

CD REVIEWS

Albéniz

Sonatas for Piano

L'Automne (Valse)

Sonata No. 3

Sonata No. 4

Sonata No. 5

Albert Guinovart *pf*

Harmonia mundi (Musique d'abord) HMA1957007 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Granados

Goyescas

Los Majos Enamorados

El Pelele

Intermezzo (version for piano by A. Guinovart)

Albert Guinovart *pf*

Harmonia mundi (Musique d'abord) HMA1957017 (69 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Enrique Granados (1867–1916) and Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909) were the two chief representatives of Spanish musical nationalism around 1900, and they figured prominently in a larger renaissance of Spanish arts and letters that took place in the wake of Spain's disastrous war with the USA in 1898. Yet it is all too easy to lump them together into a pair without recognizing the great differences that existed between them in their musical personalities and compositional styles. Two recent re-releases of recordings by Albert Guinovart of their piano music drive home some important distinctions, while reminding us of conspicuous similarities.

For example, both were from Catalonia and spent a significant portion of their youth in Barcelona. Both came to prominence as piano virtuosos, though we remember them today for their piano works, songs and operas steeped in Spanish folklore. These they composed under the influence of the patriarch of Spanish nationalism Felipe Pedrell, with whom they both studied. Both came from the middle class, married into the families of wealthy businessman, and had large

families. Finally, by an almost eerie coincidence, both of them died just short of their 49th birthdays.

And yet, differences remain. Albéniz was an extroverted *bon viveur* with a penchant for *Wanderlust*. He travelled widely throughout Europe and was as much at home in London, Brussels or Paris as he was in Barcelona or Madrid. He was an expatriate for most of his adult life and felt an intense bitterness towards his homeland, its religion and politics; in fact, he was an atheist and a socialist. By contrast, Granados was a sensitive introvert who travelled only when necessary, avoiding voyages on the water in particular, and remained almost his whole life in Barcelona (which Albéniz thought too provincial). He was largely apolitical but expressed genuine love for his country and a strong sympathy with its cultural heritage, especially that of Castile, the historically dominant region. Although not a regular practitioner of Catholicism, he was a man of faith who could feel moved to pray in church and believe his prayers to have been answered (even when he was near death, entering a church did not arouse Albéniz's faith in the least). Albéniz was preoccupied with landscapes and urban scenes, especially those of contemporary Andalusia; Granados was drawn to the human personalities and dramas depicted by Francisco Goya in the context of Old Madrid.

Despite the different trajectories of their careers, Albéniz and Granados held one another in highest regard, and there existed an affectionate bond between the two men. When Albéniz died of Bright's disease in May 1909, Granados was convulsed with grief, writing in a 'letter' to his late friend, 'Goodbye, my beloved one ... nothing remains for you, except to see, with time and patience, how much I admire and love you'. For his part, Albéniz had always kept a copy of Granados's *Danzas españolas* on his piano, so great was his admiration for that set of pieces and its author.

The most famous and enduring of Granados's compositions, however, is the piano suite in two 'books' entitled *Goyescas: Los majos enamorados* (*Goyescas: The Majos in Love*), inspired by the art and times of the famous artist, whom Granados referred to as 'the representative genius of Spain'. The term 'goyesco' was a neologism that came into vogue in the late nineteenth century with the sesquicentenary of Goya's birth (1896) and a reawakening of interest in him, not only among composers but also poets, novelists and dramatists. It referred to anything in a style inspired by Goya – in other words, 'goyaesque'. Granados's suite was a manifestation of this trend, called *majismo* due to its fixation on the figures of the *majo* and *maja*, colourful streetwise bohemians of Goya's epoch in Madrid.

The suite is divided into two books. The individual numbers of Book I are 'Los requiebros' (The Flirtations), 'El coloquio en la reja' (Dialogue at the Window), 'Fandango del candil' (Fandango by Candlelight), and 'Quejas o La maja y el ruiseñor' (Complaints, or The Maja and the Nightingale); of Book II, 'El amor y la muerte' (Love and Death) and 'Epílogo: Serenata del espectro' (Epilogue: The Ghost's Serenade). Work on this suite began in 1909 and continued into the summer of 1910, often at the home of Granados's mistress Clotilde Godó, in Tiana outside Barcelona. By 13 August 1910, he was sufficiently satisfied with the fruits of his labour to be able to write to fellow pianist Joaquín Malats, 'This summer I have finished a collection of *Goyescas*, works of great flights of imagination and difficulty'. He premiered Book I in Barcelona at the Palau de la Música Catalana on 11 March 1911, and Book II in Paris at the Salle Pleyel on 2 April 1914.

El pelele, subtitled 'Escena goyesca', is usually considered part of the *Goyescas* suite, as it is based on a famous cartoon by Goya depicting young women holding the corners of a blanket and using it to hurl a comical little straw man (or *pelele*)

into the air. Granados premiered it at a concert in Terrassa on 29 March 1914. In fact, we should recall that the term 'Goyescas' encompasses all of Granados's piano works inspired by the artist, not only the suite. The other 'Goyescas' (not included on this recording) are the *Jácara* (*Danza para cantar y bailar*), *Serenata goyesca*, *Crepúsculo* and *Reverie-Improvisation* (a recording he made for Duo-Art in New York shortly before his death).

The quasi-narrative structure of the suite suggested its transposition to the stage, and the title *Goyescas* also refers to the opera that Granados based on his piano pieces (including *El pelele* but not the 'Epílogo') and which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on 28 January 1916. Granados attended the rehearsals and premiere of his opera there, and was even required to write a new *intermedio* between the first and second tableaux to accommodate a lengthy change of scenery. Granados composed this new music in a single evening, and it endures as the most popular number from the opera: *Intermezzo*. A piano arrangement of this enchanting miniature concludes the CD.

The *Goyescas* for piano is music of surpassing technical and interpretive difficulty, and it continues to attract the attention of the finest pianists. Alicia de Larrocha is justly famous for her interpretations, and more recently Douglas Riva has recorded all of Granados's piano music for the Naxos label. Together they have edited the complete piano works (Barcelona: Boileau, 2002). Guinovart did not have the benefit of the new critical edition when he made this recording, but his performance is still remarkable. Aside from the sheer digital difficulties and complexity of the score, to play this music well requires a command of nuance and subtlety, in both tone colour and phrasing. Guinovart's playing is very clean and precise, and his shadings add lustre to the music. The quality of the recording itself is very high, avoiding excessive reverberation that would spoil the contrapuntal texture of the music.

Guinovart has devoted himself not only to interpreting the warhorses but also to exploring lesser-known byways. Among those we could include the Piano Sonatas by Albéniz, a portion of his oeuvre that distinguishes him from Granados, who wrote no sonatas at all. Albéniz wrote all of his seven sonatas during the 1880s while he was living in Madrid. Only Nos. 3–5 are complete. Nothing remains of Nos. 2 and 6, while only single movements of Nos. 1 and 7 (a scherzo and minuetto, respectively) are extant. The three complete sonatas were published by the Madrid firm of Antonio Romero in 1887–88. Number 3 bears a dedication to the pianist Manuel Guervos, who premiered it at the Salón Romero on 21 March 1887. The Fourth Sonata is dedicated to Albéniz's friend and patron Guillermo Morphy, secretary to the royal family, and was premiered by Luisa Chevalier at the same Romero concert. Sonata No. 5 was dedicated to the Catalan pianist Carles Vidiella, and Albéniz himself premiered it in the Salle Érard at the 1888 *Exposición Universal* in Barcelona.

These sonatas exhibit no hint of the nationalism Albéniz was cultivating in other works from this same period (for example, *Suite española*, *Recuerdos de viaje*), and in their lyric sweep and rhythmic propulsion they bear the mark of Mendelssohn and Chopin. They are remarkable for their craftsmanship and elegance, and as William S. Newman rightly observed in his treatise on the history of the sonata since Beethoven, Albéniz's craftsmanship in harmony, scoring, and voice-leading is beyond reproach. His handling of sonata allegro form is especially capable, if not in any way innovative, and even in this early stage of his career he demonstrated a knack for motivic development that would stand him good stead when writing *Iberia* two decades later.

It is noteworthy that Albéniz was the only Spanish pianist of his time to write keyboard sonatas of any enduring significance, and in fact these works cement his reputation as the greatest Spanish composer of them since Antonio Soler in the eighteenth century. The sonatas are not profound in the sense that Liszt's Sonata in B Minor is. Stylistically they can be situated closely to the many character pieces, such as the impromptus, berceuses, waltzes and mazurkas, both Albéniz and Granados composed in abundance for their own concert use. One such piece was Albéniz's *L'Automne (Valse)*, published in Barcelona and London in 1890. However, this sentimental work takes a turn towards the serious in the way Albéniz works out his themes over almost thirteen minutes of music. If the sonatas exude the atmosphere of the salon, here is a salon-style work that displays some of the erudition of the sonata.

How surprising and regrettable it is that these lovely if uncharacteristic works should have remained out of the repertoire for so long. Guinovart does not simply bring them to our attention; rather, he breathes new life into them with his sensitive mastery. An added bonus is the excellent liner notes written by Jacinto Torres, one of the leading authorities on Albéniz and the author of the definitive catalogue of his works.

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Best

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- CD 2 Fantasia; Christmas Fantasia on Popular English Melodies; Pastorale; Sonata in G major; Andante in C major; Fantasia and Fugue in E minor; Andante in E major; Christmas Pastorale; Fantasia on a Chorale; Allegretto in B♭ major; March for a Church Festival.

Christopher Nickol *org*

Priory Records (PRCD 681; CD 1 recorded on the organ of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 74 minutes; CD 2 recorded on the organ of The McEwan Hall, Edinburgh, 78 minutes; digital audio), £19.99
Notes and organ specifications included.

If it can be argued that the nineteenth century's re-establishment of high-quality cathedral music was spurred on by the life and work of S.S. Wesley (1810–1876), then so can the establishing of the concert-hall organist at the highest professional level be attributed to W.T. Best (1826–1897). Each was a passionate advocate of that in which he believed, and such passion inevitably led to them being perceived as 'characters'. They came together at one pivotal point in their lives and in the development of the nineteenth-century organ: the building of 'Father' Henry