

Francisco Tárrega and the Art of Guitar Transcription

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The year 2009 is momentous for many reasons, among them the death centenaries of two giants of Spanish music: Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) and Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909). Both were virtuoso soloists as well as accomplished composers, and this tells us much about the age in which they lived, one in which soloists were expected to be more than mere executants. They were also expected to be able to improvise and to compose their own music. However, the pianist Albéniz inherited an ample and first-rate repertoire; the guitarist Tárrega did not. Tárrega's output, then, includes not only original compositions but also many transcriptions of works by famous composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To be sure, he was not the first guitarist in history to transcribe works from other media to his own. This had been going on since the sixteenth century. But he did so more extensively and influentially than any of his predecessors, and he thus established a practice continued by virtually every guitarist since his time. Indeed, though it is no longer incumbent on classical guitarists to compose and perform *their own* music, and has not been customary for many decades, they *are* expected to have made their own original arrangements and transcriptions of music other than that for the guitar. This is a direct result of Tárrega's influence, and though the practice is not without its critics and controversy, there is none the less an art to doing this sort of thing, an art we will now explore.

My purpose here, then, is to examine what is a usually overlooked dimension of Tárrega's creative activity, placing it in the context of his life and the history of the guitar

itself. Finally, I will bring together Albéniz and Tárrega by examining in some detail the latter's transcriptions of Spanish-style masterpieces by the former, pieces that in most cases were themselves transcriptions of a sort, in their attempt to mimic the guitar on the piano.

Tárrega and the guitar

Francisco Tárrega was born in Vilareal, in the Valencian province of Castellón, on November 21, 1852.¹ Like many renowned musicians before him, he came from extremely humble circumstances, and despite his eventual fame, fortune would prove forever elusive. This is a crucial aspect of his career that merits attention, for Tárrega ultimately succeeded *despite* his origins and station in society, not because of them. He was born into a lower-middle class family: his father was a security guard, and his mother did chores for the nuns at a nearby convent. His was not a family of professional musicians, though his father played flamenco guitar in his spare time. Thus, like other musically gifted members of this class, he would need the assistance of his social betters if he expected to make a career out of music, especially as a guitarist; in fact, he did benefit in his early career from the occasional support of wealthy patrons. Nonetheless, his early formal education was rudimentary and provincial. He attended a church school and learned reading, writing, and arithmetic along with religious instruction in the Catholic faith.

When Tárrega was still a child, the family moved to the provincial capital of

¹ Most of the information here has been gleaned from two outstanding biographies of Tárrega: Wolf Moser, *Francisco Tárrega: Werden und Wirkung* (Lyon: Edition Saint-Georges), now available in a revised Spanish edition, *Francisco Tárrega y la guitarra en España entre 1830 y 1960* (Valencia: Piles, 2009); and Adrián Rius Espinós, *Francisco Tárrega, 1852-1909: Biography*. The Rius biography is currently the only one available in English, though Moser is planning an English translation of his.

Castellón, a move that improved his prospects of getting lessons in music, for which he showed talent early in life. There were several guitarists from whom he was able to learn, but it was not until his tenth year that he had the opportunity to study with a true virtuoso. Julián Arcas (1832-82) was a Barcelona-based guitarist whom Tárrega met in Castellón after Arcas performed there on tour. Arcas agreed to accept him as a pupil, and Tárrega left for Barcelona to study with him. It seems incredible to us now that so young a child would be allowed to do this on his own, but at about the same age Albéniz also set out on a concert career, traveling throughout Spain on a relatively new and expanding railway network.² Anyway, there were family acquaintances in Barcelona who provided Tárrega with assistance.

In the event, his studies with Arcas proved desultory, and he was reduced to performing as an itinerant musician, wandering through the city in search of opportunities to play for money, on the street or in taverns. This nomadic life suited his temperament more than his pocketbook, and he was soon compelled to return home. A few years later, he left for Valencia in search of opportunity, again performing in cafes or for arts societies. His repertoire consisted mostly of works by Fernando Sor and Dionisio Aguado, as well as Arcas.

At age 17 he again returned home to Castellón, where he also worked as a pianist, having acquired some piano skills at the insistence of his father, who regarded the piano as far more respectable an instrument than the guitar.

It was not until he was 22 years old that Tárrega received his first systematic

² See Walter Aaron Clark, *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999/2002), 26-33, for a detailed examination of Albéniz's youthful concert tours.

formal education in music, at the Escuela Nacional de Música (now the Conservatorio Real) in Madrid, where he studied composition in addition to piano and guitar. It was in Madrid that he made the acquaintance of some of Spain's leading musicians, including Albéniz and *zarzueleros* Federico Chueca and Ruperto Chapí. And he performed in some of the city's leading theaters. By the time he was 26, he was touring throughout Spain, including Murcia and Andalusia.

In order to satisfy the tastes of the general concert-going public, Tárrega began to do what guitarists before him had done, and in fact what all instrumentalists did in the nineteenth century. He arranged and transcribed works from the piano repertoire and from opera, composing fantasies on popular arias and songs of the time. By the early 1880s, he was also performing in Paris, where the Spanish Queen Isabel II was in exile. An admirer of Albéniz, she now invited Tárrega to perform at her palace. He next traveled to London, where his reputation had preceded him and he was warmly received as the leading guitar virtuoso of the day. He would travel to London again in the early 1890s.

As a guitarist and guitar composer Tárrega, now stood at a pinnacle of international celebrity not attained by any other guitarist since Fernando Sor, who was also a fixture in London and Paris and but had died over forty years earlier, in 1839.³ Tárrega returned to Spain, married, eventually settled in Barcelona, gave concerts in that city's most prestigious venues, and cultivated the friendship of Albéniz, Granados,⁴ and a

³ He was born in 1778. Wolf Moser has also published a book on Sor, *Ich, Fernando Sor: Versuch einer Autobiographie und gitarristische Schriften* (Lyon: Edition Saint-Georges, 2005).

⁴ The only biography of Granados available in English is Walter Aaron Clark, *Enrique Granados: Poet of the Piano* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

host of cultural luminaries.⁵ He also established himself as the leading pedagogue of his era, and students flocked to study with him. Several of his pupils went on to have major careers, especially Miguel Llobet, Emilio Pujol, and Daniel Fortea. One critic summed up Tárrega best when he reported after a concert that “Tárrega is a musician by nature who happens to be a guitarist.”⁶ He died on December 15, 1909, largely as a result of a stroke he had suffered three years earlier and from which he never fully recovered.

It has not been my purpose here to present a detailed biographical study of Tárrega, but his gradual ascent from absolute obscurity and penury was truly remarkable, and it forms the necessary context of our topic. For even as he was plucked from obscurity by the guitar, *he* rescued the guitar from a similar ignominy, one it had endured since the passing of Sor and a neglect resulting from the absence of a figure of comparable stature who could place the guitar on the same pedestal as the piano and violin, which dominated musical life in the romantic age of concerts in large halls and audiences. I stop short of saying that he did indeed establish the guitar on the same level as the piano and violin—that feat awaited George Harrison—but he came closer than any of his contemporaries.

Tárrega’s transcriptions and their significance

In our time, playing rock guitar is a viable avenue to achieving considerable fame and fortune. Certainly it is one method for attracting the attention of the opposite sex. The social standing of rock guitarists today was occupied by virtuoso performers like

⁵ Among these was the illustrator and author Apeles Mestres (1854-1936), who collaborated with Granados on several stage works. See Clark, *Granados*, 83-109.

⁶ Review in *Diario de Avisos* of a 3 December 1886 concert, cited in Rius, *Tárrega*, 65.

Chopin, Paganini and Liszt in the Romantic period.⁷

To achieve rock-star status in the 1800s, one needed to play the piano, or at least the violin. The guitar's chief problem was that it was best suited for performance in intimate settings for relatively small audiences. This was, incidentally, the sort of venue that Tárrega preferred, especially after he decided to play without nails on his right hand, in 1900. It was a small instrument, and though it was capable of considerable nuance and subtlety, it lacked the volume of sound and capacity for eye-popping bravura that were the stock-in-trade of pianists and violinists. However, Tárrega would prove that the right kind of guitar in the hands of the right kind of guitarist could put the instrument on a roughly equal footing. He was aided in this quest by the advent of guitars from the Sevillian builder Antonio Torres, whose instruments possessed a more forceful sound and greater projection than earlier guitars.

The other chief problem the guitar faced—and faces still, to an extent—is that the only composers who had ever written for it were themselves guitarists. From the vihuelists of the sixteenth century, such as Mudarra, Milán, and Narváez, to the Baroque guitarists of the seventeenth century, such as Corbetta, de Visée, and Sanz, and the classical guitarists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Sor, Aguado, and Giuliani, only those who actually played the guitar ever wrote for it. This meant that

⁷ Essa-Pekka Salonen, former conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, had this to say about the social impact of classical musicians in the nineteenth century compared to today: “Their voice was heard. Now we’ve been marginalized. . . . It’s only the rock performers who seem to have clout.” He made this rueful observation during an interview with Michael White for his article “L.A. Phil’s Force of Nature Presses for a Sea Change,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 2003, E5.

its repertoire was consigned to what Segovia later called the ‘suburbs’ of Western music.⁸ Handel, Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms—even Albéniz and Granados—the list of famous composers who never wrote a single note for the guitar is very long indeed. It would not quite yet occur to guitarists to commission composers of the first rank to write for the instrument. That development would take place in the twentieth century, undertaken by Tárrega’s successors, especially Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream.

Partly this was the result of diffidence and lack of connections, as well as the indifference of the composers themselves, whose careers depended on writing for more popular instruments and instrumental ensembles, especially symphony orchestra, as well as for the stage. Moreover, their unfamiliarity with the instrument was a powerful disincentive to writing for it.

Tárrega’s repertoire of guitar music written by guitarists did not include music of the Renaissance or Baroque periods. Rather, it began with the late eighteenth century and compositions by Fernando Sor. This meant that the guitar repertoire available to him was indeed quite limited in range and quantity. Tárrega’s solution to the guitar’s relatively undistinguished repertoire was to transcribe works by the great masters from Bach onwards, including Beethoven, Chopin, and Schumann. Tárrega was uniquely equipped to undertake this kind of work because he was also a capable pianist and very familiar with the piano repertoire. Being able to play the original piece on the piano assisted him greatly in arranging it for the guitar.

⁸ Andrés Segovia, ed., *Studies for the Guitar by Fernando Sor* (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Corp., 1945), 2. ‘A considerable part of the guitar educational literature consisted of the precarious works of the insolvent “amateurs” of the guitar, suitable to pass for “mastership” only in the ‘suburbs’ of the musical field.’

As a concert recitalist, Tárrega faced a dilemma that Sor and his contemporaries had not. From the time of Liszt, Paganini, and Clara Schumann onward, it became customary for virtuosos to present solo recitals from memory. This is such a commonplace now that we easily forget it was not always the case. In the period of Sor, just before and after 1800, itinerant virtuosos typically performed in potpourri concerts featuring a variety of musical acts. A virtuoso in those times could get by on a dozen or so pieces. By Tárrega's epoch, a much larger repertoire was required for giving solo recitals of an hour or longer.

Tárrega more than 200 transcriptions for the guitar. It is a prodigious catalog and notable for its variety, including as it does works by Bach, Beethoven, Bellini, Berlioz, Bizet, Chopin, Gottschalk, Gounod, Grieg, Handel, Mascagni, Massenet, Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Mozart, Puccini, Schubert, Schumann, Strauss, Suppé, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and even Waldteufel. Spanish zarzuela composers are also well represented, including such leading lights as Barbieri, Bretón, Caballero, Chapí, Chueca, and Valverde. The importance placed on the Romantic repertoire is conspicuous, as this was the kind of music Tárrega loved and that his audiences wanted to hear. Of course, his choice of material was judicious precisely because there are simply some things a piano can do that a guitar cannot. A transcription of the Liszt *Transcendental Etudes* would be the height of absurdity, not just impossibility. Tárrega chose works with a clearly delineated melodic line and chordal accompaniments, usually featuring arpeggio patterns that could be reproduced without much difficulty on the guitar.

One is not very surprised by the prominence of operatic arrangements. These were staples of the nineteenth-century instrumental virtuoso repertoire. Opera was to its

time what cinema is today, namely, the dominant cultural medium of the age.

Arrangements, paraphrases, and sets of variations on popular operatic melodies, especially from the Italian repertory, were *de rigueur*. Even guitarists had indulged in this sort of thing since the days of Sor, who wrote a set of variations on a theme from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and Giuliani, who paid homage to Rossini in his *Rossinianas*.

Tárrega, however, went well beyond this by tackling, of all composers, Wagner, on the guitar. There is nothing particularly irrational about this, really. There was a virtual cult of adulation surrounding Wagner in Catalonia around 1900, as the progressive Catalan bourgeoisie sought to emulate the cultural as well as industrial and commercial prowess of the Germans.⁹ This was, of course, well before Germany acquired a different sort of reputation in the twentieth century, especially in coming to the aid of Franco during the Civil War. In any case, Tárrega was as much of an admirer of the German master as any of his Catalan contemporaries, and there are some choral passages, the Pilgrims' Chorus from *Tannhäuser*, for example, that are not completely inconceivable on the guitar.

The process of transcription

All of this seems to beg a simple yet central question: how does one transcribe music from another medium to the guitar? The first thing one must come to grips with is the various strengths and weaknesses of the instrument. These determine in large measure what sort of music will be suitable for transcription, and how one will go about it.

⁹ See Clark, *Granados*, 76-79, for treatment of Wagner's impact in the Iberian Peninsula, especially Barcelona. Albéniz's profound admiration for Wagner exceeded even Granados's, as his incomplete *King Arthur* operatic trilogy attests. See Clark, *Albéniz*, 178-83.

The guitar is capable of great subtlety in tone production. It is an instrument of quality more than quantity of sound. It can play very softly, but it cannot compete with a violin, piano, or trombone in terms of the acoustic energy it can generate, the dynamic intensity it is capable of. The loudest sounds on a guitar are produced by strumming the strings, a technique known in Spanish as *rasgueo*. However, though this technique is common in folk-guitar styles like flamenco, and was typical of guitar music of the Baroque era, it ceased to be a feature of music composed for guitar during the Classical and Romantic eras, only recurring in the twentieth century, and then in a deliberate attempt to mimic flamenco.

For all practical purposes, a guitarist can play no more than six notes at a time, and, excluding harmonics, these notes must lie within a range of three and a half octaves. Some guitars have seven, eight, or even ten strings, so there is some latitude, but the standard classical guitar has six strings. The guitar actually sounds an octave lower than it is written, and in terms of its range and register, it is essentially a plucked cello that one cradles horizontally. In order to play music written for instruments with a wider range or more strings, including the lute as well as the piano, it is often necessary to transpose certain notes up or down an octave or two, so that they fit within the range of the guitar. Especially with Bach's works for Baroque lute, with its much larger number of strings, it becomes a bit like squeezing three carloads of notes into one car. The results are not always complimentary to the guitarist—or the music itself! One obvious solution to this dilemma, of course, is to transcribe such difficult works for more than one guitar. This allows not only for more notes to be played but also for greater complexity in contrapuntal textures. And the range of the instrument can be expanded by employing

smaller or larger guitars. Tárrega sometimes resorted to guitar duet in his transcriptions.¹⁰

In any case, some of the crucial decisions a transcriber has to make are these:

1. Whether to add or subtract notes. In the case of the solo violin partitas of Bach or the suites for unaccompanied cello, it may actually be necessary to add notes in order to fill out the explicit or implicit harmonies, so that the music seems more natural on the guitar, which is basically chordal rather than melodic. However, piano works inevitably require some pruning of notes. If some notes have been doubled at the octave, these are the most likely candidates for omission. If there are no available doublings, the transcriber has to decide which notes in the harmony are least important, and this can lead to controversial decisions, especially if the transcriber has a shaky grasp of harmony.
2. Whether to change or maintain the original key. The guitar can only sound resonant in a handful of keys. These correspond to the open strings of the guitar. Simply put, the more open strings one plays, the more resonant the instrument is. The open strings are E, A, D, G, B, and E. The best keys for the guitar are, not surprisingly, these. A few others, like C or F also work, because at least one of the tonic chord's notes is an open string (G, E, or A, respectively). Keys with more than five sharps or three flats provide few if any open strings in the most

¹⁰ For instance, the famous 'Farandole' from Georges Bizet's incidental music for *L'Arlesienne*.

important chords, and the left hand is twisted into pretzel shapes by having to cover so many strings at once, leading to a less-than-satisfactory resonance—not to mention fatigue!¹¹

3. Whether to change the rhythm and notes. Some arpeggio patterns do not work on the guitar simply because one has only four fingers in the right hand. These patterns may have to be changed to make them idiomatic for the instrument. Also, some scale passages may be too fast and have to be simplified, or some complex polyphonic textures tamed through the alteration of rhythms or reduction of notes. Sometimes it is necessary to speed up rhythms, because the sound of the guitar dies very quickly, and any note longer than a whole note at a moderate tempo is basically impractical. Repetition of notes is the time-honored solution to their rapid decay. This also involves tempo. Sometimes a piece is too hard to execute at the original fast tempo, or one may have to speed up the tempo to compensate for very long notes.
4. Adaptation of idiomatic phrasing, articulation, and other indications. Phrasing and articulation do not always translate from one idiom to another. A violinist can do things with her bow in this regard that are impossible on the guitar. Similarly, the guitar does not have a pedal, so a transcriber of piano music has to somehow translate pedal markings into rhythms that work on the guitar.

Since guitar music is written on a single staff, not two like piano music,

¹¹ A good example of this is ‘Estudio 19’ from the above-cited Studies of Sor edited by Segovia. In B-flat major, its extensive use of *barré* tests the guitarist’s left-hand mettle.

this means that the score can quickly become crowded with various indications and be difficult to read.

Tárrega's transcriptions of Albéniz

Tárrega understood these problems very well, and he gained a mastery of transcription rarely achieved by others. Much of his expertise no doubt derived from his knowledge of the piano. In my opinion, the most important of all of Tárrega's transcriptions were those he made of selected piano works by his friend and compatriot Isaac Albéniz.

List of Tárrega's Transcriptions of Piano Works by Albéniz¹²

1. *Pavana (Capricho)*, op. 12 [T. 48]
2. 'Granada (Serenata)', *Suite española no. 1*, op. 47 [T. 61A]
3. 'Sevilla (Sevillana)', *Suite española no. 1*, op. 47 [T. 61C]
4. 'Cádiz (Saeta)', *Suite española no. 1*, op. 47 [T. 61D]
5. 'Oriental', *Cantos de España*, op. 232 [T. 101B] (transcribed for two guitars)
6. 'Seguidillas', *Cantos de España*, op. 232 [T. 101E]

We can see from this list that Tárrega transcribed at least six works by Albéniz for guitar (there is some uncertainty about the exact number based on published and unpublished sources). All of these pieces date from the late 1880s and early 1890s, when Albéniz first emerged as an important composer and in which he first developed his distinctive Spanish style. Indeed, Albéniz was an extraordinary piano virtuoso who

¹² The T. numbers in brackets are derived from the seminal catalog by Jacinto Torres, *Catálogo sistemático descriptivo de las obras musicales de Isaac Albéniz* (Madrid: Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 2001). The opus numbers provided by Albéniz and/or his publishers are inaccurate, misleading, and virtually useless.

became the first of the major Spanish composers of a nationalist renaissance that took place around 1900.

Isaac Albéniz first opened his eyes on this world in the small town of Camprodón, in northern Catalonia, in 1860. Precocious at an early age, he gave his first public performance at four. After moving with his family to Madrid in 1868, he took Spain by storm as a youthful concert pianist in the 1870s.

In the following decade he cemented his reputation as the most formidable keyboard artist in the peninsula and expanded his activities into the realm of composition. In the early 1880s he came under the influence of composer Felipe Pedrell, who convinced Albéniz of the necessity of using Spanish folklore as the basis for his music. During the years 1885-89, Albéniz wrote some of the most enduring masterpieces in the Spanish style. Among these are the first *Suite española* and *Recuerdos de viaje*. From these collections come such works as ‘Granada (Serenata)’ and ‘Rumores de la caleta (Malagueña)’, pieces redolent of the vibrant colour and seductive mystery of the Spanish south, a region he knew well from his travels. His music also evokes regions outside Andalusia. The Catalan *sardana*, Castilian *seguidillas*, Aragonese *jota*, Basque *zortzico*, and Cuban *habanera* all figure prominently in his output from the 1880s and ’90s. But we must point out that Albéniz never confined himself exclusively to pieces in a national style, and during this time he wrote a concerto, three complete piano sonatas, and myriad character pieces that have no connection to folklore whatsoever, their sources of influence being Weber, Mendelssohn, and Chopin, a repertoire he knew very well. Tárrega, however, showed no interest in these works by Albéniz.

At the end of the first three decades of his life, then, Albéniz was prepared to establish himself as an artist of truly international stature. His concert appearances in Paris and London in 1889 were met with great acclaim, and as a result of these triumphs he decided to settle in London in 1890.

During his London tenure, which lasted for nearly four years, Albéniz became deeply involved with musical theater and gradually gave up concertizing.¹³ He composed English operetta, winning the approbation of Bernard Shaw for his *The Magic Ring* in 1893, and increasingly aspired to gain respect as a serious composer, especially of opera. In 1894 he decided to move to Paris and devote himself solely to composition. He remained in the French capital until his death in 1909. Here he immersed himself in the heady atmosphere of the *fin de siècle* and came under the influence of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy. From this period we have his Spanish opera *Pepita Jiménez*, based on the novel by Juan Valera, on a libretto written by Albéniz's close personal friend and patron Francis Burdett Money-Coutts, scion of the Coutts banking family, with whom he became acquainted during his London years.¹⁴

Albéniz was an ardent admirer of Richard Wagner's music and later composed a Wagnerian opera entitled *Merlin*, again with a libretto by Money-Coutts. This was the only completed work from the projected Arthurian trilogy mentioned earlier. However, his most celebrated work is a collection of twelve piano pieces entitled *Iberia*, which he completed a year before his death.

¹³ For more on Albéniz's London years, see Clark, *Portrait*, 75-97

¹⁴ Albeniz's relationship with Money-Coutts has been misunderstood and misrepresented in the biographical literature over the years. See *ibid.*, 102-08, 192-94, 255-61, for a balanced appraisal of their relationship.

Albéniz's decision to remain an expatriate had much to do with his ambivalent, and at times outright hostile, feelings towards Spain. Although he retained a residence in Tiana outside Barcelona, he never settled permanently in Spain after leaving for Paris and London in 1889. This forms the greatest irony in his career. The leading Spanish nationalist composer of his time was in many respects an unlikely candidate for the role. His antipathy to his homeland is clear enough in several letters and diary entries. Though Albéniz had a near-total absence of formal education, he was fluent in several languages, had a large library, was widely read, and enjoyed discussing aesthetics and philosophy. It is clear from his correspondence, moreover, that he was at least an armchair socialist. And his objections to Spanish politics and society extended to Spanish religion. Albéniz, in fact, remained an atheist to his dying day.

Albéniz was finally driven to conclude that 'the Spanish people sing a lot but think only a little'.¹⁵ Barcelona seemed to him backward, while Madrid would always be, in his words, 'the region of perpetual insipidness and of concealed envy'.¹⁶ All of this did nothing to instill in Albéniz much loyalty to his homeland, and he declared in his diary

¹⁵ From an entry in Albéniz's diary, now located in the Museu de la Música in Barcelona, dated 3 April 1902. Much of his diary was published in Enrique Franco, ed., *Impresiones y diarios de viaje* (Madrid: Fundación Isaac Albéniz, 1990). However, for whatever reason, this excerpt was left out of the edited version. It is cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 206.

'El pueblo español, canta tanto, como piensa poco!!!'

¹⁶ From a letter to Joaquim Malats, dated Paris, 2 July 1907. This letter appears in Joan Salvat, 'Epistolari dels nostres músics: Isaac Albéniz a Joaquim Malats', *Revista musical catalana*, 30/357 (Sept. 1933), 364-72; repr. in Enrique Franco, ed., *Albéniz y su tiempo* (Madrid: Fundación Isaac Albéniz, 1990), 129-36. Also cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 250.

'... es la región de la guasa perpetua, de la encubierta envidia.'

that ‘The idea of *Fatherland* can be considered an excusable egoistic sentiment, but never as a *virtue*’.¹⁷

Yet, despite all this, Albéniz felt a deep love for his country’s culture. The regional folk musics of Spain became the very foundation of his style. His was a liberal nationalism, which supported national unity under a liberal, democratic regime while celebrating the diverse cultural heritage of the country.

Albéniz was not a nationalist in the sense of unquestioning loyalty or chauvinistic contempt for other nations and peoples, but he definitely exhibited devotion to Spanish national culture. But of what type? One finds within Spain a variety of regionalist, separatist, and nationalist impulses. Many of Albéniz’s contemporaries in Barcelona, for instance, were adherents of Catalan nationalism. Albéniz himself, however, like his mentor Felipe Pedrell, was pan-Spanish in his aesthetic. Let us now turn our attention to his musical style by taking a look at one of his best-known works.

“Granada” by Albéniz/Tárrega

Albéniz’s piano music was very popular in Spain, and it is easy to see why Tárrega saw advantages in adapting it for guitar. One of his most famous pieces, ‘Granada’, from the first *Suite española* for solo piano, is a work Albéniz composed in late 1885 and premiered in early 1886 at a concert in Madrid.¹⁸

Here one perceives a conscious attempt on his part to forge a united Spain by combining and unifying otherwise contrasting themes based on northern and southern

¹⁷ From Franco, ed., *Impresiones*, 67. This excerpt is cited in Clark, *Portrait*, 218. ‘La idea de *Patria*, puede considerarse como un excusable egotístico sentimiento, pero jamás como una *virtud*.’

¹⁸ See Clark, *Portrait*, 65-68, for an in-depth examination of this work and its genesis.

folklore. His dedication to evoking various regions and cities of Spain reflects his lifelong love of travel and absorbing the sights and sounds of exotic locales, which then became the inspiration for these essays. He visited Granada on several occasions and was intimately acquainted with the city and its monuments.

‘Granada’ is in ABA form. The piece commences with a disarmingly simple melody in the tenor ‘voice’, accompanied by the use of rolled chords in the right hand to simulate ‘strumming’ of a guitar. The phrasing, rhythms, and harmonies are foursquare and predictable—symmetrical, downbeat oriented, and simple. The rhythm suggests the octosyllabic lines so common in Spanish verse and poetry. Along with the melodic contour, this resembles the *jota*, a song and dance native to Aragón in the north.

The B section creates an entirely different impression. The melody now removes to the soprano register. The rhythm abounds in syncopations, the phrasing is asymmetrical, and there are long sinuous runs in imitation of melismatic singing. The key is minor, with oriental-sounding chromatic inflections. What we have here is clearly an evocation of Andalusia, not to mention the exoticized oriental female other of postmodern discourse. The two themes, however, are united in the B section and brought under the same tonal roof of D-flat major. Certain similarities of these themes in their rhythm and contour become very apparent at this point.

The significance of this union of both themes surfaces in a letter Albéniz wrote from Granada to his friend Enrique Moragas concerning this work. In it he states that I seek now the tradition, which is a gold mine, the *guzla*, the lazy dragging of fingers over the strings. And above all, a heartbreaking lament out of tune. I want the Arabic Granada, this which is all art which is all that seems to me beauty

and emotion, and that which can say to Catalonia: *Be my sister in art and my equal in beauty.*¹⁹

Here is the clearest possible explanation of his aspiration for national unity while celebrating the inherent diversity of the country.

Tárrega was attracted to this piece for the obvious reason that it already strongly evoked the guitar and could be convincingly adapted to the instrument in a sort of retranscription. It is reported that Albéniz exclaimed upon hearing Tárrega's rendition of this piece that that was exactly the way he conceived it. And well it may have been. But that does not mean, as many guitarists would plainly love it to mean, that Albéniz actually preferred his music to be played on the guitar or would have written for that instrument had he been so able. Albéniz was first and foremost a pianist, and as a guitarist I will go on record saying that I actually prefer to hear his music played on the piano, which alone is capable of rendering all the effects and nuances of the original score.

Still, Tárrega has done a fine job of rendering this enchanting work on the guitar. We can see that he dealt with the inevitable difficulties described above using predictable solutions. The range has been compressed, and the number of notes in the right-hand guitar accompaniment is often reduced to a single note. The key has also been changed from F down a half step to E. In fact, this piece would be nearly impossible in F on the

¹⁹ This letter probably dates from late 1885 or early 1886. It first appeared in Rafael Moragas, 'Epistolario inédito de Isaac Albéniz', *Música* 1/5 (1938), 38-44, and was later cited in José María Llorens Cistero, 'Notas inéditas sobre el virtuosismo de Isaac Albéniz y su producción pianística', *Anuario musical* 14 (1959), 99, as well as Clark, *Portrait*, 65.

guitar. Some guitarists will play it in D, retuning the lowest string from E to D, and that is a common and satisfactory solution as well.

I stated above that the Albéniz transcriptions are the most important arrangements Tárrega made, but we must recall that Albéniz was not in the front rank of composers Tárrega most admired. He also transcribed a great deal of Bach's music, but he was in the same second rank of Tárrega's preferences. In fact, his favorite composers were Beethoven and Chopin, many of whose works he arranged for guitar. But times and fashions change. It is no longer considered tasteful or even acceptable to play transcriptions of that piano repertoire, simply because no one really believes any more that the guitar can do justice to it. Even in Tárrega's day there were many critics who took a jaundiced view of this sort of thing, though Tárrega's performances were so tastefully rendered that he was able to win over many skeptics. Few guitarists possess Tárrega's skill and musicality, and as a consequence, they tend to leave the mainstream piano repertoire alone. The guitar repertoire is large enough now that it no longer requires rummaging through the keyboard literature for more music, except in those cases where the music already possesses a character suitable to the guitar, e.g., Albéniz, Granados, and especially Scarlatti, whose harpsichord sonatas are often redolent of Spanish folklore as a result of his lengthy residence in Spain and obvious love affair with its music and dance.

Of course, some guitarists rush in where others rightly fear to tread, transcribing, say, symphonies in order to demonstrate their own phenomenal virtuosity. However, just because one *can* do something does not necessarily mean one *should* do it. It is the occasional sort of circus act that has given the guitar, and guitar transcriptions, a bad

reputation. Though Tárrega was the main impetus behind this movement to transcribe, he was in no way responsible for the excesses committed by others in the process. He was, first and foremost, a musician who played the guitar, and his transcriptions reveal the considerable art that is involved in making a transcription that, in a Hippocratic sense, above all else, does no harm. In fact, so much good did his transcriptions do that they are still performed and recorded today. For that, we can all be grateful.