

## Stylistic and performance aspects of piano music reflected in the creation of the composer Isaac Albéniz (1860 – 1909)



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Isaac Albéniz was born in Camprodon, province of Girona, in the Alavias region. Albéniz was a child prodigy who first performed at the age of four.

At age seven, after taking lessons from Antoine François Marmontel, he passed the entrance examination for piano at the Paris Conservatoire, but he was refused admission because he was believed to be too young.

His concert career began at the young age of nine when his father toured both Isaac and his sister, Clementina, throughout northern Spain. By age 15, he had already given concerts worldwide. Albéniz did travel the world as a performer, however he was accompanied by his father. As a customs agent he was required to travel frequently.

After a short stay at the Leipzig Conservatory, in 1876 he won a scholarship in Brussels. In 1883, he takes lessons from the teacher and composer Felipe Pedrell, who inspired him to write Spanish music.

The apex of his concert career is considered to be 1889 to 1892 when he had concert tours throughout Europe. During the 1890s Albéniz lived in London and Paris. In 1900 he started to suffer from Bright's disease and returned to writing piano music.

Between 1905 and 1908 he composed his final masterpiece, *Iberia* (1908), a suite of twelve piano "impressions". In 1883, the composer married to Rosina Jordana. They had three children, Blanca (who died in 1886), Laura and Alfonso.

Albéniz died on 18 May 1909 at age 48 in the turistic region Cambo-les-Bains of Bright's disease, and is buried at the Montjuic Cemetery, Barcelona.

### Piano works – Classification

**1. Instrumental miniatures:** *Marcha militar, Pavana – capricho, Barcarola, Seis pequeños vales, Estudio impromptu, Dos Mazurkas, Seis mazurkas de salón: 1. Isabel, 2. Casilda, 3. Aurora, 4. Sofia, 5. Christa, 6. Maria, Serenata árabe, Suite ancienne nr. 1: Gavota, Minuetto, augustia: Romanza sin palabras, Balbina valverde (Polka brillante), Diva sin par (Mazurka-capricho), Menuet nr. 3, Suite ancienne nr. 2: Sarabande, Chacona, Suite ancienne nr. 3: Minuetto,*

*Gavota, Andalucia, Barcarole (Pe apă), Mazurka de salón, Menuet (sol minor), Recuerdos (Mazurka), Cotillón – Album de danzas de salón, Pavana fácil para manos pequeñas, Dos mazurkas de salón, La fiesta de aldea, Dos danzas españolas: Jota aragonesa, Tango, Suite española 2: Zaragoza, Sevilla, Cádiz-gaditana, Serenata española, L'Automne (Toamna –Valse), Mallorca (Barcarola), Zambra granadina (Danse orientale), Zortzico, Espagne: Souvenirs – Prélude, Asturias, Alhambra: Suite pour le Piano.*

**2. Mid-size works:** *Rapsodia cubana, Siete estudios, Recuerdos de viaje: 1. En el mar (Barcarola), 2. Leyenda (Barcarola), 3. Alborada, 4. En la Alhambra, 5. Puerta de tierra (Bolero), 6. Rumores de la caleta (Malagueña), 7. En la playa, Seis danzas españolas, Doces piezas características: 1. Gavotte, 2. Minuetto a Silvia, 3. Barcarolle, 4. Prière, 5. Conchita (Polka), 6. Pilar (Valse), 7. Zambra, 8. Pavana, 9. Polonesa, 10. Mazurka, 11. Staccato (Capricho), 12. Torre Bermeja (Serenata), Album de miniaturi – Les Saisons (Anotimpurile): 1. Le Printemps (Primăvara), 2. L'ete (Vara), 3. L'Automne (Toamna), 4. L'Hiver (Iarna), Cantos de España: 1. Prélude, 2. Orientale, 3. Sous le palmier (Danse espagnole), 4. Córdoba, 5. Seguidillas, Yvonne en Visite: 1. La Révérence, 2. Joyeuse Rencontre et quelques penibles événements, Azulejos (Albăstrele - terminată de E. Granados), Navarra (terminată de Déodat de Séverac).*

**3. Large works:** *Sonata nr. 1, Suite española: 1. Granada, 2. Cataluna. 3. Sevilla, 4. Cádiz, 5. Asturias, 6. Aragón, 7. Castilla, 8. Cuba, Rapsodia española pentru piano solo, Sonata nr. 3, Sonata nr. 4, Sonata nr. 5, Suite España: Six Feuilles d'album: 1. Prélude, 2. Tango, 3. Malagueña, 4. Serenata, 5. Capricho catalán, 6. Zortzico, Suita Iberia - Primul caiet: 1. Evocacion, 2. El puerto, 3. Fête-Dieu à Séville, Caietul doi: 1. Rondeña, 2. Almeria, 3. Triana, Caietul trei: 1. El Albaicin, 2. El polo, 3. Lavapies, Caietul patru: 1. Málaga, 2. Jerez, 3. Eritaña, Lucrări orchestrale: Rapsodia española, Concierto Fantástico.*

### Style features

In his desire to perfect his composition technique, Albéniz went beyond the limits of salon music, beyond plain folklorism, and created a new style of Spanish music, based on the inclusion of harmonies and elaborate forms, which lent his works emotional and intellectual depth. Albéniz was thoroughly familiar with the rhythms of *flamenco*. He would place a greater weight on the genres of *canto jondo* than foreign composers did, as they knew Spanish folk music only superficially and thus stayed within the limits of lighter genres, such as *jota* and *habanera*.

## Structural analysis

Structural analyses aim to highlight the characteristic features of a composer's work. They encompass all the coordinates of the composition style: order and structural symmetry, harmony and modal intonations, balance of sound parameters.

### *Suita España op. 165, 6 Feuilles d'Album pour piano*

#### I. Prélude

Form: **AA'BAvBv** and Coda

The first piece in the cycle has the role of introducing the audience to the specific atmosphere of Spanish music. We can distinguish here the modal intonations, which, together with certain rhythm/melody formulas, contribute to the portrayal of national ethos.

Ex. 1, *Suita España, Prélude*, p. 3, ms. 1-4

J. Albeniz

Andantino.

*p ma sonoro*

*ced.*

#### II. Tango

Form: **ABABv1Bv2ABv3**

The second piece in the cycle is a tango, a dance genre originating from South America, more precisely from Argentina. The specificity of this dance is its rhythm, individualised in a punctuated formula of quarter-sixteenth followed by two eighths.

Ex. 2, *Suita Española, Tango*, p. 7, ms. 1-4

Andantino.



### III. Malagueña


Form: **ABA**

The name of the piece originates in the name of the Spanish harbour Malaga. The alert tempo in which the ternary pulsation is executed, alternating with moments in which the sound flow suddenly calms down, in an obvious dynamic contrast, lend the dance a special pathos.

Ex. 3, *Suita Española, Malagueña*, p. 11, ms. 1-4

Allegretto.

*staccato*



### IV. Serenata

Form: **ABA** and Coda

The fourth piece aims to capture, as the title suggests, the fairy-tale atmosphere of a Spanish evening. The architectonic structure is a complex three-part one, with an unusual organisation of section **A**.

Ex. 4, *Suita Española, Serenata*, p. 16, ms. 1-3

Allegretto.

*leggiero staccato*

### V. Capricho catalan

Form: **ABA**

The fifth piece has a particular formal organisation. It is built around the same *lied* pattern, **ABA**, the middle section having a transformation role for the elements of section **A**. Thus, both sections contain in fact the same melodic material, the differences occurring at tonal and morphological level.

Ex. 5, *Suita Española, Capricho catalan*, p. 22, ms. 1-5

Allegretto.

*dolce*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

### VI. Zortzico

Form: **ABA** and Coda

The last piece excels in terms of meter and rhythm, standing out within the suite due to its heterogeneous 5/8 measure and its isorhythmical punctuated aspect, maintained unflinchingly throughout the piece.

Ex. 6, *Suita Española, Zortzico*, p. 26, ms. 1-3

Allegretto.

*ben marcato* *dolce*

Ped.

### *Pavana – Capricho*

Form: **ABA**

Structured in the form of a *lied*, explicit in terms of organisation, the piece is surprising despite its architectural simplicity, but due to the beauty of its melodic and harmonic development. The composition effort is underpinned by a unitary morphological plan, deriving from a few elements that are essential for the musical development.

Ex. 7, *Pavana-Capricho*, p. 1, ms. 1-6

Allegretto (a piacere)

*Allegretto (a piacere)*

### Stylistic and performance analysis

This analysis relies on the argumentation of the musical phenomenon using the works written for piano by Spanish composers. I have tried to enrich the documentary collection in order to provide the technical and interpretative means required for the performance of these works, as they are included in piano repertoires around the world.

- the *legato* manner of attack is predominant

- the melodic line is emphasized
- the ornaments are clearly rendered
- the *rubato* technique – performed Spanish-style (*Tango*)
- warm touch, detailed, covered sonority
- clear differentiation between *staccato* and *legato*
- pedal – on the first beat
- constant and accurate rendition of the punctuated rhythm (*Capricho Catalan, Zortzico*)

## Conclusions

The piano music is marked by the folk character of the melody, Isaac Albéniz composes an orchestral type of pianistic writing, traditional, with wide sounds, made by different instruments (guitar, castagnete) and peculiar *flamenco* rhythms. The composer combines very well the tonal and modal aspect, we also find the polyphonic structure in *Iberia*. We often find polyrhythm aspects, and also dance beats, for example in the *Tango* from the work (*España: Six Feuilles d'album*, op. 165 – present in the article). The piano works of the composer Isaac Albéniz are highlighted by virtuosity, nerve and various rhythm.

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#### Abstract

The article *Stylistic and performance aspects of piano music reflected in the creation of the composer Isaac Albéniz* reveals some elements concerning the biographic aspects of the composer, the classification of piano works in 3 wide categories.

There are mentioned small style features and also a short stylistic and performance analysis of the works *Suita España op. 165*, *6 Feuilles d'Album pour piano* and *Pavana – Capricho*. The article finishes with general conclusions of the entire piano works of the composer Isaac Albéniz and of the piece analyzed - *Suita España op. 165, 6 Feuilles d'Album pour piano*.