

Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic*  
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The Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909) has attracted relatively little attention in the musical scholarship of the English-speaking world, making the publication of a groundbreaking monograph in this language a welcome event. In *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic*, Walter Aaron Clark presents a major reconsideration of the life and works of this seminal figure of Spanish musical nationalism. This volume builds upon a body of Albéniz research undertaken over the last decade by the author himself and by Spanish scholars such as Jacinto Torres Mulas and Montserrat Bergadá, all of which has contributed to a demystification of the Albéniz biography, a contextualisation of the composer and a reappraisal of his entire output.

In his introduction, Clark makes reference to the numerous problems that confront the Albéniz biographer and the shortcomings of previous attempts. The earliest versions of Albéniz's life (by Antonio Guerra y Alarcón (1888) and in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1891)) are attributed to accounts by the composer himself, and these informed the subsequent biographies by Henri Collet (1926) and Gabriel Laplane (1956), particularly their narration of Albéniz's youthful exploits. But it is precisely the early years which gave rise to the greatest degree of mythologising on the part of Albéniz, especially with regard to his precocious escapades from home and tours of America, as well as in connection with his studies with the great pianists of the time. In Clark's account of Albéniz's early adventures in America a credible picture begins to emerge of a rebellious child prodigy whose family possibly sanctioned and assisted some of his undertakings. The likelihood that the almost fifteen year old Albéniz actually accompanied his father to Cuba, given the latter's contemporary posting as 'interventor-general,' is cogently argued. Clark also casts doubt on Albéniz's purported piano studies with Carl Reinecke and convincingly argues that the studies with Franz Liszt were fabricated by the composer in an attempt to extract further funds from his father. In fact it seems unlikely that Albéniz ever met Liszt. All of these clarifications of Albéniz's biography resulted from the author's painstaking research, yet there are still some significant lacunae in the account of the early years. However, Clark justifiably states that although 'there are still gaps and unanswered questions, the results of this research paint a rather different picture from the one previously available [of Albéniz]' (p.14).

Another of the myths that is laid to rest in this monograph is that of Albéniz's 'Faustian pact' with his patron the banker Francis Money-Coutts, which supposedly entailed Albéniz grudgingly composing operas to Money-Coutts' worthless libretti so that he could live on the lavish scale that he had become accustomed to. The role played by Money-Coutts has come under repeated attack from Albéniz biographers since Edgar Istel's 1929 article in the *Musical Quarterly*. Clark's meticulous review of the surviving documentation, including the contractual agreements and correspondence between the two men, presents a rounded picture of the relationship. Money-Coutts is revealed as a more sympathetic and supportive patron and collaborator than had hitherto been believed, even to the extent of providing financial support to Albéniz's family after the composer's untimely death. Albéniz's perseverance with the operatic genre and his fascination with Wagner are also presented by Clark as an integral

component of the composer's compositional aims and output, and not just an outcome of the conditions of the contract with Money-Coutts, which supposedly stultified his development as a nationalist composer. Building on recent scholarship, Clark presents a vision of Albéniz which embraces his neglected theatrical works and stresses their importance in his creative development.

Albéniz's cultural milieu in fin-de-siècle Paris provides some fascinating insights into the forces that shaped the mature composer of the piano cycle *Iberia*. His continuous striving for command of his compositional technique and the need for stylistic evolution led him to study at the newly formed Schola Cantorum. While he later taught piano at that institution, he was not a hardened disciple of its tenets and assimilated stylistic traits of composers such as Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy. Clark paints a vivid picture of this period and provides insights into how Albéniz's pianism, along with his generous and outgoing character, allowed him to win the admiration of, and to form enduring friendships with, key protagonists from opposing cliques. The intimate nature of the poetry Fauré wrote to Albéniz, which is here translated into English for the first time, reveals the depth of some of these relationships.

In general the biographical material is seamlessly interwoven with the passages relating to the conception, composition and reception of the works. The commentary on Albéniz's theatrical output skillfully blends considerations of libretto with those of musical style and there is an abundance of well-selected musical examples which aptly illustrate the points raised in the text. In his discussion of Albéniz's piano music Clark often has recourse to describing the guitar textures and flamenco styles that are evoked. While Clark displays a great deal of knowledge of these styles, it may have been interesting to try to further contextualise Albéniz's assimilation of such elements. Reference to contemporary notated sources of such music, such as the flamenco guitar scores of Julián Arcas and Rafael Marín, as well as comparison with the imitation of these styles in the scores of Albéniz's compatriots may have been useful in this regard.

On the whole the documentation and the translations are of the first order, although there is the odd infelicitous translation from Spanish. In line with current practice, Catalan spellings are employed for persons, places and institutions from that region, and this practice could also have been extended to musicians like Miguel Llobet. Still, these are minor considerations in a volume that offers so much. Clark succeeds in presenting a positive reassessment of the pianism and compositional originality of an intriguing late Romantic artist, whose construction of Spanishness had an enormous impact on a subsequent generation of Spanish composers. It could be argued that Albéniz transcends this epithet in his masterpiece *Iberia*, which informed contemporary French constructions of Spain in the *espagnolade* and sits on the cusp of modern music.

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