

Isaac Albéniz: Biographical Profile

Born in Camprodón, Spain on 29 May 1860, Isaac Albéniz was a brilliantly endowed child who gave a public concert at the age of four and passed the entrance examination of the Paris Conservatoire at the age of six. The same recklessness that at that time led him to throw a ball through one of the windows of the Conservatoire, prompting a deferral of his admittance (under the guise of his not being age-eligible) led him – after a year or so of studies at the Madrid Conservatory – at the age of nine, to run away from home to a series of adventures that took him from the streets of Buenos Aires and the waterfront salons of new York to the dignified tutelage of Jadassohn and Reinecke at Leipzig.

His daring flight ended only when, with the aid of a stipend from the King of Spain, he settled down to serious work at the Brussels Conservatoire, whose first prize in piano he took in 1878. Two years of study with Liszt followed, and then, at the age of twenty, Albéniz took up the nomadic life of the travelling virtuoso. Two events soon altered his purpose.

One was his extremely happy marriage, in 1883, to his pupil Rosina Jordana; the other was the stimulation he received from his studies, begun in the same year, with Felipe Pedrell. Pedrell, who was unable to teach so independent a pupil even the elementary rules of composition, gave him instead a new awareness of the richness of the Spanish musical heritage. From that time, Albéniz played less frequently in public and gave up entirely the facile composition of salon pieces. He began instead a search for an individual style that was not to end until 1893, when, in the live aesthetics and fresh sounds of the French impressionists, he at last found a musical language supple enough to bend to his strong personality. It is more than ironic then, that in the very year in which his ideas crystallized, he had bound himself, with his characteristic recklessness, to an impossible creative task by agreeing, for a yearly stipend, to set the music the turgid plays of Francis Money-Coutts, a dilettante author who had been attracted to the clever music Albéniz had previously written for the Prince of Wales theater in London. The immense conflict between his own artistic needs and the demands of an uncongenial task weighed heavily upon Albéniz. Long periods of illness overtook him; he was unable to finish the Arthurian trilogy given him by Money-Coutts. Instead, he gave his remaining strength to his masterpiece, *Iberia*, and finished it, in a final miraculous burst of creative energy, a few months before his death on 18 May 1909.

Although he wrote operas and numerous other works, Albéniz' fame as a composer rests predominantly on in piano music and, overwhelmingly in particular, with the suite *Iberia* (much in the same way as Granados' lasting fame would be tied primarily to *Goyescas*, composed a few years after Albéniz' death). It has been said that *Iberia* is "Spain set to music", and indeed Albeniz takes the listener on a musical tour through much of his native country.

One of those to visit Albéniz during the final weeks of his life was his friend Enrique Granados, who brought with him the news that the French Government had awarded the dying Albéniz the *Legion d'honneur*. Granados himself was to receive this same honor some years later after he had performed his *Goyescas* with enormous success at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in April 1914.