Henri Collet, Albéniz et Granados (1926)

Albéniz et Granados by Henri Collet (1885–1951) was published in 1926 by Félix Alcan in the collection “Les Maîtres de la musique”, overseen by the music-writer and biographer Jean Chantavoine (1877–1952).

A new edition, virtually identical to the first, appeared with the same publisher in 1929. In 1948, the publishing house Plon issued another edition in the collection “Amour de la musique”, reproducing that of 1929 without modification. The author indeed explains in the preface (unpaginated) to this last edition: “We have had no need, in view of this reissuing, to modify our judgements, nor even to update the bibliography, the civil war in Spain and its aftermath having cut short much work which we would otherwise have had to take into account: in the event, this has been limited to a few articles that contribute nothing essential and whose inclusion has therefore seemed unnecessary.” The most recent edition, from 1982, by Éditions d’aujourd’hui in the collection “Les Introuvables”, is nothing more than another reprint of that of 1929. Finally, one should mention a Spanish translation by Pedro Labrousse (Buenos Aires, Tor-SRL, 1943). The success of the book—attested to by the number of republications— very likely has to do with the absence of other works in French on these two musicians, until the appearance in 1956 of a monograph on Albéniz by Gabriel Laplane (Geneva: Éditions du Milieu du Monde).

In his General Introduction, (pp. 1–7), Collet justifies devoting this double monograph to two composers often considered—notably by certain French “masters”, whom Collet does not see fit to name—as simple “Spanish improvisers” (pg. 1): “they too created a genre and expressed a moment in the national and universal sensibility. Above all, they represent Spain in the world’s eyes” (pg. 3). And he specifies shortly after that it is indeed a question of “two representative artists of Spanish music” (pg. 5) who, by infusing art music with stylistic features of folk tradition, anticipated in a certain sense the artistic and aesthetic vision of Felipe Pedrell (1841–1922), one of the godfathers of this awakening of national consciousness in Spanish music at the turn of the twentieth century. Always ready with the snappy turn of phrase, Collet concludes his introduction, with a glance at the history of Russian music, by declaring Albéniz and Granados “the Rimsky and Borodin of the Spanish musical renaissance” (pg. 6).

The first part of the work, by far the longest (pp. 9–177), is devoted to Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909), while the second (pp. 179–241) focuses on Enrique Granados (1867–1916). Completely independent of each other, each follows a binary structure according to the time-worn scheme of life-and-works. The majority of the biographical documentation on Albéniz originates from private family archives (miscellaneous texts, biographies, newspaper articles, interviews) shared with Collet by Laura Albéniz y Moya, the composer’s daughter (see pg. 9). Also drawn on were numerous anecdotes told directly by Laura, without the author ever taking the

trouble to question them or, in particular, to verify their origins. The tone is therefore closer to that of a tale than a truly scientific and historical approach, so legendary do certain episodes appear; this one, for example: “When the stagecoach carrying him from Zamora to Toro was surrounded by the brigands of which we have spoken, Albéniz, in the costume of a musketeer, his little bundle of rags in hand, knelt down before the chief of the bandits and politely said: “Mr Brigand, Sir, I hereby give you everything I have, but leave me my book wherein I keep my letters of introduction from bishops and freemasons!” The chief, having disdainfully examined said book, threw it to the ground… Albéniz gathered it up, so glad of this salvage that, back in the stagecoach with the luggage-deprived and distraught travellers, he was overcome with a wild laughter that drew the indignation of these last. So much so that he narrowly escaped a lynching!” (pg. 17–18). Collet, not too scrupulous in this regard, also draws frequently on the little hagiographic tract of 47 pages by the journalist Antonio Guerra y Alarcón published in 1886 (*Isaac Albéniz. Notas crítico-biográficas de tan eminente pianista*, Madrid: Escuela Tipográfica del Hospicio), which consists of a sort of propagandistic libretto inspired by Albéniz himself for his self-promotion as pianist and composer at the court of Madrid. Collet also takes at face value the oral or epistolary divulgations of Carlos d’Avezac de Castéra and the pianist Francis Planté, sources not cited even in the very slim bibliography at the end of the volume (pg. 245). The analysis of Albéniz’s works (pp. 82–177), garnished with musical examples, ranges over, among others, the *Chants d’Espagne* and *Iberia*, tracing their roots in the *cante jondo* and flamenco but also in Arab music, drawing notably on Rafael Mitjana’s study “El orientalismo musical y la música árabe”, published in the *Revista musical* of Bilbao (no. 8, Aug. 1909, pp. 181–6 and no. 9, Sept. 1909, pp. 209–12). Reducing Albéniz to a pianist and emphasising the clumsiness of his orchestral palette, Collet finds that his lyric works *Merlin*, *Henry Clifford*, and *Pepita Jimenez* “are no more than orchestrations of music conceived at the piano” (pg. 88). He next classifies the piano works into “three characteristic manners” (pg. 88). The “‘improvisation’ style of the bohemian virtuoso” (pg. 89) constitutes, we are told, the “first period”. “The *Chants d’Espagne* belong only partly to the first period, and partly herald Albéniz’s second style, that of the settled-down and married bohemian, his soul deepened by the long-desired experience of family life, and also by contact with the Parisian milieu, more demanding than the Spanish, English, or American” (pg. 91). Finally, the “third period” is that of “total mastery” (pg. 92).

As for the study of Granados, it turns out to be quite summary indeed, with the composer’s life scanned in just 22 pages (179–200). It draws principally on the work (judged however “incomplete”, pg. 180) by Guillermo de Boladeres Ibern, *Enrique Granados: Recuerdos de su vida y estudio crítico de su obra por su antiguo discípulo* (Barcelona: Editorial Arte y Letras, c. 1921), on Joaquín Nin’s article “Evocaciones sobre Enrique Granados” published in the *Revista musical hispano-americana* in May 1916 (pp. 2–5), on various articles in the *Revista musical catalana*, and on anecdotes and souvenirs recounted by the composer’s son Eduardo. Granados’s oeuvre is viewed from four angles: A. “The Early Works” (pp. 205–8), B. “The Emergence of a Personality” (pp. 208–15), C. “The Romantic Period” (pp. 215–27), D. “The Call of the Earth” (pp. 228–41). There too, Collet reproduces or summarises copious passages from the book by Boladares.

Collet rounds out his study with a very brief “Catalogue of the Works of Albéniz and Granados” (pp. 243–4).

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Further reading

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