

ALBÉNIZ

Iberia – España – Recuerdos de viaje – Sonata No.5

Esteban Sánchez *piano*

Isaac Albéniz 1860-1909
Piano Music

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Esteban Sánchez *piano*

Esteban Sánchez: like a flame

Esteban Sánchez Herrero was one of those pianists who illuminated his performances like a flame, with light, colour and personal, inimitable passions. He had a mysterious, intuitive talent which always led him to the right interpretations. He was such a convincing pianist, such a searcher for beauty in sound, so sure that there is no deep music without deep poetry, that he was able to unravel, in his own manner and style, not only the best of Spanish music – Albéniz, Falla, Granados, Turina – but also Beethoven concertos and sonatas, the intimacy of Schumann and Mendelssohn, Rachmaninoff's expressive virtuosity, or the Post-Romantic elegance of Saint-Saëns. Esteban was somewhat different and at the same time, strictly analytical. His natural intelligence, his self-taught cultural knowledge, through piles of reading material selected with no other criteria than his own inclinations, made him a fascinating talker, always quick to enthuse and to disagree. He had the potential to be a divo but his emotions and his convictions reinforced a natural simplicity and a lack of vanity that, in today's world, made his career difficult.

Esteban Sánchez was born in Orellana la Vieja, a lovely town in Badajoz, a province of Extremadura, in 1934. From an early age, he studied with his grandfather, Joaquín Sánchez Ruiz, a notable choirmaster in Plasencia cathedral. In 1945, he went to the Real Conservatorio (Royal Conservatoire) in Madrid, and studied piano under the teacher Julia Parody (Málaga 1890-Madrid 1973), a distinguished pupil of José Tragó, who, in turn, had studied under George Mathias, a disciple of Chopin's. Sánchez perfected his studies in Paris with Alfred Cortot and in Rome under Carlo Zecchi, who was to conduct his presentation concert in the capital of Spain on 3rd December 1954. Sánchez played Beethoven's Concerto in G, No.4, with resounding success. It was clear that Cortot was not exaggerating when he said that Sánchez was "a musical genius of the twentieth century". The pianist had just received the International Awards of Ferruccio Busoni in Bolzano, Alfredo Casella in Naples and that of Virtuosity in the Santa Cecilia Academy of Rome. Prior to these, he had been awarded all the possible

prizes a pianist could receive in Spain and, after his performance in London, he was awarded the Dinu Lipatti Medal from the Harriet Cohen Foundation.

He made recordings for international labels, all of them noted by reviewers with surprise, as if they were a new find. But in Barcelona, the producer Antonio Armet made a series of recordings by Albéniz, Turina, Beethoven, Fauré, with superb technical accuracy for the time and the circumstances (1968-1974), and which today serve as a brilliant reminder of a life brought to an abrupt end by his death in February 1997. Among these recordings is *Iberia*, by Albéniz, a truly monumental piano work, unprecedented and practically unsurpassed, and which is presented here.

Esteban Sánchez died in his homeland, to which he had returned in 1978 to give lessons as a teacher in the Badajoz Conservatoire, and, surely, to breathe the air and enjoy the scenery of his birthplace. Perhaps he also returned to distance himself from the noise and pressure of big cities and the anxiety, problems and struggle of his profession. In short, to make of his life what he wanted and made him happy. It is not long since Daniel Barenboim, who adored *Iberia*, as did Messiaen, discovered the recordings and added an astounded question to his enthusiastic praise. "How is this possible? How can Spain have hidden away a performer of such class?". There was only one answer: Esteban Sánchez had chosen his path and decided on his livelihood. In the face of this choice, nothing could be forced on him, because the one existential value the pianist most loved, in his humanity, was that of freedom.

The distances between the great European centres, the trips to Italy, France or England, were reduced to the short journey between Badajoz, where Esteban taught, and Orellana la Vieja, his birthplace and his roots. It was in one of his almost daily journeys that this extraordinary pianist met his brief death, in concordance with his eventful yet peaceful brief life.

For Esteban Sánchez, playing music was, above all, imagining it. Then, after conscientious study and detailed analysis, it came down "to making dreams come true", listening to oneself to find the required sound, the failure, the nuance, the colour

and the accent that had been considered and felt earlier. Then the pianist's serious face was satisfied and aware. The wonderful marriage of desire and reality must be continued. Every time Esteban Sánchez played Iberia, he seemed to make his listeners feel it deep down inside. After listening to him actively and intensely, the audience burst into applause. It was difficult to judge what we had heard with equanimity. Perhaps the only possible comment was to apply to the performer of Iberia the words that Gabriel Fauré dedicated to its composer, Albéniz, "There is only one Esteban Sánchez on the face of the earth who is worthy of being Esteban Sánchez".

Iberia: The Wonder of the Piano

Although the Iberia suite is not Albéniz's only legacy, it is certainly the most valuable, original and transcendental. There are few works in music worth as much as El Albaicin, wrote Claude Debussy in 1913. Some decades later, Olivier Messiaen declared, "Iberia is the wonder of the piano and has a place – perhaps the highest – among the most brilliant stars for this absolute king of instruments". The critic Claude Rostand, said, in 1950, "It is the masterpiece of Isaac Albéniz's masterpieces".

Through the twelve pieces that make up the four series of Iberia, Albéniz creates a magnificent evocation of an ideal Spain, and at the same time, the real Spain that he travelled and lived in from coast to coast. There is a particular fact I have never seen pointed out, which I think is important: everything Albéniz evokes in his "new impressions" relates to places or scenery the knew. In the staves, he absorbs the rhythmic strength and the fascinating colours of Spain, and in particular, those of the south of the country; not without reason did the composer feel he was a colleague of the Spanish painters of the time: Rusiñol, Zuloaga, Regoyos, etc.

For all that, this incomparable Iberia which begins and, in many ways, is the height of Iberian nationalist music, makes scarce use of popular airs, much the same way as Albéniz hardly ever gave in to the temptation to describe, narrate or paint. Albéniz's Spain is essentially profound, despite the influence of Andalusian Baroque styles in its composition. There is no vertigo in its tempi, nor exaggeration in the dynamics.

With regards to these aspects, it is useful to remember an anecdote told by the conductor André Messager to Francis Poulenc: "One afternoon, in Vincet D'Indy's house, Chabrier had played his Rhapsody Spain for Albéniz. The composers were very alike in certain aspects – their beards, the eternal cigar between their lips, their straightforwardness, truculence, generosity – yet, they were profoundly different. When Chabrier got up from the piano, after having played his wonderful Spanish-style piece with overwhelming passion, we saw Albéniz go to the piano to play his music even more calmly than usual, almost austerely". Of Granada, Albéniz wrote, from his home in the Alhambra, to his friend Moragas, "we should move away from the image that many people have of Granada, seeing it through the bailaoras (flamenco dancers) spreading the wide, starched swirl of the train of their cambric dresses. Granada is not that, friend Moragas, and the Granada I want to show to my Catalan countrymen should be, right now, exactly the opposite. I want Arab Granada, the one that is all art, the one which seems to me to be all beauty and feeling and which can say to Catalonia: Be my sister in art and my equal in beauty". This is why Juan Ramón Jiménez wrote of Isaac Albéniz in deep, anti-picturesque tones: "You who left my soul, with your sound, so often Clear and trembling. Take this wreath that I hang on your cypresses, Made of roses of my life."

Evocación, El Puerto and Corpus Christi en Sevilla

When Albéniz composed Iberia (1905-1908), his health had deteriorated. Moreover, according to his daughter, Laura Albéniz, her father never had a day when he did not suffer pain. Nobody realised this, because he had such a lively character, animated by his active, willing, passionate spirit. Undoubtedly, Albéniz's final effort stemmed from the deep-seated conviction that he was going to leave posterity a greater work than anything that had sprung from his imagination before. Indeed, in Iberia, each of the twelve pieces is a marvel, practically dedicated to Andalusia. At one time, he thought of including a piece on Valencia, which he was going to call La Albufera, and it is common knowledge that, to start with, Navarra, was also composed as a part of the

suite. Albéniz rejected both pieces as part of Iberia: the former never got further than the idea; the latter “because of its brazenly popular style”, as he wrote to Joaquín Malats, the great pianist Albéniz always had in mind when he wrote his four series, and, of course, one of its very first performers.

Blanca Selva (Brive 1884-St. Armand, Tallende 1942), the French pianist, must have been the first performer of the whole of Iberia, playing the pieces practically as soon as they were written. The first series was performed in the Pleyel Hall, on 9th May 1906; the second, on 11th September 1907 in St. Jean de Luz; the third series was first played at the house of the Princess of Polignac, in Paris, on 2nd January 1908 and the fourth and final set, in the Société Nationale de Musique, again in Paris, on 9th February 1909, three months before the composer died in Cambo-les-Bains.

The first series of Iberia, dedicated to Mme. Ernest Chausson, comprises *Evocación*, *El Puerto* and *Corpus Christi en Sevilla* (*Evocation*, *The Port* and *Corpus Christi in Seville*). In its name and content, *Evocación* seems to be the ideal prologue to the collection. The first theme, something like a foretaste of the consequence of the ballad, takes us into the distinctive world of “distances” characteristic of the great Albéniz, through a calm, poetic, alert melody characteristic of Cádiz, comes the joyous, bright and radiant piece *El Puerto*. This port is none other than Puerto de Santa María, in the province of Cádiz. The possible traditional elements, if one cares to use the term, are, in any case, imaginary: the persistent rhythm and lively pace stops at the end in an evocation of the street criers, just as *Argentina* and *Mariemma* did when they danced it. Perhaps this was not the intention, but rather just a quick, attractive final relaxation.

Corpus Christi en Sevilla is, without a doubt, the most descriptive piece in Iberia, with the slow beat of the drum, the original combination of the *saeta* (popular, spontaneous song sung during religious processions) with the particularly Spanish *tantum ergo*, and the use of the *tarara*, a literal quote from folklore, which, although it hails from Castile in central Spain, has been adopted in the Corpus processions in Seville. The atmosphere of a great festival is captured by the three variations and the piano part that, as Messiaen said, was the only one that could be orchestrated. The procession moves away, night falls and the sound and movement fade into a very soft vibrato.

Rondeña, Almería and Triana

Rondeña, *Almería* and *Triana* make up the second series. An almagamated rhythm, very common in Spanish music where 3/4 and 6/8 time are used, runs through the whole of *Rondeña*.

The title could indicate an evocation of the ancient city of Ronda, in the province of Málaga, where Rilke was to live in 1913, or it could also refer to a form of flamenco singing derived from the *fandango*. Again, we must avoid the temptation to see a scholarly version of folklore in Albéniz’s music. He has enough with cadences or glimpses of traditional songs and dances. Everything else is pure imagination. Not even the most finicky ethnologists have been able to pick apart Iberia, as they consistently did with Falla’s work. With great coherence, after *Rondeña*, the composer places *Almería*, imbued with the same stylistic and ideological framework, despite the apparent differences. Moreover, if *Rondeña* can be defined as the interplay between peaceful and lively rhythms, *Almería* spreads out before us as suggestively as, in another ambit, Debussy’s impressions, to draw out the long song of the nonchalant ballad.

The explosion of *Triana* comes as a contrast, evoking the Sevillian neighbourhood on the other bank of the river Guadalquivir. The piece makes use of a popular type of flamenco song, called *seguidillas sevillanas*, or simply *sevillanas*. The first part develops the rhythm with great gusto, while in the second, the lilting song appears. The development, based on these two elements, becomes very complex and interesting, and naturally, rather difficult. The problem posed for the performer is how to play it correctly without overloading the sense of the work, which is amusing, sparkling and has a hidden rhythm of castanets. Joaquín Malats gave a preview performance of *Triana* in Madrid, where its success obliged him to play it again as an encore, and the same happened in Barcelona shortly afterwards. “We passionately applauded your *Triana*”, wrote Breton, “You are on the right path”. And the pianist Malats enthused, “Everyone says the same: *Triana* is adorable”. *Triana* is not a bravura work, as quite a few pianists think, but one of grace and nuance. Albéniz only included indications at the end, and the final page is full of notes such as “gracefully”, “sonorous but not very loud”, “very sweet and nonchalant”, “calmly and without hurrying” and “singing”.

El Albaicin, El polo and Lavapiés

El Albaicin – the old quarter of Granada which rises up from the centre of the city to St. Nicholas' Square through clean, winding streets – El polo and Lavapiés – a popular area of Madrid – follow each other in the third series of Iberia. “Although unfortunately rather ill, I still have a large, healthy heart in which to keep my Granada”, wrote the composer to his close friend Enrique Moragas. He continues, “For Iberia, I have finished an emotional, rowdy piece, epic and noisy, all guitars, sun and fleas. But I have been able to spread a rosy hue – as Paul Dukas says – On El Albaicin – that is what the work is called – of great tenderness, but very elegant tenderness”. Writing to Joaquín Malats, “I have finished, under your direct influence as a wonderful performer, the third series of Iberia, the pieces are entitled as follows: El Albaicin, El polo and Lavapiés. I think I have taken the Spanish elements and technical difficulties to their utmost”.

The enthusiastic, unanimous praise heaped on El Albaicin culminated in Dukas' words: “A poet of music blinded before nature”, The Countess of Castellà, who had great perception for musical messages, wrote, “It is gypsy-like in its mode, inflexion, style and sense. Full of gypsies and Granada, with the mystery of dawn in the inspired motif of the initial pianissimo...”. “The tone, richly changing, enlarges on the theme with the fullness of midday”. El Albaicin is probably Albéniz's masterpiece in the way it captures mystery and perspective. Everything resounds like overlapping layers of distances, like Granada itself. “It is rather like the muted notes of a guitar lamenting in the night,” thought Debussy, who, on the other hand, never renounced the cliché about Iberia being “where we rediscover the atmosphere of those evenings in Spain with the scent of carnations and brandy” and which – we must add – he never knew, since the only once visited the Spain he dreamed of, for a few hours, to see part of a bullfight in San Sebastián.

Albéniz's sense of humour led him to include a note in the manuscript for El polo to say, “this is an Andalusian song and dance which I should be confused with the sport of the same name”. Words which the publishers, rather more serious types, did not print when the work was published in Andalusian tradition there are different

kinds of polo, the two principal ones being that used by Manuel García and through him, Bizet in Carmen, and the “gypsy polo” of which Falla gives a shining example in his *Siete canciones populares* (Seven Traditional Songs). Albéniz is more inclined to use the first type, with a charming identification of its rhythm and melody. It could be said that the melody springs from the rhythm by spontaneous generation and tends to return to it. It has as always, an air of calm within the allegro character, and it is even touched with melancholy expression on occasions.

Lavapiés is, to start with, the only piece not based on an Andalusian impression in Iberia. The composer had often strolled through this typical Madrid neighbourhood, which, like other suburban areas in the capital, is full of the smells, sounds and flavours of Andalusia. Therefore, the result is not in opposition, nor is it in great contrast, to the rest of the suite. “This piece should be played joyfully and freely”, Albéniz indicates. The basis rhythm and melody employed is the “Andalusian tango” which travelled to America and came back as the tango-habanera, later known only as habanera. As a tango, infused with Caribbean wit and livened up with reminders of its original boldness (very brash), the song was very popular in the zarzuelas called *género chico* (one-act operettas) and with the singers in café-concerts and flamenco clubs. It is curious to note that Iberia's composer, in his heterodox traditions, makes use of an Andalusian Christmas carol, still sung on Christmas Eve, with its traditional verses:

“Bells ringing out,
And over them, one bell,
Look out of your window
And you will see the Baby in the cradle.”

Málaga, Jerez and Eritaña

Once La Albufera and Navarra had been rejected as the final scenes of Iberia, the remaining triptych comprised Málaga, Jerez and Eritaña. As a whole, this is the most difficult set of the four. What Albéniz himself called “technical difficulty” continue to grow and, on the other hand, gain brilliance. Malats commented in one of his letters to Albéniz that Málaga was somewhat reminiscent of the composer’s early period, and this perception is quite subtle. That reminder came from the substance, since the language, the keyboard treatment, the agglomeration of sounds, situate the piece as a forerunner of the most daring modern forms. Messiaen never tired of pointing out to his disciples how he had come to like dissonance after listening to Iberia time and again. If we look for it, once the technique has been mastered, Iberia carries us from its modern, inimitable and untransferable modern language to a depth which makes it a testimony. “This is an authentic historical document”, Manuel de Falla used to say, “through musical language, the Andalusia of past times reappears to us”.

Jerez again refers to Cádiz, as in El Puerto. But in Jerez, the border town of horses and wine, despite the continuing, burgeoning complexity, all the elements that come together in the later works of Albéniz, solidify and are presented with great ease. I do not know whether it is of great interest to note that in the deep poetic dimensions of the piece, there are echoes of the soleá and in any case, the whole atmosphere breathes the matrix songs”, those known as jondo in flamenco, or the deepest part of the tradition. This is, perhaps, the last idealised piece in Iberia, since the final work, Eritaña, is much more realistic. This is another masterpiece about an illusion of Andalusia, examined and discovered through the feelings and thoughts of an exceptional artist. “Music has never achieved such varied impressions”, said Debussy of Eritaña, a typical Sevillian tavern. The flamenco guitars, singing and dancing were both festive and deep with “black sounds”. The roots of Eritaña are in the sevillana, or as Albéniz wrote, “anguished sevillanas,” and one can almost imagine a whole procession of the different types of this most popular of Andalusian songs: variants from Triana, flamenco, “jewel-like”. It reminds me of his purpose: to evoke, explore,

starting from deep-rooted traditional features and then, invent his own Andalusia. This is what Albéniz did right from the sevillanas in his Suite Española (Spanish Suite) or the almost clavichord-like notes of the Malagueña, played superbly by Iturbi or by Benedetti-Michelangeli. Albéniz never wrote anywhere that Iberia was a single, whole work, to be played in its entirety and, in fact, Rubinstein, Iturbi, Clara Sansoni and so many others, have performed just one series, or at most, two. Today, with the technical and emotional aspects of Iberia being mastered, it is wonderful to hear the complete work, which clearly shows Albéniz’s logic in his arrangement of the twelve pieces. It requires, naturally, an imaginative performer, a poet who will reinvent the whole and the parts, the explicit and the hidden depths, the real and the imaginary aspects. Esteban Sánchez, for example.

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Most of the works in this recording were written or perhaps we should say first performed, given the difficulty inherent in establishing exact dates of composition to which we alluded at the beginning of these notes by Albéniz during the time he lived in Madrid, between 1885 and 1889, in Antón Martin Square, after his marriage to Rosina Jordana in 1883. He had already acquired an extraordinary reputation as a pianist, which would take him across the whole of Europe, sometimes on his own and sometimes with the violinist Enrique Fernández Arbós. During those years in Madrid, Albéniz triumphed as a performer and was called upon by high society including Queen Maria Cristina, which seems to have led him to say, exaggerating somewhat, that he was “the Court pianist” and by people wanting to pass the entrance exams to the Conservatory, according to the advertisement that Albéniz himself placed in La Correspondencia musical (Musical News). Albéniz’s interest and ambitions as a performer can be gauged by the programme for the recital he gave in the salon held by his publisher Romero, on Sunday 24th January 1886: Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Weber, Chopin, Rubinstein, Heller, Mayer, Wagner-Liszt and, of course, Albéniz himself, with a transcription of

an excerpt from the prelude to *Mefistófeles* by Boito, and his own *Suite española*.

Sonata No.5 is part of a cycle of seven sonatas of which only the third, fourth, and fifth are still complete, published in Madrid by Romero in 1887. Of the first and the seventh, only fragments have survived and nothing at all is known of the second and sixth, which leads one to wonder, given the lack of order in a great part of the composer's works, whether they ever actually existed, whatever the numbering would seem to imply. Sonata No.5 opens with overtones reminiscent of the salon world, with echoes of Chopin and Grieg – a composer who greatly influenced Granados and in its formal aspect reminds us of a tone poem or a ballad without words, with authentic lyricism which, in the best moments of those works – still anchored in a particular past full of logical influences – make the music Albéniz wrote in those years something which went much further than the not-altogether-inevitable sources. The second movement, with the curious name of “Minueto del Gallo”, or “Minuet of the Cock” – despite which there is no descriptive element at all- has overtones of Chopin in its first theme, but the second brings us closer to the clearly Spanish tone of Albéniz's works. After the romantic echoes of the *Rêverie*, ambitious in its own way, the last movement is a tribute to the music of Soler and Scarlatti, almost a game which Esteban Sánchez exaggerates in his version until he transforms it into a reference to the past full of humour, warmth and brilliance.

Recuerdos de viaje (Memories of a journey) was first performed in 1887. It is a series of postcards in sound, impressions of landscapes and people, which runs the full range from a dramatism close to Mendelssohn – except for the central theme- in “En el mar” (At Sea), to the light “En la playa” (At the Beach).

“*Leyenda*” (Legend) is a barcarole closer to Chopin than to Fauré, who was also composing similar types of works at around that time. The basis of the evocation of “*Alborada*” (Dawn) is a very simple melody which transports us to the sunrise and the dawn chorus of the first birds in the early morning. A second theme acts as a melancholy counterpoint to the almost impressionist lightness. “*La Alhambra*”, *Puerta de Tierra* (Land Gate) and “*Rumores de la Caleta*” (Echoes of la Caleta) ,

describe particular places. The postcards are meant to be clearly identified, not just a dawn anywhere or a rather abstract sea. “*La Alhambra*” is more ambitious than the earlier pieces in the series, with a second theme which seems to fold back into itself before taking on its full height, as if the time for Iberia had not yet arrived. “*Puerta de Tierra*”, the gate which opens into the old part of the town of Cádiz, has a rhythm in which the mazurkas of Chopin and a popular bolero come together easily in a work construed by a pianist for a pianist, full of arabesques, typical of a person who is confident of his own resources. “*Rumores de La Caleta*” is the most interesting piece of all these *Recuerdos de viaje*, with the freest composition, the closest to the work of Albéniz in Iberia, the cleanest lines and best colours. The place referred to in the title is in Málaga, and the theme uses is a “malagueña” (popular flamenco song from Málaga) which Albéniz probably heard sung by Juan Brevan (1844-1918), a “cantao”, or flamenco singer, who made it popular then. The piano takes on the role of the guitar in the introduction, while the syncopated notes of the chorus – with two different beats, one for each hand- and the verses of the second section take us straight into the world of the serious flamenco songs. After this piece, “*En la playa*”, among the names which it suggests is Chopin again, but also Liszt in his work *Years of Pilgrimage*, which comes to mind even if only because of the sense of the title when the whole work is heard at once- seems to be a rather lightweight ending to a series which grows in intensity as it develops.

The *Pavana-Capricho* is an earlier work, and there are references to its existence in 1882, when Albéniz played it during a series of concerts round Galicia. It is a brilliant, pleasing piece, with no more pretensions than to please an audience probably made up of people accustomed to salon works. The “*Tango en la menor*” (Tango in A minor) together with the “*Jota aragonesa*” (Aragonese Dance) –the same one as the sixth piece of *Suite española* no. 1 – make up “*Dos piezas características*” (Two Characteristic Pieces) also called “*Dos danzas españolas*” (Two Spanish Dances) , published in London and Paris in 1889. Again we see a more mature Albéniz, especially in the introduction, much more dramatic than the main theme, which is

light like earlier works but with deeper and more expressive inflexions, until it reaches a transitional theme which takes us back to the initial mood, with the repetitions of a kind of popular song.

With Torre Bermeja (Vermillion Tower) – the name of one of the towers in the Alhambra in Granada – his maturity is even more apparent.

The ABA form still gives us a second, lighter theme, perhaps a little vague but memorable, where the piano seems to linger, as if conscious that it has reached a melody of dreams. It is a feeling that will reach its heights, then years later, in La Vega, the clearest forerunner to the great achievement of Iberia.

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The emotion of the moment

There are artists whose performances radiate surety, control and authority over phrases which, once heard, one can imagine will be interpreted in an identical, or at least very similar way on other occasions. However, when one hears Esteban Sánchez (1934-1997) play, as when we hear Furtwängler conduct, we are overcome by a very different feeling. His prodigious technique allows him to calmly confront any challenges a score may contain, but whilst his conception and the way he brings the score alive captures our imagination, we feel certain that nothing we hear could be repeated the next day. However, it is more than likely that the second, third or fourth version of the same piece will leave us just as satisfied, and, above all, moved.

Esteban Sánchez's style of playing swings between emotion and immediacy. In his performances, both concepts are inseparably joined. The emotivity stems from the older style of playing where the notes suggest an untiring journey through the world of feelings, which, in Albéniz's case, means a vast compendium of emotions, with joy, nostalgia, loneliness, enthusiasm, passion or melancholy portrayed with carefully graded nuances of colour. The Catalan composer's great music is always a personal expression, whether it is the memory of a landscape, the perception of a rhythm, or an experience which he could not forget. Such subjective music needs, almost demands,

a performer who will let it breathe freely as its own entity. And this is exactly what Esteban Sánchez does, perhaps in a way no other pianist does. It is exciting to see, in the works collected on this record, how a mordant, a trill, a cadence, are far from being typecast as the more or less conventional, recurring formulas of Spanish music of the time, becoming instead sonorous renditions of very varied hues. Nothing can be further from Albéniz's music than routine, conformity or clichés; in fact, he created a new language himself. When the composer's notes literally fall into the hands of Esteban Sánchez, they recapture an environment which must seem familiar to them: surprise, risk, adventure, fresh air. And the resulting joy is contagious. Immediacy: this is the other extreme on which the art of the pianist from Extremadura rests. It is often the mark of unpredictable artists and Esteban Sánchez was exactly that, both sitting at the piano and away from it, to the extent that he soon renounced, like those "few wise men" extolled by Luis de León (the greatest Spanish prose writer of the XVIth century), what promised to be a splendid international career, in order to live quietly in his village, devoted to teaching the piano. At the keyboard, Esteban Sánchez knew exactly what he wanted, although the moment did not always coincide with his fingers. The repetitions that studio recordings allow mean that, luckily for us, the union between the immediacy and the performance is always perfect, and when he gave his ideal interpretation of the work (or one of them, since great musicians always have more than one ideal), the results are dazzling, precisely because the spontaneity which pervades the music fits it perfectly and lends itself to the performer who made spontaneity the emblem of his playing.

Such an outpouring of spontaneity would be pointless without a guiding mind to govern the dictates of this extreme sensitivity and without fingers that move across the keys with an exhaustive knowledge of what they have to offer. Only someone who has plumbed the depths of the possibilities of his instrument can produce such a torrent of timbral nuances and varied dynamics. For example, you can hear how Esteban Sánchez interprets a process that Albéniz uses frequently, that of the same phrase written for both hands, although separated by two octaves. Here, it can

be found right at the beginning of “Preludio”, the first of the Seis hojas de album (Six Album Leafs), Op.165, or in the central song from Sevilla (in Iberia, it also appears, for example, in the song from “El Albaicin”). Esteban makes the music seem to hang from a thread, with the sound floating in a fragile balance between the two extremes, which, although far apart, touch each other. Or there are the risks he takes in performing Asturias almost as if it were a toccata for harpsichord, playing at a tremendous rate, which he makes compatible with Albéniz’s initial indication (*marcato il canto*) and with the execution of the rapid chords in *fortissimo*, resounding in his hands like broadsides. When the music requires simplicity, floating lightness, Esteban Sánchez knows how to strip down his playing, avoiding useless trills. His version of “Tango”, a piece that is often disfigured or inflated by pianists, is a model of elegance, sincerity, of how to generate expectation through a melody which he carefully modulates, bar by bar, weight and profile, with its constant oscillation between binary and tertiary designs. The pieces which cannot hide their origin in salon music, such as “serenata”, from Seis hojas de álbum, gain in depth without having to renounce their origins. When the music calls for extremes, such as in Córdoba, the pianist throws himself into exploring them, although this does not prevent him from building perfect transitions in which it is impossible to find the slightest hint of rhetoric. On a more general level, Albéniz’s music always requires the delicate interweaving of melody and accompaniment, and their common path can take on diverse forms. Esteban Sánchez graduates and places the voices, not favouring the former nor lessening the importance of the latter, with an almost visual precision: as a result, both the whole and its parts are necessary.

In the works included in this recording, there is not the unity of concept or formal ambition of Iberia, but it does show signs of many of his achievements. This is also a more complete journey round a Spain which, duly filtered by someone who made changes of scenery the vital force of his life, Albéniz chose as the main inspiration for his creations. We have already referred to Iberia as the summit of Isaac Albéniz’s art. The piece which closes this recording, La Vega (The Plain), is perhaps its most

significant precursor, and a work whose entity could have won it a place among those “impressions” for piano admired by Ravel, Falla or Messiaen. In it, the art of Liszt, Chopin or Debussy are reflected, as well as the composer’s earlier achievements. Albéniz received the influence of the first two composers on his piano works through their teaching, directly or indirectly; from the French composer, he learnt through their mutual friendship and admiration. And his own linguistic conquests are transformed here into a prophetic work, ambitious in its formal structure and in the harmonics (the key with seven flats and a constant flood of accidental alterations show how uncomfortable the visionary Albéniz found the diatonic or chromatic strictures of the time), stripped of artifice, or picturesque touches, happy in its abstraction, exquisitely slow in the exposition of its slight melodic touches. If La Vega is one of the heights of piano music of our century, Esteban Sánchez’s performance of it, based on a miraculous tempo, comprises an artistic monument of the stature of that of Iberia which he recorded a few months later. These are the first recordings for the Ensayo label by the pianist from Extremadura. Three decades after their creation, these performances have lost nothing of their deep sincerity, their capacity to astonish us, to suggest images, to leave us floating, as in the prodigious recreation of La Vega, in a state of perfection. The talent of a unique performer and the intuition of a clairvoyant producer forged in the Barcelona of 1968, another revolution, this time intimate and reduced to a mere sum of moments, perhaps, but of moments transformed by emotion.

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