

Program Notes

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) composed this last piano sonata in 1794-1795, placing it within the final group of the fifty-two solo sonatas he wrote for the instrument. These ultimate sonatas contain elements of surprise, elegance, charm and wit. Of tonight's sonata, the exuberant yet simple, principal theme of the opening *Allegro* is based on motivic material that undergoes several alterations. Haydn's use of the damper pedal, which at the time was a new device on the instrument, lends one of the most interesting treatments of this theme. The composer requests the pianist to hold the damper pedal throughout an entire phrase, producing a captivating blending of sound. Just as in Haydn's time, this special effect adds yet another element of interest for the audience. The second, slow *Adagio* movement is beautifully expressive and wanders eloquently through several tonal centers. There is a quality of nostalgia from beginning to end, as this music captures all characteristics of the "galante" style. The last movement, *Allegro molto*, is binary in form and contains *scherzo*-like elements of fast figuration and scale passagework. Although Haydn was an excellent keyboardist and wrote substantially for the instrument, the keyboard works do not actually occupy the most prominent position of his compositional works—he is most famous for his development of the string quartet and symphony. Like those works as well as a large part of his music oeuvre, tonight's program begins with a piece set in what musicians call "sonata form." This highly elevated piano sonata, classic in structure and a model of Haydn's dedication to form, provides a wonderful example of a late, Eighteenth Century, classical "fast-slow-fast," multi-movement work. This form will be deconstructed and rebuilt in the last piece on tonight's program.

The *Barcarolle*, (defined as the song of a Venetian Gondolier), Op. 60 in F-sharp Major by **Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849) has been characterized as one of his most attractive pieces for piano. For it is in this work that one experiences several of the compositional techniques Chopin perfected. The swaying, lyrical figure of the left hand accompanied by the expressively melodic thirds and sixths in the right hand, the use of trills and delicate passages, and the continued line of thematic development are all a part of this piece's charm. Chopin's use of rich harmonic color is found in the passionate coda, which is one of the most stirring and beautiful moments from this composer's musical literature. The work was composed just three years prior to his death at the age of thirty-nine, when he struggled both with tuberculosis and his relationship with author George Sand.

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) had a colorful life. Born in Camprodón, Spain, he was a child prodigy of piano who gave his first public concert at the age of four and thereafter concertized throughout his entire life. He passed the entrance exams of the Paris Conservatory at the age of six but was not admitted because they thought he was too young (it may have been that ball he threw at a mirror inside the conservatory which caused the authorities to question his maturity...). Legend has it that at age nine he ran away from home and experienced many adventures in South America, the United States and throughout Europe—concertizing all the while. "In reality, Albéniz first performed in the New World in the spring of 1875 when he gave a series of concerts in Puerto Rico. From there he traveled to Cuba where, in the fall of 1875, he gave several more concerts before returning to Spain. As for the young Albéniz being a stowaway, the record shows that his father, a Spanish customs inspector, was transferred to Havana, Cuba in April 1875, and that the elder Albéniz sailed from the port of Cádiz on the 30th of that month to begin his new assignment. The record also shows that Isaac performed in Cádiz the night before his father's departure. Hence, we can safely assume that our restless prodigy first sailed to the New World in the company of his father."¹ Realizing that his child prodigy fame was short lived, he "settled down," enrolling himself into the Leipzig Conservatory in May of 1876. Just as many of today's music students,

¹ Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32-33.

Albéniz hoped that the prestige of the Leipzig Conservatory (comparable to the Julliard School of Music, for example), would give him more credibility as a pianist. However, he was not disciplined enough to earn those accolades on his own merit, and so, “short of money, ill at ease with the German language, and unhappy with the rigorous discipline imposed on him by his teachers, Albéniz returned to Spain after spending less than two months in the Saxon city where Bach, Schumann, and Mendelssohn once dwelled.”² His time in Leipzig was not all a waste, however, as he studied piano with Louis Maas and composition with Salomon Jadassohn, both who were students of Franz Liszt.³

Back in Spain and after offering concerts, Albéniz received a scholarship which permitted him to study at the Brussels Conservatory for two years, where he won first prize in piano performance. Thereafter he still offered public performances throughout Europe, but his biggest dream was to study piano with Franz Liszt. And so at the age of twenty, he left for Budapest in order to fulfill that wish. “There are many conflicting accounts as to how long Albéniz studied with Liszt. Most sources give a period ranging from six months to two years and indicate that Albéniz followed Liszt from Budapest to Rome and Weimar. And then there is the entry in Albéniz’s own diary, quoted by the Argentine musicologist Miguel Raux Deledicque, stating that Albéniz stayed in Budapest a total of just seven days and saw Liszt only once, on the 18th of August 1880, a few days before Liszt departed Budapest for Rome (where Albéniz did not accompany him). In reality Albéniz never even met Liszt, let alone studied with him, because Liszt was in Weimar, Germany on the 18th of August 1880, not Budapest. Albéniz, it seems, traveled all the way to the Hungarian capital only to find that Liszt was not in residence there at that time. And the entry in his journal was probably meant to placate his father who helped fund this excursion.”⁴

Imagine our pianist’s surprise when she realized that Albéniz never studied with Liszt! This was one of the myths that she had accepted and printed many times in former papers and program notes—never to be reprimanded by any of her teachers for offering this misinformation. Coming to the aide of many pianists and scholars who have also erroneously repeated this supposed lie, there is a similar pianistic writing style—virtuosic and difficult—shared between the two composers. And it is known that Liszt taught many prominent pianists in his later years of life. Even though as early as the 1990s this information destroys the myth that Albéniz studied with Liszt, it just goes to show that pianists still have a lot to discover regarding the Spanish composers and their lives. As was said about this “fact”: “Numerous accounts of Albéniz’s life have been written... an examination of any half-dozen of them soon reveals, however, that they are all plagued by inconsistencies and contradictions. This one says he was a stow-away on a Steamer in Cádiz and traveled to Cuba when he was twelve; that one says that the steamer was bound for Buenos Aires, not Havana; another says that it left from La Coruña, not Cádiz. This one says that he studied for nine months in Leipzig; that one says 18 months; another, 3 years. This one says that he studied with Liszt in Weimar, Rome, and Budapest; that one says that he studied with him for a year but only in Italy; another says that he played for Liszt but once, in the summer of 1880. And so it goes, throughout his life.”⁵

It was in the year 1883 when Albéniz arguably began finding his way. This was when he met Felipe Pedrell, composer and historian of Spanish music. Felipe Pedrell gave Albéniz a new awareness of Spanish musical heritage but was unable to constrain Albéniz with compositional rules and boundaries. It was not

² Walter Aaron Clark, "Albéniz in Leipzig and Brussels: New Data from Conservatory Records," *Inter-American Music Review* 11 (Fall-Winter 1990): 113.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Clark, *Isaac Albéniz*, 42.

⁵ Walter Clark, *Isaac Albéniz and Automythology: Chants d'Espagne, Chants des adieux, Chants biographiques* (Chamber Music Today, May 22, 2009, accessed September 15, 2009) [article on-line]; available from <http://chambermusictoday.blogspot.com/2009/05/isaac-albeniz-and-automythology-chants.html>; Internet.

until he met several French Impressionist fine artists that he was finally able to use a musical language which suited his strong personality. It is with this impressionistic style that tonight's set of pieces was written. *Córdoba*, which is one of the most important port cities of Spain, is located on the Guadalquivir River and was home to the Romans, the Moor Caliphates (or Kings) and the final conquering Christian regime of the Hapsburg Dynasty and rule of Carlos V (or Charles I). The city now houses both the Great Mosque of Córdoba, with a renovated Christian Cathedral in the very center of the same building. In this city, Muslims, Christians and Jews all worked and lived harmoniously, and it is this wonderful mix of cultures that finds its way into the piece *Córdoba* by Albéniz.

At the top of the score, Albéniz included the following poem, written by Enrique Morera, and it is these words' image that he tries to portray through music: *In the silence of the night, which is broken by the whispers of the breezes fragrant of jasmine, one dreams of the Moorish guitar accompanying the serenades, and there spreads in the air, passionate melodies and notes so sweet like the swinging of the palm trees in the high skies.*

The piece primarily contains two ideas: one of a sacred character, set in a homorhythmic and chorale-like texture. The other idea is more "Spanish" in nature: a yearning melody with guitar influenced (or in this case, Moorish guitar), rhythmical punctuations.

Perhaps the most famous of all is Albeniz' *Leyenda*, or Legend, also from the Songs of Spain. The portrayal here is alarmingly obvious: Albéniz is capturing the delicate and intricate capabilities of the Spanish guitar, except originally composed for solo piano. Dispersed among the webbing of repeated pitches Albéniz incorporates the strong and violent strums that flamenco guitarists are so easily and successfully able to execute powerfully. This is not the case on the piano however, as these violent strums are represented with huge, crashing chords found in the extreme opposite registers of the instrument. The middle of the work possesses the contrasting slow, *copla* section, with a *grita* or cry so often found in *cante jondo* of Andalusian folk music.

Hungarian-born composer **Franz Liszt** (1811-1886) was a monumental figure in the world of piano. Not only did he travel throughout Europe as a phenomenal concert pianist, but he also was acclaimed as a major piano pedagogue, an innovative composer who pushed compositional boundaries, and Liszt was also an influential conductor, impressing younger musicians and composers. Tonight's offered work, the Sonata in B Minor (*Klaviersonate h-Moll*, S.178) comes from a prolific composing period of Liszt's life. Having retired from his hectic concertizing lifestyle at the age of thirty-five, he accepted a position as *Kapellmeister* at the court of Weimar where he remained from 1842 until 1861. His job requirements included being court conductor and piano instructor (he taught the great piano virtuoso Hans von Bülow who actually premiered the Sonata in B Minor in Berlin in 1857). He had ample time to compose, incorporating new ideas along with strong influences, for he held passion and high regard for the music of Niccolò Paganini and Franz Schubert. The Sonata in B Minor is a study of the musical form some believe Liszt perfected: that which is known as "thematic transformation." This technique, in which virtually all the music is derived from a small number of melodic kernels, is heard throughout the work—as the typical three movements of the classical sonata form are heard without interruption in one, massive masterpiece. "The result in the B-minor Sonata is a work of rare structural unity and dramatic power."⁶ The idea of using one motivic idea throughout was not a novelty: many have compared this sonata to Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*—a piece that is also cyclical in nature, with various transformations and of epic proportions. Other contributions of Liszt in regard to compositional style include his dynamic piano

⁶ Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984), 189.

transcriptions, symphonic poems and harmonic expansions as heard toward the end of tonight's piano solo.

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