

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909): Overview of Writings

1. General Overview

Isaac Albéniz's literary output remains largely unpublished and inaccessible to the general public, though writing was a relatively frequent activity for the composer, especially during three decades. A general indifference has condemned this corpus to ignominy, despite its considerable interest, leaving it to languish in the detritus of the composer's various archives, in particular those conserved at the Museum of Music of Barcelona and the National Library of Catalonia, and to be dispersed amongst other Spanish and European archives. Among the most important are the Centre de Documentació Musical de l'Orfeó Català in Barcelona, the Biblioteca Nacional de España, the Centre international Albert Roussel, the Archives générales du Royaume in Brussels and the Breitkopf & Härtel Archiv in Leipzig.

The corpus consists of three types of documents differentiated by content and destination: three journals (personal and travel), writings for the press, and correspondence.

The two travel journals in Albéniz's hand to have been preserved depict, in the form of frescos of considerable interest, two of the most mythic episodes of the composer's life. The first, *Viaje de Hungría* (Travels in Hungary), recounts his long journey to Budapest by way of Prague and Vienna, with the goal, at least according to the official version, of meeting the eminent pianist Franz Liszt. Written between 12 August and 16 September 1880, this notebook, which rounds out the musician's romantic youth, offers a delicious read in a youthful and ardent style.

The second chronicles his two trips to Karlsruhe and Prague for purposes of an audition and then premiere of his opera *Pepita Jiménez*. It is divided into two parts, *Viaje de Marzo* (March Journey) and *Segundo viaje a Praga* (Second Journey to Prague), covering the period from 22 March to 1 July 1897 in the course of which the author relates his fears and hopes, in his feverish quest for international renown, on the occasion of his solemn presentation as a stage composer at the epicentre of European operatic activity.

The third journal, of a more intimate and personal character and picturesquely titled *Pensamientos, aforismos, paradojas y otras zarandajas, con sus puntos y ribetes de autobiografía* (*Thoughts, Aphorisms, Paradoxes, and Other Trifles, Decorated with a Few Autobiographical Touches*, 1898-1909), amounts to a compilation of sporadic notes, compiled, without concern for structure, between 1898 and 1909. It contains philosophical and moral reflections, many of them

surprising in the highest degree, which reveal an Albéniz of great intellectual depth in a wide variety of subjects: art, existence, the homeland, woman, love, marriage, goodness, learning, friendship, death, liberalism, faith.

It is appropriate to mention that these three journals were published in 1990 by Enrique Franco in a bungled edition full of errors and bowdlerisations, especially those relating to sexual and religious questions, certainly with the goal of dissimulating not only the openly inappropriate remarks but also, most especially, the author's apparent agnosticism.

Digital newspaper libraries have enabled the recovery of one of Albéniz's most neglected literary outputs: the criticism and journalism. His collaboration with Spanish newspapers, between 1882 and 1908, produced a corpus of 43 texts: 21 reviews, 9 articles, 12 letters to the editor, and 1 panegyric. His two stints as music critic for the newspapers *El progreso* (1887) and *Las Noticias* (1901-2) are of capital interest: under cover of a pseudonym, in a style at once affable and mordant, Albéniz delivered blunt judgements on the Spanish musical world at the end of the century, opinions that would incite great controversy over the musical context of the time. The picture that emerges of these writings is multifaceted: contributions on his own musical output and concert career; his relations with the Francophone world and musicians such as Francis Planté, Charles Bordes, Ernest Chausson and Mathieu Crickboom; a double polemic around the violinist Pablo de Sarasate (arising partly from a critique of the ills visited upon artists by the institution of marriage, and partly from the excessive compensation demanded by Sarasate from his Spanish handlers); his support for the piano builders of the time; his friendship with the composer Enric Morera; a plea on behalf of the pianist Carles G. Vidiella; his connections to the Teatre Líric Català; finally, his opinions on various performances of operas by Wagner, Verdi, Humperdinck, Meyerbeer, and Pedrell at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, and on various concerts given at the Teatre Novetats by Joaquim Malats, at the Orfeó Català, and at the Societat Filharmònica. Not one of these writings has been published at time of writing.

Finally, Albéniz's correspondence comprises 329 documents: 304 letters, 11 telegrams, 7 postcards, 5 calling cards, and 2 notes. They trace the itinerary of a life and an artistic trajectory particular to the composer, touching on diverse personal and professional matters and covering the entirety of his youth and adulthood, from his departure for the Brussels Conservatoire in 1876 to the period just before his death in Cambo-les-Bains in 1909.

These pages weave together a rich fabric of situations and relationships that bring into focus a multifaceted personality: the concert tours in Europe and America, the composition of his first piano and vocal works, the consolidation of his compositional identity thanks to the performance of *Pepita Jiménez*, his first thermal cures, Parisian life, the composition of *La Vega*, his move to Barcelona, his permanent rupture with Spain, his French exile spent between Paris and Nice, his fluctuating health, the composition of *Merlin* and *Iberia*, his relationship with the pianist Joaquim Malats.

The primary recipient of Albéniz's letters was his family, especially his faithful companion and spouse Rosina, as well as his sister Clementina in lesser measure. An abundant correspondence also appears with his two primary publishers, Breitkopf & Härtel and Éditions mutuelle, the latter directed by his student René de Castéra. These pages also reflect Albéniz's relations, never less than fraternal, with such musicians as Flip Pedrell, Paul Dukas, and Joaquim Malats, as well as Joaquín Turina, Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, Jesús de Monasterio, and Ruperto Chapí, not to mention his dear friends Count Guillermo Morphy, Enric Moragas, and Edmond Picard. Only a fifth of these letters has been studied by specialists; the rest remain unknown.

Taken together, Albéniz's literary output constitutes a source of inestimable value for anyone who would come to know the man and musician in his own words. This is precious information when one considers the habitual lack of rigour and the ongoing tendency to give the imagination free rein, or lend credence to false or biased information peddled during or after the author's lifetime, which have posed such challenges to specialists and students of Albéniz.

Albéniz's very personal narrative style alternates between moments of frankness, benevolence, or a sense of justice and others dominated by a satirical, poignant, impassioned, or outraged tone. His exuberant character manifests itself in idiosyncrasies such as a cavalier approach to punctuation, a sometimes obtrusive use of hyperbaton, excessive parenthetical asides, abundant repetition, overuse of exclamation points, and gratuitous French loanwords and expressions.

In sum, this corpus offers a rich kaleidoscope of revealing glimpses into Albéniz's personal and family life in addition to the purely professional sphere, painting a highly believable portrait of this artist of genius in all his idiosyncrasy.

Further reading :

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2. The Journalism (1882-1908)

Isaac Albéniz was always a musician engaged with his milieu, attentive to the fashions of the musical world and aware of the power of the press to influence public opinion, as is apparent from his journalistic activity which extends over nearly 26 years, from the age of 22 to less than a year before his death. With one or two exceptions in which he temporarily published as an official critic, these are sporadic reactions to notable events, reflecting a personal need to expound his point of view on questions diverse in nature.

The journalistic part of his legacy consists of 43 texts written for the most part in Spanish, and occasionally in Catalan. They take in a national purview of the musical scene, focusing on Barcelona (*Las Noticias*, *La Vanguardia*, *La Renaixensa*, *La Veu de Catalunya*, *La Publicidad*) and Madrid (*El Progreso*, *La Correspondencia Musical*, *El Liberal*) but also cities such as Alcoy (*El Serpis*), Palma de Mallorca (*El Isleño*) and San Sebastián (*El Diario de San Sebastián*, *El Eco de San Sebastián*, *La Voz de Guipúzcoa*).

The corpus consists of letters to the editor, a eulogy, articles, and concert reviews. The twelve letters to the editor correspond to three different purposes: to express thanks after his own concerts or the performance of his opera *Henry Clifford*; to praise the merits of the Steinway piano workshop and also the local brands Chassaigne Frères, Bernareggi, Estela & Cía, and Ortiz & Cussó; finally, to plead for or against colleagues such as Charles Bordes, Mathieu Crickboom, Pablo de Sarasate, or Carles G. Vidiella, and to publish his sole panegyric—his last piece of writing, as it happens—in homage to the Societat Coral Catalunya Nova.

Turning to the nine articles, they divide between a memorial homage to Ernest Chausson, brief notes congratulating Enric Morera and Felip Pedrell on their compositions, an announcement of a project to create a music school in Alcoy, an expression of strong approval for a visit of the Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux to Barcelona, and, above all, responses that Albéniz felt obliged to contribute to polemics incited by his own critical opinions.

It is this last aspect of his work that presents the highest interest. The 21 reviews, just under half of his journalistic writings by number, amount to nearly three quarters in extent. Although the earliest—his first published piece of writing—is a simple and innocent summary of a performance by the pianist Francis Planté, the remainder, which can be grouped into two periods around Albéniz's two tenures as official critic, were motivated by covert interests, for which reason the composer decided in both cases to mask his identity behind a pseudonym.

The first period encompasses the nine reviews published in the Madrid newspaper *El Progreso* between 17 February and 10 April 1887, all bearing the signature "Chinesco" (an uncommon adjective, used here as a noun, meaning roughly "shadowy"). These take it upon themselves to cover the series of concerts that the violinist Pablo de Sarasate had just given in the course of the season of the Madrid Society of Concerts, directed by the composer and conductor Tomás Bretón. Already compromised the year before by the violinist's unfortunate remarks on his prospective marriage, the polemic—touched off by accusations of contempt for the

Spanish public and also by performer's fees deemed out of all proportion—swelled to the point of provoking a veritable uproar, giving rise to multiple acerbic exchanges, to say nothing of the violinist's indignation. Despite certain suspicions—which Albéniz attempted to dispel by the rather outlandish step of reviewing one of his own concerts—the identity of the author of these articles was never officially revealed. Fortunately, Bretón's paper left a clue on 6 April: "Will Sarasate long persist in attributing the responsibility, or the inspiration, for these articles in the *Progreso* to the Concert Society and to myself, when Albéniz no longer makes any secret of having written them?"

The second period encompasses the 11 reviews published in the Barcelona newspaper *Las Noticias* between 18 November 1901 and 2 February 1902, this time under the moniker "Cándido", which cover the opera season of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, where Albéniz had in mind to present his final work, *Merlín*. Within the duration of his official functions, Albéniz reviewed performances of ten operas: Wagner's *Lohengrin*, *Siegfried*, et *Götterdämmerung*; Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, et *Aïda*; Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*; Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*; Boïto's *Mefistofele*; and Pedrell's *Los Pirineus*. He also showcased four concerts given at the Teatre Novetats: one by the Orfeó Català under Lluís Millet; two by the Societat Filharmònica under the baton of Mathieu Crickboom and Antoni Ribera; and a recital by the pianist Joaquim Malats. By contrast to his earlier period, Albéniz deliberately decided to make himself known by signing his real name to the articles devoted to the opera of his beloved teacher Felip Pedrell.

In closing, it bears repeating that none of Albéniz's writings destined for the press has been published as a volume, nor included in any of the biographies or studies of the composer. This whole source body is therefore unfortunately still unpublished at time of writing. Yet it represents an invaluable legacy for its literary qualities, in which the author's personality overflows in a style by turns direct, demonstrative, mordant, sarcastic, and provocative, too brilliant to go unnoticed.

3. The Correspondence (1878-1909)

The correspondence of Isaac Albéniz as presently known consists of 329 documents: 304 letters, 11 telegrams, 7 calling cards, 5 postcards, and 2 notes, written across a period of 33 years. They are particularly abundant in the first three of those years, when the adolescent Albéniz resided in Brussels to pursue his studies at the Royal Conservatoire, and also from 1896 until close to his death.

These documents' dispersal has rendered access difficult. On the one hand, the texts in Spanish have been conserved in various Spanish archives, in Barcelona (Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya, Museu de la Música de Barcelona, Centre de Documentació de l'Orfeó Català, Centre de Documentació i Museu de les Arts Escèniques de l'Institut del Teatre de Barcelona) and Madrid (Biblioteca Nacional de España, Archivo General del Palacio Real, Biblioteca del Real Conservatorio Superior de Música, Fundación Juan March, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San

Fernando) as well as the Archives of the Alhambra and of the Generalife of Granada, the personal archive of José Ramón Caubet Rovira, the familial archives of the composer, and even the pages of various local periodicals.

One is struck by the breadth of the familial correspondence—the letters to his wife Rosina, his daughter Laura, his sister Clementina, and his nephew Víctor Ruiz—which represent more than a quarter of the whole. In particular, many of the 72 letters to his wife fall into two groups, the first constituting a narrative parallel to that presented in *Viajes a Praga* (1897), during the auditions and then the Central European premiere of his opera *Pepita Jiménez*, the second group relating the musician's return to Barcelona in 1901. Other groups of letters present a genuine interest: those written to his mentor, Count Guillermo de Morphy, which furnish significant information on Albéniz's student days in Brussels, and those addressed to the pianist Joaquim Malats, especially with regard to the composition of *Iberia*, to which can be added those written to the director of the Orfeó Català, Joaquim Cabot, on the subject of Albéniz's efforts in behalf of a Parisian tour of the choir. Among the occasional recipients, we find Ángel Barrios, Enric Moragas, the brothers Enric and Ferran Alzamora, Felip Pedrell, Tomás Bretón, King Alfonso XII, Antoni Nicolau, Jesús de Monasterio, Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, Ruperto Chapí, Adrià Gual, Lluís Millet, Ricard Viñes, Joaquín Turina, Luciano Urizar Echevarría, Emili Vilalta, Carlos Ossorio, Luis Ricardo Cortés, and the Orfeón Pamplonés.

The remainder of the epistolary documents, written largely in French (but also occasionally in Italian, German, or English) is conserved in various European countries: France (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Centre International Albert Roussel, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, the Parisian auction houses Piasa and Auction), Belgium (Archives générales du Royaume), the United Kingdom (British Library), and Germany (Breitkopf & Härtel Archiv). These letters of more professional character represent almost a third of the correspondence, devoted especially to exchanges with Albéniz's two main publishers, Breitkopf & Härtel, charged with the publication of *Pepita Jiménez*, and Éditions mutuelle, directed by René de Castéra, to which Albéniz confided *Merlin* and *Iberia*. Also noteworthy is a small group of letters to Paul Dukas, conserved in unknown private archives, whose contents have only been partially preserved. The remaining, less important recipients include Edmond Picard, Paul Gilson, Francesco Berger, Herman Klein, Sylvain Dupuis, Lucienne Bréval, Guillaume Lallemand du Marais, Gabriel Astruc and Gabriel Fauré.

Altogether, this correspondence touches on a great diversity of subjects. On a more personal level: familial obligations and disputes, the death of his parents and relations with his nephew, his continual illnesses and hydrotherapy sessions, his support for his colleagues such as Pablo Casals and Joaquín Turina, his admiration for Joaquim Malats, the political situation in Spain, Parisian life in general, his moves first to Barcelona and then to Nice. On the purely professional level: his concert tours in Europe, Cuba, and North America; the composition of various of his works, from his first student sketches to his well-known piano works *Granada*, *La Vega*, and *Iberia* to the operas *The Magic Opal*, *Poor Jonathan*, *Pepita Jiménez*, and

Merlín; the performance of *Pepita* Jiménez in Prague and the futile attempts to organise the premiere of *Merlín* in Barcelona and Madrid; and finally his relations with French musicians.

To conclude, let us add that a significant part of these letters was dictated to the composer's daughter Laura, who acted as Albéniz's assistant, especially from the summer of 1905.

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