

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 11 January 2026
7.30pm

Nelson Goerner piano

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Iberia (Book 1) (1906-7)

Evocación • El puerto • Fête-Dieu à Séville

Iberia (Book 2) (1907)

Rondeña • Almería • Triana

Interval

Iberia (Book 3) (1907)

El Albaicín • El polo • Lavapiés

Iberia (Book 4) (1908)

Málaga • Jerez • Eritaña



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1860 was an auspicious year in musical Europe. Franz von Suppé's *Das Pensionat*, the first Viennese operetta, received its première. Gustav Mahler was born in Kališče and Hugo Wolf in Slovenj Gradec, at the time both within the Austrian Empire. In Wales, the National Eisteddfod was founded – a pride in local talent curiously counterpointed by the unveiling of a statue of the late Felix Mendelssohn at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham. And in the little Pyrenean town of Camprodon, less than 30 miles from the Spanish border with France, Isaac Albéniz was born.

Albéniz is fascinatingly colourful figure. He gave his first public performance at five, had toured across Spain and as far as Puerto Rico and Cuba by his 15th birthday, and took over as the conductor and administrator of a touring zarzuela company (a genre of music theatre) by the age of 22. Thanks to his highly peripatetic childhood years, Albéniz remained a student – albeit on and off – well into his mid-twenties, learning most importantly with the composer and musicologist Felipe Pedrell.

Pedrell, who also taught Enrique Granados and Manuel de Falla, is considered the founder of Spanish musicology, and it was his detailed research into the country's deeper musical past – its sacred music and popular song – that provided a basis for younger composers to develop a nationalist musical approach. By 1886, Albéniz had taken up the cause with the first numbers of his *Suite Española* No.1, and this showcase of regional Spanish songs and dances was the beginning of a string of works that engaged creatively with his country's musical heritage. By 1905, after a number of years on the one hand struggling to break into the operatic establishment, and on the other spending enough time with friends and colleagues in France that his credentials as a 'genuine' musical Spaniard were being called into question by the press, Albéniz began his most ambitious pianistic project to date: *Iberia*. These '12 new "impressions" in four books' represent the composer's most extensive and virtuosic reimagining of the music of his homeland. The collection was published in France: a sound business decision, but also a fitting reminder that this was music by a truly cosmopolitan composer with a very particular perspective on musical Spain.

Iberia draws largely on southern Spanish models – but despite the seemingly generic titles of each movement, these are not pieces that only contain one song or dance each. Albéniz believed that 'the ideal formula in art ought to be "variety within logic"', and many of these numbers combine the rhythmic or melodic components of multiple genres. Also, sometimes the 'impression' in question is sufficiently stylised or abstract that it could refer to more than one thing. The opening melody of the hauntingly beautiful 'Evocación' could be a *fandanguillo*... or a *jota copla*... or connected to the *malagueña*. This is ultimately a showcase for Albéniz's skilful melding, blurring and mixing of styles and genres.

The aching nostalgia and mysterious harmonies of 'Evocación' give way to 'El puerto', inspired by the town of El Puerto de Santa María, a lively fishing-port near Cádiz. The highly rhythmic, shaking patterns here are drawn from *zapateado*, the rapid stamping of the heels and toes of flamenco shoes. 'Fête-Dieu à Séville', the last piece in Book 1, is a depiction of the Corpus Christi procession in the Andalusian capital, and we follow them from distant drum rolls to the thundering passing of the full company.

It's clear from these three pieces alone that *Iberia* is a ferociously virtuosic work, frequently requiring awkward jumps and hand-crossings, the simultaneous juggling of multiple simultaneous musical voices, and fiendish counter-rhythms. Even Albéniz himself considered some of them unplayable and would leave out certain notes to make them viable! But it seems that the remarkable French virtuoso Blanche Selva committed to every twist and turn of the score in her première of the four books, one a year, from 1906-9.

The 'Rondeña' is a flamenco genre named after the city of Ronda – but the first piece of Albéniz's second book once again brings together various musical models, the jaunty opening theme contrasting with a mysterious, minor-key *copla* (as if sung). 'Almería' is not a musical genre at all, but the name of the seaport where Albéniz's father had worked; while 'Triana' is a quarter in Seville associated with the birth of flamenco – evident in its strumming guitars and snapping castanets. And indeed, the first piece of the third book, 'El Albaicín', is also named after a city quarter, this time in Granada. Here the pianist is told to play 'always nonchalantly', the simulation of a plucked guitar at the opening marked strictly in rhythm and 'melancholically'. 'El polo' is also full of melancholy – one passage must even be delivered 'always in the spirit of a sob'. But despite all this tragic weeping, the composer noted wryly on the manuscript that this Polo 'should not be confused with the sport of the same name'. This volume ends with 'Lavapiés', a working-class district in Madrid, ringing with the sounds of city life and the wildly popular *habanera* rhythm, and so impossible to play that Albéniz nearly destroyed the manuscript.

And so we reach the last book: the singing melodies and scampering accompanimental patterns of 'Málaga' (which is, coincidentally, one of a number of these pieces which is actually written in a kind of sonata form); the almost Debussyan modal harmonies of 'Jerez'; and finally 'Eritaña'. It's not a musical form – nor a city district – but an inn on the outskirts of Seville, the Venta Eritaña. Sherry is drunk, *jamón crudo* consumed, flamenco danced, castanets clacked... and this rollercoaster ride of a deliciously modern, ever nostalgic Spain reaches its close.

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