Albéniz's attitude to these arrangements is cited, though without source, in Clark, *Portrait*, 252.

popularized further pieces by Albéniz: *Granada*, *Sevilla*, *Torre Bermeja*, *Tango*, *Mallorca*, *Zambra granadina*, and, to a lesser extent, *Leyenda-Barcarola*, *Oriental* and *Capriccio Catalan*.

The Albéniz repertoire established by Segovia clearly provided the basis of that performed and recorded by the following generation of celebrity concert players: figures such as Julian Bream, Alirio Diaz, Narciso Yepes, John Williams (who also contributed a long-lasting arrangement of *Cordoba* and a recording dedicated solely to Albéniz's music: *Echoes of Spain*), and others. Only relatively recently have guitarists been more comprehensive in their adoption of the Albéniz repertoire with recordings of the complete *Suite española* now having been made by such artists as Manuel Barrueco, Goren Sollscher, Julian Byzantine (who also recorded the complete *Recuerdos de viaje*), the Newman-Oltman (who also recorded the complete *Cantos de España*), and the (aptly-named) Albéniz Duo.

In addition to this "mainstream" Albéniz guitar repertoire, during the 1950s and 60s the Madrid publisher UME issued Albéniz arrangements literally by the dozen (of a wide range of items), made by such now forgotten arrangers as Garcia Velasco, M. Chacon, Luis Maravilla and Miguel Angel.

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Obviously, it is impossible to fully understand Albéniz's music—as it is the music of any composer—without an awareness of the essential details of his life. In the case of Albéniz, however, this is particularly the case. Albéniz is one of those musical figures whose biography is—for many—much better known than his music: a Paris Conservatory audition at the age of six; admission deferred after he threw a ball through a pane of glass; concert tours throughout Spain as a runaway from the age of eight; stowed away on a steamship to the New World with subsequent tours in North and South America; studied with Franz Liszt in Budapest; entered into a "Faustian pact" with an English businessman that forced him to set his tormentor's libretti for the rest of his creative life. All very colorful stuff—but none of it true!

In 1886, at the age of 25, our composer moved to the Spanish capital, Madrid, where he gave a series of well-received concerts. This success led to him providing a biography to a Madrid periodical (published as "Albéniz, Critical Biographical Notes of an Eminent Pianist"), which soon after was picked up by Giuseppe María Arteaga y Pereira for his *Celebridades musicales* (Barcelona, 1886). Thus was disseminated a mythological biography, provided by the composer himself, which provided the basis for virtually every further biography of Albéniz until the "exposés" of Walter Clark in the early 1990s. It would, however, be facile to simply label Albéniz a liar. Closer to the truth are Albéniz's powers of romantic fantasy, his abilities as a raconteur, a personality that was larger than life, and a mischievous sense of humor. In any case, the verifiable facts of Albéniz's life are hardly any less interesting than the mythological ones:

first "concert" appearance at age four (with his sister Clementina); toured with his father and sister in a kind of piano vaudeville act; entered the Madrid conservatory at age 8; first published composition at age nine (which survives and has been recorded at least once); studied in Leipzig at 16 and shortly after at the conservatory in Brussels for three years; at age 20 traveled to Budapest to study with Liszt (funded by the Spanish government), Liszt wasn't there however(!); by 23 had concertized throughout Spain, had toured in Cuba and had composed around 50 pieces; at age 25 moved to Madrid, where he gave a series of well-

received concerts and provided the now famous “biography;” at age 29 (1889) performed a concert of his own music in Paris at the Sala Erard for an audience that included Debussy, Ravel, Dukas and Fauré, who responded enthusiastically to Albéniz's pianism and ability to produce guitar-like effects from the instrument (they were particularly impressed with *Torre bermeja*, a piece that coincided with the French composers' recently acquired taste for flamenco music after having experienced it at the Paris World's Fair earlier that year); at age 31 (1891) moved to England for three years (under the patronage and management of a London businessman Henry Lowenfeld) where he concentrated on opera and theatre music and which led to the banker Lord Latymer (Francis Burdett Money-Coutts) providing Albéniz a large yearly salary in exchange for setting three of his libretti to music (some writers claimed that Albéniz later described this arrangement as a "pact with Faust" that drained his creative energy; in reality, the two appear to have been close friends and Lord Latymer continued his financial support of Albéniz without concern for their original agreement); at age 34 (1894) moved to Paris, abandoned performance and, cushioned by Lord Latymer's annual salary, concentrated all his efforts on composition, working on the three operas contracted by Latymer and a *zarazuela*; several premiered in Spain without success (he never actually finished all three) with the result that he remained in France for the most of the remainder of his creative life; around 1900 (age 40) his health began to fail due to Bright's disease (nephritis); spent some time in Spain during 1902-6 (the Llobet concert took place in 1906); at age 43 moved to Nice (Southern France) in 1903 and between 1905-9 wrote the miraculous *Iberia*; died at age 48, in 1909, in Cambo-les bains, a small village in the French Pyrenees.

A glimpse into the more internal aspects of Albéniz's character is provided by several tragic events that took place during the composer's early years: his eldest sister, Enriqueta, died of typhus when he was 7; when he was 14, his second sister, Blanca, committed suicide (after not being accepted to music school); Albéniz's father, Angel, was constantly out of work (being a low-level government official in times of rapidly ebbing political change) and, when employed, was often away from the family; one of Albéniz's closest friends at the music school in Brussels also committed suicide.

Albéniz's Performance Style

Albéniz's successful career as a concert performer resulted in a large number of published reviews of his playing, many of which are readily available today. These accounts paint a vivid picture of Albéniz's performance style, though perhaps not one that matches a first guess at the performance aesthetic of a composer considered quintessentially “Spanish.” Here is a sample:

"delicate taste, refined reading, dainty execution...his strength lies in the rendering of light, graceful compositions (*Trade & Finance*, England, 1889); "He reminds of Rubinstein in his refined and delicate passages (*Pall Mall Gazette*, England, 1889); "velvety touch " (*Vanity Fair*, England, 1889); "master of refinement" (*Daily Telegraph*, England, 1889); "velvety softness of touch—the cadences dying almost to a whisper" (*Rochdale Observer*, England, 1889); "his tonal shading is remarkable" (*Bristol Times & Mirror*, England, 1890); "rare power of producing full tone without having recourse to violence of any kind, or ever exceeding the limits of acoustic beauty" (*The Times*, London, 1890); "Soft and sympathetic touch" (*Musical Standard*, England, 1890); "an exquisitely delicate and tender style of playing that is peculiar to himself" (*England Magazine*, 1891); "his great excellence lies in his ability to play softly...he produces tones which resemble the ripple of water, and which charm the ear by their delicate softness" (*Bazaar*, England, 1891); "a peculiarly feathery

touch" (*Daily Telegraph*, London, 1891); "Albéniz represents a reaction against the slap-bang-and-hack school of Liszt [!]...possesses the art of making the piano sing" (*Pall Mall Gazette*, London, 1891); "artful phrasing and beautiful tone" (*Stadtburger Zeitung*, Germany, 1892).⁹

When one adds to these descriptions the preponderance of *piano* and *pianissimo* markings found in his scores, it is clear that Albéniz's performance aesthetic stands in stark contrast to a modern stereotype that equates Spanish music only with such qualities as energy, fire and passion.

Another facet of Albéniz's performance aesthetic is revealed through surviving concert programs of his recitals. In addition to the almost overwhelming length of many of these often three-part programs, is the clear classical orientation of Albéniz's performance repertoire which, around 1886, consisted of the following items:

Bach: *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, Italian Concerto, English Suite*; Handel: 2 Suites and other pieces; Scarlatti: 12 Sonatas; Rameau: 2 Suites; Couperin: 10 pieces; Mozart: 3 Concertos, 5 Sonatas, Fantasy; Beethoven: 2 Concertos, 6 Sonatas, Fantasy, 2 sets of Bagatelles; Weber: 2 Concertos, Sonata; Mendelsohn: 2 Concertos, a Fantasy, *Rondo Capriccioso, Variations serieusesse, Prelude and Fugue*, 6 *Songs Without Words*; Chopin: 14 Etudes, 5 Polonaises, 8 Waltzes, 6 Mazurkas, 4 Nocturnes, 5 Preludes, Fantasy, 3 Impromptus, Sonata, *Concert Allegro*, Scherzo, Barcarolle, Concerto; Schumann: Concerto, *Konzertstück, Papillons, Carnaval*; and concertos by Moscheles, Liszt, Ries, Rubinstein, Grieg and Mayer. (!)

In other words, Albéniz's performance style was based on a classically-oriented repertoire with delicacy, refinement and soft, beautiful tone at the heart of his delivery. How does this compare with our conception of Albéniz's musical style today?

Confirmation of Albéniz's performance style may be found in three "Improvisations" by our performer recorded on wax cylinders in Tiana in 1903.¹⁰ Although recorded toward the end of his life, long after he had retired from serious public performance and at a point when his health was no longer at its best, a refined, rhythmic, somewhat understated approach is clearly discernable.

At this point, we might mention the influential and highly artistic recorded interpretations of Albéniz's music by the Spanish piano virtuoso Alicia de Larrocha (whose recordings made as a child appear on the same CD, coincidentally). The highly convincing performances of this artist, not surprisingly, are widely regarded as models for the interpretation of this repertoire. It is important to recognize, however, that these are interpretations born of the intuition of a great artist, though not of any first-hand experience of having heard Albéniz (or even Granados, of whose school of piano playing Larrocha is the most famous example) actually perform.

⁹ A comprehensive listing of contemporary periodical literature relating to Albéniz may be found in Clark, *Guide*, 75-122.

¹⁰ The three "Improvisations" of Albéniz, along with performances by Joaquin Malats, Enrique Granados, Frank Marshall and the nine-year old Alicia de Larrocha are reproduced on "The Catalan Piano Tradition," VAI Audio, VAIA/IPA 1001.

The Aesthetic Quality of Albéniz's Music and the Programmatic Aspect

Albéniz's music, without question, is a highly evocative expression, one which invites a romantic speculation as to what story the composer may be relating through his vividly titled pieces. Apocryphal descriptions (of the type often found on old record sleeves) aside, we can be fairly certain as to the general program intended by many of Albéniz's pieces—though rarely of any precise one. Albéniz's message lies in essentially two things: 1) a nostalgic feeling for an ancient Spain; 2) an identification with a Moorish ancestry, albeit imaginary. Beyond this, much of what is “described” in Albéniz's music is of his own fertile romantic invention, even including, in some cases, the specific locales indicated in his titles. The evocatively titled *Torre bermeja*—“The Crimson Tower”—is a good example, especially as revealed by James Michenor in his book *Iberia: Spanish Travel Impressions and Reflections*.¹¹ Michenor provides a detailed and dryly amusing account of a trip to the “Torre bermeja”, which he knew to be the title of an evocative piano piece by Albéniz. Fully expecting to find a “splendid Moorish monument,” he instead found “a pair of square, dumpy things” and “a squat tower built of ugly brick in the worst possible proportions, as far removed in spirit from the music of Albéniz as one could imagine.” No doubt Albéniz too had been captivated by the evocative words “Torre bermeja,” which were enough to inspire him to the composition of a piece of music that described something that in all likelihood he had never actually seen.

Albéniz's letters often expressed strong nostalgic feelings for Spain, especially when he found himself away from it, and these feelings he expressed in the form of romanticized reminiscences of an ancient Spain that in reality never existed. In addition, he imagined himself to be of Moorish ancestry (Spanish words beginning with “al” are in fact derived from Arabic, though Albéniz's own ancestry apparently was not at all connected with that culture) and held a special affection for the Southern Spanish region of Andalucía (rather than his native Catalonia). In Andalucía the influence of the Moors in Spain was felt the strongest, and this is especially true of Granada and its Alhambra Palace, a place Albéniz visited many times. In a letter written to his friend Enrique Moragas in 1886, Albéniz describes the composition of one of his best-known pieces—the serenata *Granada*:

I live and write a *Serenata*...sad to the point of despair, among the aroma of the flowers, the shade of the cypresses, and the snow of the Sierra. I will not compose the intoxication of a *juerga* [a flamenco party]. I seek the tradition...the guzla [an ancient instrument], the lazy dragging of the fingers over the strings. And above all, a heartbreaking lament out of tune...I want the Arabic Granada, that which is art, which is all that seems to me beauty and emotion...¹²

(The phrase “heartbreaking lament out of tune,” as we shall see later, refers to Albéniz's use of the melodic augmented-second in the slow central section of this piece.)

In an annotation attached to the first page of the piece *Còrdoba*, Albéniz provided another colorful description of evening *serenatas* accompanied by ancient Moorish instruments:

¹¹ James Michenor, *Iberia: Spanish Travel Impressions and Reflections* (Random House, New York, 1968), 195-7.

¹² Cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 65, fn.

*In the silence of the night, interrupted by
the whispering aromatic breeze of
jasmynes, Guzlas accompany
Serenatas and their fervent melodies,
which diffuse in the air notes as sweet as the sound
of the palms swaying in the sky above.*

Albéniz’s use of the term “guzla,” obviously referring in both descriptions to an ancient plucked string instrument (“the lazy dragging of the fingers over the strings”) is a little curious. Organologically speaking, the term is used to indicate either a single or double-stringed instrument played with a bow or a plucked zither, both of eastern European origin. On the other hand, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), the English novelist, in his satirical medieval novel *Rebecca and Rowena* describes “the slaves of the Moor ministering to his scarred and rugged Christian conqueror...Some fanned him with peacocks' pinions, some danced before him, some sang Moor's melodies to the plaintive notes of a *guzla*” [italics added]. Another of Albéniz’s romantic evocations?

Beyond these descriptions there is little evidence for the fanciful programmatic specifics that we have become accustomed to reading in casual (and less casual!) writings on the subject.

The Elements of Albéniz's Musical Style

Albéniz was the first Spanish composer to achieve a truly significant national style of composition, and was a major inspiration to the generation of Spanish composers who came after him (Fallá and Turina, for example).

Albéniz's Spanish style, however, was newly created by him (despite his contact with Spanish music nationalist Felipe Pedrell), and not based on very much at all that came before. It is *inspired*, nationalistically, by folk music, by flamenco music, though without being based directly on its details. As Albéniz himself said:

"I never utilize the 'raw material' in crude state...I prefer to suggest our national rhythms, and infuse the *spirit* of our national melodies into my music."¹³

In other words, Albéniz’s Spanish music represents a stylized, romantic transformation of folk elements that evoke an *atmosphere* of Spanish folk music but go little further than adopting its basic rhythmic characteristics. In fact, the bulk of Albéniz's compositions are in essence written-out improvisations based on his own freely invented melodies. This, however, is not to suggest that we cannot trace authentic elements in Albéniz’s music. As we shall see later, a number of his pieces, principally those from his “second period,” employ modal melodic ideas characteristic of flamenco vocalization and harmonic effects derived from the guitar itself, though probably as much through artistic intuition as compositional design.

¹³ From a letter to Herman Klein. Cited in Clark. *Portrait*, 281-2.

Textures

In evoking the Moorish character of Andalucía, Albéniz adopted something of the *color* and *character* of flamenco music, adopting rhythms and harmonies that evoke a solo voice with strummed guitar accompaniment. For Albéniz, the piano became a kind of metaphysical guitar, and it was his ability to draw guitar-like effects from it that so impressed Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, *et al* when they heard him perform *Torre bermeja* in Paris. Often, the evocations are quite literal, as in the *Jota aragonesa* (1889) (*Aragon*), where the score contains the instruction, “the right hand immediately **pp** *ben marcato*; [the left hand] **pp** but sonorous like a singing guitar [fig. 1:]”

Jota aragonesa, Op. 64, No. 1 (edition Max Eschig: Paris, 1889).

The musical score for *Jota aragonesa* shows a right hand part with a series of chords, beginning with an 8-measure rest. The left hand part features a melodic line with triplets and a triplet of eighth notes. The score includes the instruction "subito **pp** ma sonoro" and "la mano *D* ben marcato comme une guitarre il canto."

It is hardly worth mentioning the similarity of this passage with the serenata *Granada*—the piece which reputedly moved Albéniz to exclaim “this is what I had conceived!” upon hearing Tárrega perform it on the guitar (see earlier). (Another overt reference to the guitar—again, almost too obvious to mention—is found in the *granadinas*—*malaguena*-like texture of the opening of Albéniz’s prelude *Leyenda*.)

Rhythmically, many of Albéniz’s pieces are of course built on accompaniment patterns typical of a strummed guitar. For example [fig. 2]:

Serenata española Op. 181 (*Cadiz*).

The musical score for *Serenata española* shows a right hand part with a melodic line featuring triplets and a triplet of eighth notes. The left hand part features a rhythmic accompaniment pattern with triplets and a triplet of eighth notes.

Forms

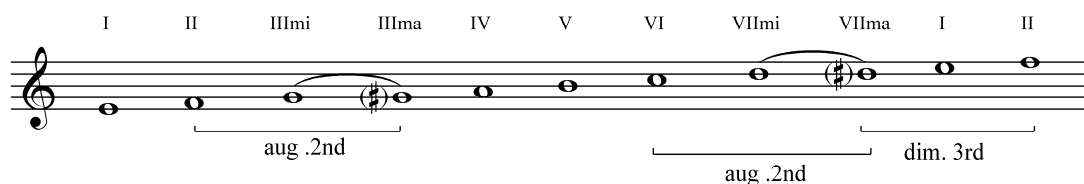
Albéniz rarely adopts the sectional forms typical of flamenco, but instead most often uses the standard ABA form of late nineteenth-century European salon music. Within this plan, Albéniz typically contrasts a light, lively dance character for the outer sections in which a principal melody is transposed though a couple of keys (though remains undeveloped) with a soulful evocation of *cante jondo* for a slower central *copla* section. Albéniz expanded and varied this

design in the various movements of the series *Chants de Espagne*, in the quasi sonata-form *La Vega* and, of course, throughout the four volumes that comprise *Iberia*.

Melody

Albéniz's melodies often employ the Phrygian mode. Of hypothetical Moorish origin, the distinctive features of this mode include a half-step between the first and second scale degrees, both major and minor versions of the third and seventh scale degrees, and the resulting potential for both upper and lower "leading tones" to the tonic and the unusual melodic intervals of the augmented-second and diminished-third. (Pieces set in Phrygian minor-mode are characteristically notated with a key signature one fourth lower than usual—for example, e-minor without any accidentals or a-minor with one flat.) [fig. 3]

"Spanish" Phrygian E-Mode.



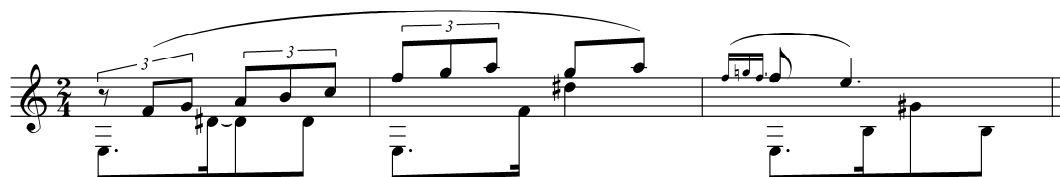
As mentioned earlier, Albéniz introduced the melodic augmented-second in his serenata *Granada* ("a heartbreaking lament out of tune"), apparently his earliest use of such an effect (and one that has sometimes been "corrected" in later editions, both for the piano and for the guitar) [fig 4]:

Granada, Op. 47, no. 1.



The double leading-tone effect (f-natural and d# in the following example), along with a tendency to cadence a minor-mode melodic phrase on a major version of the tonic-triad is exemplified in the second of Albéniz's *Dos danzas españolas* [fig. 5]:

Tango, Op. 164, no. 2.



Albéniz also employs the melodic lowered-seventh, evoking an unaccompanied improvised voice in *cante jondo* style (the concluding triplet is also a characteristic vocal feature of Spanish folk music) [fig. 6]:

Malagueña, Op. 165, no. 3.



The following descending *Phrygian tetrachord* (whole-step–whole-step–half-step) is another characteristic of Albéniz's *estilo aflamencado* (also note the modal key signature) [fig. 7]:

Prélude, Op. 165, no. 1



Harmony

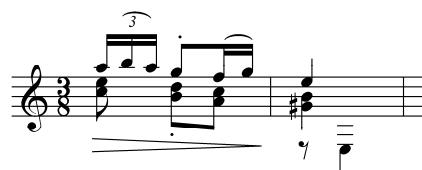
Although the major part of Albéniz's harmonic language lies well within traditional Western practice (and is particularly reminiscent of Chopin), we often find traditional dominant chords used side-by-side with their more colorful Phrygian counterparts. Pieces in the minor melodic mode, for example, almost always cadence on the major version of the tonic chord (as in the *Tango* above). The *doubled leading-tone*, a characteristic of the Phrygian mode, produces the *augmented-sixth Phrygian dominant* chord, which often replaces the traditional dominant based on chord V [fig. 8]:

Prélude, Op. 232, no. 1.



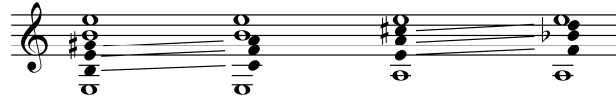
Another characteristic harmonic effect lies in a cadential formula of descending triads based on the descending *Phrygian tetrachord* shown earlier [fig. 9]:

Orientale, Op. 232, no. 2.



And a further group of harmonies derive specifically from the guitar; especially characteristic are those consisting of the major triad built on the lowered second scale degree, sounding over "open-string" pedals [fig. 10a-c]:

Guitar Harmonies



Cádiz-gaditana



Serenata española, Op. 181 (Cadiz).



Albéniz may not have written a single note of music for the guitar itself; nevertheless, there is hardly a note of his music that was not inspired by its dark and mysterious spirit. “The taste of olives”—and the sound of spruce!

[Stanley Yates' Albéniz Edition and Reviews](#)

