The Unique Nationalism of Isaac Albeniz

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life and times of Isaac Albéniz, the nineteenth century Spanish piano virtuoso and composer. It will address the national debate surrounding the true nature of Spanish culture and describe the cultural, political and musical climate in late nineteenth century Spain. It will demonstrate how the expatriate Albéniz responded to these conditions to produce a remarkable body of music, primarily for the piano, that strove to express the depth of his love for the people, the land and the folk culture of Spain. The paper will finally demonstrate how his oeuvre can be included in the general classification of European nationalist music, but will contrast Albéniz’s nationalism with that of his European contemporaries.
Introduction

The Spanish pianist and composer Isaac Albéniz lived at a time when Spain was confronting the need to define itself as a modern nation. This existential crisis found its climax in the years following Spain’s disastrous defeat in the Spanish-American war of 1898, but the issues were actively fermenting throughout Albéniz’s life. Whereas a powerful minority at the top of Spanish society was content to preserve the political and social status quo, intellectuals and artists like Albéniz were deeply concerned with the failure of Spain to govern itself properly, to provide adequately for the welfare of its people, and to integrate culturally, economically and politically into the rest of Europe.

Faced with an audience that was only belatedly appreciative of his music, and even then was opposed to his modernist tendencies, Albéniz struggled throughout his career to earn a living producing art music of a high caliber that expressed his own feeling for the nature of the Spanish soul. His creative mixture of the essence of the Andalusian folk idiom with the tools of the modernist European composers placed him at variance to both the regionally divided Spanish cultural elite and the conservative tastes of the Spanish public.
Even though Albéniz was not in accord with the social, political, and cultural climate in turn-of-the-century Spain, he derived from his life experiences the impulse and the ability to write music that reflected the rich cultural heritage of his people. He created a unique brand of musical nationalism largely devoid of the proselytizing of other nationalists like Richard Wagner\(^1\). His unique musical style combined folk musical inspiration with modern musical techniques and forms. In composing in this decidedly new manner, he provided the impetus that put Spain back in the forefront of the European musical scene and set the direction of Spanish music for a generation.

To demonstrate Albéniz's unique nationalism will require considerable background information about his life and times. His formative years launched him on a brilliant career as a concert pianist but also shaped his understanding of Spain as the repository of a rich musical culture. In his youth he witnessed the impact of the seriously flawed institutions of his homeland: the incompetent and self-serving government, the lazy aristocracy, and a church devoted to preserving its own perquisites. The political and cultural climate into which he was born was that of a regionally and hence culturally divided country, struggling simultaneously with an inferiority complex and a high level of national chauvinism. Spain was in the midst of a national identity crisis and was struggling to identify its authentic character while at the same time trying to place itself satisfactorily in the cultural and political structure of the balance of Europe. Although

\(^1\) Formal political boundaries do not necessarily define a nation. Hobsbawn indicates that Joseph Stalin’s definition of a nation has proven very useful. That definition is that “a nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (5).
blessed with a long and distinguished history of musical expression, the fin-de-
siècle Spanish concertgoer preferred Italian opera composed by foreigners or
domestically composed light popular musicals called zarzuela. Nevertheless, Spain was
home to a number of competent musicologists who had begun to collect and publish
Iberian folk music. This renewed interest in folk music was consistent with the
nationalist musical impulse elsewhere in Europe, and also provided musical fodder for
the late Romantic composers. Isaac Albéniz merged this array of artistic elements
(nationalism, Impressionism, folk harmony and rhythms) into a compositional style
that represented the best of the each, molded into works of great originality and depth,
reflecting the essence of the Spanish people and their land. He is commonly labeled a
nationalistic composer, but his style and his motivation are distinguishable from that of
many of his peers by the absence of a chauvinist socio-political agenda.

Isaac Albéniz, life and influences

When writing about the life of Isaac Albéniz, it is important to explain the nature of the
corpus of available biographic information. Since Albéniz has never been considered a
giant of Western music, the number of academics focused on his career has been
relatively small. Those who have written biographical sketches have been hampered by
the fact that he promulgated a number of false stories about his early life and career.
Whether for career enhancement or as an effort to bolster a weak ego, Albéniz claimed
to have had adventures he never had, to have occupied positions that he did not fill and
to have studied with Franz Liszt, which never happened. These biographical fables were accepted as true, and as recently as the 1990s standard musical history survey texts and academic articles included them (Schonberg 341-342; Jean-Aubry 535; Istel and Martens 120).

Albéniz’s mythical life went unchallenged until Walter Aaron Clark wrote the seminal biography of the composer during an eight-year period in the 1990s when he made an extensive study of his life and music, using the important primary sources such as diaries and letters. As a result of Clark’s *Isaac Albéniz: Portrait of a Romantic*, the mythology of Albéniz’s life, created by the man himself, has fallen away to reveal a far more interesting and complicated psyche than was theretofore understood (Clark 6). This means that there is essentially only one valid reference on the life of Isaac Albéniz because the sources that Walter Clark lists in his bibliography either utilize erroneous material (as Clark showed) or are quoted exhaustively by Clark in his book.

Isaac Albéniz was born in Catalonia to a Basque father and a Catalan mother. He may have derived his sense of being Moorish from his name which, because it ends in “-iz,” is sometimes associated with Arabic nomenclature. Although his maternal grandfather was from Andalusia, his patronymic is, nevertheless, Basque (Clark 20). His early piano training was at the Madrid Conservatory, and his later studies were conducted at the Conservatoire Royal in Brussels, where he tied for first in the piano competition of his final year, 1879 (Clark 38). He began composing in earnest as early as 1884, but did
not give up concertizing until 1892. His early compositions were short salon-type pieces of moderate difficulty usually having a Spanish place name for a title and incorporating Spanish folk elements.

Finding the cultural climate of Spain uncongenial, he settled first in London (1892) and later in Paris (1894). In the early nineties Albéniz entered into a series of business agreements whereby he would receive a full stipend in return for an exclusive composing partnership. The final form of those arrangements was to be a life-long relationship with a wealthy Englishman named Francis Money-Coutts (Clark 102). The chief tangible result of that partnership was several operas based on Money-Coutts’ libretti, mostly on English themes. The unfortunate side of these ventures was that they were unsuccessful because the texts were weak, the subject matter was of little popular interest and Albéniz was neither trained for nor talented at writing large works for the musical stage (Clark 274). What the relationship did offer, however, was economic security for Albéniz and his family and the right to compose other music as he saw fit between the contractual projects. Had Albéniz tried to compose while supporting his family by concertizing, it is very likely that his output would have been sparser and less well written. His final opera under this partnership, *Pepita Jimenez*, was based on a popular Spanish story written by Juan Valera. This production achieved a moderate amount of success, being performed eight times in five days of January of 1896 (Clark 159).
In the first decade of the twentieth century Albéniz returned to writing piano music. The piano suite *Iberia* represents the product of his final productive years (1905-08) and is the culmination of his compositional development. The suite comprises twelve pieces arranged into three books. The performance order is not important and the entire suite is seldom played at single concert. These works incorporate elements as disparate as Andalusian flamenco rhythms and French Impressionist harmonies. The affinity of French Impressionism and Andalusian motifs has been frequently noted, but the juxtaposition of them in a single composition was a novel idea and set the model for Albeniz's Spanish successors. Although many of the pieces are based loosely on the classical sonata form, they frequently convey an improvisational style that creates a depth and originality that places the work at the pinnacle of late Romantic music and ensures it a place in the standard concert repertoire (Clark 283).

Albéniz's father, Angel, was a civil servant. The vicissitudes of Angel's career as a customs agent in the revenue department had a significant impact on the Albéniz household (Clark 20). During Isaac's formative years, Angel was stationed in at least six different locations throughout Spain and Cuba. During some of this time Isaac was living and studying piano in Madrid, but he must have resided occasionally at his father's stations in Barcelona, Almeria, Extremadura, and Havana (Clark 21-35). In his

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2 Powell recounts an evening in Paris when Albeniz entertained Manuel De Falla (1876-1946) and Joaquin Turina ((1882-1949). That day the three expatriates entered into a pact to write "Spanish music with vistas toward Europe" (98).
late teens he was sponsored for study in both Brussels and Leipzig. Clearly
Albéniz, as a well-travelled young man, was exposed to a wide variety of cultural,
political and environmental influences. From this travel he drew the sources for his
music, the love of the people and the land, and an awareness of the dismal conditions of
the majority of his countrymen. The time he spent in northern Europe would have
served to reinforce the impression of the political and economic backwardness of Spain.

The career of Angel Albéniz was spent during periods of both great political unrest and
of artificial stability on the Iberian Peninsula. A revolution of 1868 was followed by a
period of near anarchy ending in the creation of a republic in 1873. After more
internal strife, the Bourbon monarchy was restored in 1874. Carr calls the tenure of the
restored monarchy the most stable government of the nineteenth century in Spain
(347), but this stability was obtained partly by a retreat from controversial liberal
ideals of earlier times (Carr 352) and partly through a power sharing arrangement,
called the turno pacífico, whereby the liberal and conservative parties alternated in
office.

This governmental turmoil caused uncertainty and instability in the Albéniz household.
As a civil servant, Angel would have been required to curry favor with higher-level
government functionaries in order maintain his position. Clark theorizes that Albéniz’s
first composition, composed at age nine, was given to the Viscount del Bruch in order to
gain the favor of his father Juan Prim, a key figure in the revolution (Clark 26). Angel
was out of work at least three times from 1869 through 1876, sometimes for significant periods. The dehumanizing and self-respect sapping nature of the process, undoubtedly required of Angel, to ingratiate himself back into governmental employment is depicted in the novel *Miau*, by Perez Galdos. The protagonist of that story is driven to suicide by the strain of his unsuccessful efforts to regain his lost sinecure.

Clark portrays Angel as a conniving, tyrannical womanizer who spawned five children between 1877 and 1889 with the family cook (46). The stresses of employment clearly affected Angel’s behavior, resulting in a dysfunctional and economically warped relationship with his son. It is widely believed that Angel, somewhat like Leopold Mozart, was prone to scheduling his son for lucrative concert engagements when he was a child. Being exploited for money may have resulted in Albéniz’s difficulty in managing his own finances in later life, as he was prone to making bad investments or spending lavishly, necessitating his going back to the stage to replenish his funds. This economic treadmill may well also be one reason why Albéniz did not secure the technical training adequate for writing effective, large scale, orchestral works until he had gained considerable compositional experience.

Albéniz’s dysfunctional relationship with his father may have motivated the long-standing economic and emotional bond that he formed with Francis Money-Coutts. Some have speculated that there was a homosexual aspect to their relationship,
primarily based on their flowery and emotional correspondence (Clark 258-259).

It is more valid to assume that the relationship fulfilled Albéniz’s need for a father figure who he could count on for the emotional and economic support that was withheld by his father, or given only grudgingly.

The politics and the personal converge in another way in Isaac Albéniz’s life. In writing about the period of the *turno*, John Gill makes two telling points. He asserts first that “bland and safe cultures sometimes produce bland and safe art,” a point which will be addressed in the section on Spanish music below. But in the same quotation he theorizes further that talented artists prefer to reject artificial consensus and take an intentionally oppositional stance in the production of their art (Gill 65). The vicissitudes of Albéniz’s early years helped foster a healthy skepticism about Spain and its government. His artistically independent direction frequently resulted in adverse receptions to his novel music by conservative Spanish audiences, causing him to characterize Spain as “my ungrateful dark one” (Clark 288)3.

Another factor that separated him from the mainstream Spaniard was his exposure to Freemasonry. The Masonic Order was founded in Spain in 1728 and experienced

3 Albéniz’s stage works were rejected for their quality; he had a poor dramatic sense, his compositional style was fundamentally instrumental and overwhelmed the voices, and his libretti were weak (Clark, 273). His attempt to include a recurring thematic technique in his zarzuelas, like Wagner was doing in his operas, resulted in his being accused of being too “foreignized” (Clark, 288). His early piano music is beautiful and was enjoyed, but it did not have a significant impact. His final works were both more sophisticated and better received by the critics, but the public accord was perhaps mostly in sympathy for his failing health (Clark, 251).
periods of acceptability and of persecution. The antipathy of the Church was particularly strong and membership was declared a sin by the Pope in 1751 (McGregor 6). In the period from the return of Ferdinand VII to about the 1860’s the Freemasons were persecuted and their political impact minimized. By 1868 they had returned to influence as demonstrated by the fact that the uprising in Cadiz, that spurred the revolution, was led by a group of six generals, all of whom were Masons (McGregor 10). Throughout the nineteenth century Freemasonry was associated with the progressive elements of society, and was positioned against the influence of the Church, which, in turn, had sided with the aristocracy in order to preserve its land holdings and its monopoly over the thought and conscience of the people (Brennan 207).

Many of the Albéniz’s relatives were members of the Masonic order; most noteworthy was Isaac’s father (Clark 18). On numerous occasions Angel used his Masonic connections to schedule concerts and generally promote the career of his son. Although Isaac never became a Mason, it is clear that the liberal philosophy of the organization heavily influenced his behavior and his politics, especially making him skeptical of his government and the Roman Church. He frequently avowed that he was neither religious nor a patriot. Writing to his sister in 1893 he said, “I am very disheartened with our country, and you must believe that it will be exceedingly difficult for me to return to her unless it is to leave my bones” (Clark 110). Later, in 1903, he wrote in his diary, “Faith is an abdication of one’s intelligence” (Clark 217). His antipathy to late nineteenth century Spanish political and cultural life meant that whatever significant
art he would produce would need to be the product of fresh ideas in an open society elsewhere on the continent.

Not everything was negative for Isaac Albéniz in his early years in Spain. He most certainly must have fallen in love with the places he visited while traveling with his family or concertizing throughout the country. His infatuation with all things Andalusian must have arisen during that time as well. It is certain, however, that about 1883 Albéniz came under the influence of Felip Pedrell, a musicologist and the founder of modern Spanish classical music (Istel and Baker 165). During his time studying under Pedrell, Albéniz would have been indoctrinated with Pedrell’s theory that national music must be dependent upon native folk music. Pedrell was the first prominent Spanish nationalist composer and his teaching, his compositions and his musicological projects prepared the way for his more talented students to utilize the now legitimized and catalogued Spanish folk music in their compositions. Subsequent to his time with Pedrell, Albéniz began writing a new genre of distinctly Spanish salon-style pieces that represented the first instances of what would later mature into a special musical compositional style (Clark 56).

By the time he was twenty-three years old, Isaac Albéniz was a sophisticated, well-travelled and uninhibited young man. His liberal family background had created an independent thinker, skeptical of the consensus views of the Spanish upper classes and cultural elite. He would be driven, like many of his peers, to establish himself musically
outside his native land and so he would spend the bulk of his creative time and energy in France, especially Paris. There he would be introduced to modernist musical thought, and he would be willing to use the new tools being developed by the late Romantic and Impressionist musicians. But his emerging efforts to define himself musically would be given direction by his exposure to folk music in the provinces of Spain and also by the influence of Felip Pedrell and the nationalist movement generally in Europe. Concerns about economic security arising from his troubled family life would drive him into a potentially Faustian bargain with the rich Englishman Money-Coutts that, while allowing him the free time to compose on his own, would lead him toward Wagnerian imitation that was congenial neither to his personality nor his skills.

Isaac Albéniz was emerging onto the musical scene at an important time in Spanish history. The country would shortly undergo a traumatic upheaval due to the loss of the last of its colonies that would accelerate the process of trying to define what it meant to be Spanish. As a country, Spain was relegated to the cultural backwater or, even worse, characterized as a land of religious zealots, swaggering bullfighters and beggars (Vincent, 100). At the same time, the rest of Europe would become fascinated with things Spanish, although the result was often a poor imitation of Spanish folk music. The time was right for a talented Spaniard to bring Spanish art music into the forefront of the Western European music scene. To understand Albéniz’s accomplishment and the uniqueness of his style it is necessary to explore in greater detail the political,
cultural and musical situation in late nineteenth century Spain and then address the impact on the life and career of the composer.

**Spanish cultural politics at the turn of the century**

One could argue that the only time that the Spanish people behaved as a unified nation during the nineteenth century was in response to the French invasion of 1808. Napoleon established his brother, Joseph, as the King of Spain and began rebuilding the country in the liberal French model using a Masonic coterie called the *afrancesados* as the nucleus of the movement (Brennan 207). Regardless of whether the motive was anti-Jacobin (Brennan, 207) or simply a defense of the Spaniards' *patria chica* (village and province), the country united and drove the invader from the peninsula.

From the end of the invasion through the war of 1898, Spain was governed by a succession of parties with different political philosophies: liberal, conservative, republican, and monarchical. It often devolved into near anarchy. Historically, the unifying institution in Spain had been the Church. According to Brennan, the Church had been prominent in the war of 1808 because the nobles and the upper classes either dithered or went over to the French, but this was the last time it would have a significant impact on the governance of Spain in the nineteenth century (42). There were two reasons for this decline in influence; first, the Church, in order to retain its wealth, sided with the rich over the poor, and, second, in reaction to the excesses of the
French Revolution, the Church expressed its fear of an educated and potentially restive lower class through its active aversion to the liberal ideal.

By the end of 1898, the Spanish empire had been fully dissolved by the loss of Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico as a result of the humiliating destruction of its fleet at the hands of the United States. Blinkhorn states that many non-Spaniards were not surprised by this outcome for a country that had been living in the glow of its former glory for hundreds of years⁴. Only seventy years earlier Spain had lost a far greater number of colonies, including its mainland American possessions such as Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico. For decades, however, the Spanish were able to delude themselves into believing that the conflict was merely a “family” squabble and that the cultural bonds between Spain and its former colonies would keep them within an imagined Hispanic commonwealth (Carr, 145). In 1898, however, the defeat was substantially more disillusioning. First, the United States was not a Hispanic country and was a somewhat despised rival in the imperialist competitive mindset of Europe at that time. Second, the decline of the European monarchies throughout the nineteenth century, and the rise of nationalism, had fostered a concept of national honor. Thus, for Spain, the final loss of colonies in 1898, and the recognition of the absurdity of their delusional hopes for reunification, was a tremendous blow to the national honor rather than simply a diminution of the King’s wealth, as had been perceived in 1820 (Blinkhorn 5-6).

⁴ Blinkhorn references F.V. Parsons, “The Origins of the Moroccan Question, (1880-1890),” which documents the views of French diplomats and politicians about the condition of the Spanish state (5).
While a major segment of the Spanish elite may have been shocked and dismayed by the events of 1898, they should not have been. The colossal failure of Spanish power cannot be pinpointed to that year, because it had been brewing since the end of the Golden Age, at least two hundred years before. Spain's easy colonial wealth had supported the aristocracy and the code of honor that circumscribed the performance of manual labor. The Spanish also had expended that wealth in ill-advised military campaigns, leading to invest in their infrastructure. Poor planning, unwarranted expenditures, and the disdain for work all greatly impeded the growth of industry. While the roots of the poor economic performance went back centuries, it was being perpetuated by protectionist behavior like the sheltering of Catalanian exporters through their exclusive access to the captive Cuban market. The Spanish had never had to learn how to compete economically. The earlier loss of only part of their empire had allowed them to maintain the illusion of power and prestige far beyond that which their diminished holdings would have warranted. Blinkhorn notes that the inability of the Spanish government to arouse support in the streets for its colonial campaigns was a cause for government worry long before 1898. Spain's inflexible attitude toward the administration of its colonies, the reluctance of its lower classes to fight in the military overseas, and the ossified and bloated Spanish bureaucracy should all have been obvious weaknesses, readily apparent to the Spanish intelligentsia (Blinkhorn, 8-10).
A group of intellectuals, later called the Generation of '98, was not so much shocked by the loss of the colonies or the abject nature of the Spanish military, as by the realization that no one had been taking seriously the warning signs about the decay of Spanish culture. Many of them had been writing about these issues for the previous thirty years. Now that the last colonies were gone, there was no avoiding the need to create a new Spain out of the ashes of the old; the only question was how to define what constituted the real Spain and how then to capitalize on that strength to set the country back on the path to greatness.

The difficulty of addressing the so-called Spanish problem resulted in vigorous debates and highlighted internal issues that had been festering for many years. The primary conundrum was whether to choose to look backward to find and resurrect Spain’s past greatness or to choose to look forward and adopt the modern concepts of government and commerce extant in the rest of Europe. Much of Spain was conservative, if not reactionary, in its outlook and was enamored of the look-back scenario. The European model was a liberal one and it included unfettered capitalism. As has been pointed out, liberalism was opposed by the Church and the wealthy, and capitalism was a daunting prospect for a number of reasons. Spain’s lack of respect for work made it uncompetitive in most markets, and areas of the country where manufacturing could have been efficient were accustomed to protective tariffs. Ironically, Spain, a supposedly medieval country, had a strong collectivist attitude, arising from the pueblo tradition, and this mindset was averse to economic competition. Some of the
Generation of ’98 were so anti-progress that they could have been labeled Luddites. Unamuno declares in the *Tragic Sense of Life* that Spain should “Let others invent!” (305). Yet others saw that Spain could only prosper by adopting the modern political and economic policies of France and England.

Conflict among the regions made it difficult to create a unified vision of Spain as a nation. In the previous two hundred years, most of the provinces had attempted to form semi-autonomous governments, to withhold taxes, or to secede outright from the central union. The nineteenth century Spaniard’s allegiance was first to his village, then to his province; seldom did it harmonize with national goals. Hobsbawm points out that language was a key unifying factor for both Italy and Germany during the nineteenth century (103). In Spain, despite repeated attempts to repress local languages, the Basques and the Catalonians had managed to preserve the existence of their local patois. Aside from separationist pressures, this regionalism also created animosity among the provinces.

A typical regional conflict was that between Catalonia and Castile. Catalonia was a manufacturing center while Castile was the center of government. Catalonia looked more toward Europe, culturally and politically, while Castile was focused on what it defined as pure Spanishness. In music and art, modernism had become a significant element of Catalanian art, whereas in Castile the tastes were substantially more conservative. Landscape art arose as a politically charged genre around 1868; its new
status was based on a theory that the *tierra* defines the people. The landscape movement intended to teach the population by exposing them to high quality art whose subject matter would glorify the Castilian landscape, its people and its culture. The conservatives of the Generation of ’98 favored the art of El Greco, Velazquez and Goya, believing their work (and the subject matter in particular) to be representative of the Castilian model of Spanishness (Jurkevich 57-63). Meanwhile, in Barcelona, Antoni Gaudi would begin his famous Church of the Sagrada Familia in 1883, and this striking modernist edifice was deemed by the Catalan public to be a central part of the Catalanian renaissance in art, music, industry and politics (Moffitt 200). This difference in artistic aspiration highlights the contrast of the Castilian desire to look to native historical models as against the Catalanian impulse to emulate Europe in the search for a dynamic and successful Spanish future.

The status of Andalusia was another regional issue that the Generation of ’98 grappled with in defining the concept of Spanishness. In attempting to prove that Spain was, in fact, a coherent political and cultural entity they debated extensively whether Andalusia was fundamental to the essence of Spanishness or was a completely foreign. Andalusian gypsy culture had become almost an obsession in Spain during the nineteenth century. The writers of the Generation of ’98 dismissed both authentic Andalusian and gypsy culture with a vigorous and almost vindictive campaign. Their purpose was to emphasize the European (Visigoth and Celtic) side of their cultural inheritance and to downplay the unsavory Moorish and Jewish influences. It was only
later, under the auspices of Federico García Lorca and the Generation of ‘27, that Andalusia received its due in the panoply of Spanish contributions to world culture (Handley 42-47).

The debate, with respect to Andalusia, over the origins of Spain took on an unpleasant racial overtone. There was a mild obsession with racial and ethnic purity among the Generation of ’98 that is encompassed by the word castizo - literally “pure” or “genuine.” Writers, like Miguel Unamuno and Ramon Menendez Pidal, argued that pure Spanish culture had been corrupted by an array of negative influences during the preceding several hundred years (Moffitt, 197). In music, this aversion to things Andalusian was especially focused on flamenco. This music was originally gypsy music, that later morphed with native music into the much more flamboyant style we know today (Livermore 166). To the conservative Castilians interested in racial purity, the southern music was Moorish, sexually suggestive and vulgar.

Sometimes a group will allow itself to be defined by outsiders. In the case of Spain, the so-called “Black Legend” affected not only the reception of Spanish art and artists in the rest of Europe, but it also affected the internal debate over what it meant to be Spanish at that time. This term was coined by Julian Juderias in the twentieth century. It was meant to encompass the negative characterization of Spain and the denial of its positive aspects by writers from the rest of Europe. He states that the Legend, originating after the Reformation, depicts Spain as a religiously dogmatic, ignorant, and violent place, not
subject to economic, social or cultural improvement (Qtd. in Etzion, 96). In 1899 the Spanish landscape artist Dario Regoyos and Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren travelled around Spain and published an illustrated account of their journey. Their work was a conscious attempt to identify the problem of Spain and concluded this way; “there is something at the heart of its culture and, indeed, national identity that is backward and twisted” (Vincent 97). The book was widely available in Spain at the time. It contributed to the internal discussion of the “Spanish problem” and was also used to cast inter-regional aspersions. Judith Etzion postulates that the marginal position of Spain in Western music was the result of the Black Legend having been passed on from one generation of reviewer or historian to the next over a period of several centuries. She claims that there is cultural divide between Spain and the rest of Europe that is driven by political factors to the detriment of the Spanish image abroad and self-perception at home (93).

Isaac Albéniz grew up and matured musically during this time and, being an intelligent, well-connected and well-read individual, was undoubtedly drawn into the controversies and conflicts enumerated above. He was never able to feel comfortable with the manner that the Spanish people chose to govern themselves, and that was one reason for his exile to Paris. He wrote the following to his sister Clementina.

I do not have to tell you the state of nervousness in which I find myself because of the numerous calamities that are befalling our
unfortunate country. What remedy does it have? We have not corrected ourselves, nor will we ever. Ill-intentioned chauvinism blinds us in such a way that our faults appear to us virtues and our crass ignorance, inspired science. Send me your news, but do not tell me one word about anything else going on there, as I have decided to ignore what is happening and what will happen in Spain (Clark, 191 quoting correspondence).

He was also involved in the dissonance between Madrid and Barcelona. He studied in Madrid and felt the need to present his nationalistic works there, but Barcelona was much more accepting of his use of modernist techniques in his compositions. An 1895 performance of his opera Henry Clifford was deemed, by the management of the theater, to be too European for Madrid and too Castellano for Barcelona (Clark 131). A reviewer of an Albéniz work performed in Madrid in 1894 averred that the work was too ‘foreignized’ (Clark 123). An even more striking situation was that his most Spanish opera, Pepita Jimenez, had to be translated into the customary Italian for the Barcelona performances. When it came to the issue of looking forward to Europe or backward to former Spanish glories, Isaac Albéniz was at odds with both perspectives.

Albéniz also found himself straddling the cultural gap between Castile and Andalusia. His travels throughout Spain undoubtedly revealed the same ills recorded by the Regoyos and Verhaeren, and it is clear that this exposure is what prompted his aversion
to the Castile-based government. Nevertheless, his travels must also have created
a strong attachment to the people, the *tierra* and the music that he encountered.
Although not born in Andalusia, Albéniz was prone to announcing that “soy un moro” – I
am a Moor (Clark 264).

The Black Legend affected Albéniz’s career and his personal relationships. The public
perception of a Spanish performer is typified by the review of an Albéniz recital in
London, where the writer was disappointed that the pianist did not display the
emotionality and flash expected of a southerner (Clark 80). Albéniz’s placid and
reserved technique at the piano did not fit the image of the emotionally provocative
Spaniard. The reception of his compositions was also biased by expectations arising
from the national stereotype. In 1890 a London newspaper wrote that there was no
unique Spanish music and that what was being published there was a poor imitation of
French and German musical styles (Clark 81). Albéniz was often insecure about his
status among the sophisticated French composers in his Parisian circle of friends. In
his diary in 1897 he writes, referring to a favor that he performed for a French
composer friend, “That’s one more favor they owe me, a fact that will not prevent them
from thinking it well deserved and continuing to view me as some kind of strange beast”
(Clark 166).

Isaac Albéniz contributed to the cultural struggle to help define Spanish culture and to
solve the “Spanish problem” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but he was not
active politically nor did he make significant written input to the discussion. As a musician, he made his contribution through the works that he composed. Although living and working in France, he wanted most to have his material accepted in his native land, but despite a renewed interest in Spanish music throughout Europe, the musical life of Spain continued to stagnate.

**Music during fin-de-siècle Spain**

Although Felip Pedrell has been called the Moses that lead Spain out of the wilderness, at the time of Albéniz’s career Spanish art music was still lost in the desert. Arguably Spanish culture reached a zenith during the *Siglo d'Oro* that, at the outside, ran from 1492 to 1681. But musically the era probably ended a century later with the death of Domenico Scarlatti in 1757. According to Gilbert Chase, it is commonly held that, with few exceptions, Spain took a secondary role in musical history for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (17). Earlier, during the Renaissance and early Baroque, Spain excelled at creating secular songs in a variety of forms, guitar music (initially as accompaniment and later for solo polyphony) and church music both for the organ and chorus. Chase maintains that the Spanish art song of this time had reached a height of expression that was very mature compared to the rest of Europe (49). In the
sixteenth century, Spain contributed significantly to the musical life of Italy, but by the eighteenth century this cultural influence had been largely reversed.\(^5\)

The perception, as reported by Etzion, was that Spanish music in the nineteenth century consisted of church music of no significance, popular musical theater of low artistic merit, and Italian opera (94). In fact, there had been no performance of a Beethoven symphony in Spain until 1866 (Clark 288). A large part of this cultural vacuum can be attributed to the lower education levels and poor economic health on the Iberian Peninsula. Partly because of the Church’s resistance to education the illiteracy rate in 1870 was over 60%, surely one of the highest rates in Europe (Brennan, 50). Despite the poverty of the society, there was still an active musical life, but the form it took was significantly different from other European centers and not terribly congenial to serious art music.

The conservative taste of the listening public was shaped by a number of social phenomena unique to Spain when compared to Italy, France and Germany. An overriding factor in nineteenth century Spanish culture was the egalitarian nature of the society. To be sure, Spain was economically stratified with a wealthy class, a small upper middle class and a large and non-unified underclass, but the lack of class feeling was significant (Carr 282). The relatively free mixing of the classes was at least partly

\(^5\) According to Chase, the focal point of sixteenth century Spanish religious music was in Rome, where composers like Cristobal Morales wrote masses and advance the writing of polyphony (77). Conversely, in the eighteenth century Italians like Carlo Broschi (Farinelli) and Domenico Scarlatti dominated Spanish music (106).
due to the cross-class nature of the cultural activities. The major social diversion in poor rural areas and in the city was the bullfight. All classes could attend and the stars could be drawn from any economic stratum. Another major feature of Spanish life was the religious procession. These musically accompanied mini-pilgrimages involved the whole community in a sometimes multi-day celebration. Finally, the love of the guitar as the national instrument had no economic class distinctions. The guitar was relatively inexpensive and easy to transport, making it an ideal instrument in the countryside, but even royalty was trained to play it. Given this flat socio-cultural terrain, it is logical that the common musical diversions would have to be acceptable across a wide social spectrum.

The primary forms of musical entertainment were musical theater and folk singing and dancing. The origins of Italian opera in Spain date back long before the reign of Philip V (1701-1746), but reached a new high under the musical and emotional sway of the great Italian castrato Farinelli (Livermore 111). From this time on, grand opera in Spain was, by definition, Italian. Despite the best efforts of Felip Pedrell to create a Spanish operatic tradition, it never happened. Gilbert Chase asserts that the Spanish composers of the late nineteenth century “wrote both zarzuelas and operas, relying on the latter for prestige and on the former for cash” (146).

Consistent with the relatively egalitarian nature of the society, popular musical drama has had a continuous and an always-prominent presence in Spain. The zarzuela was the
primary popular musical dramatic form of the nineteenth century. The first popular-subject zarzuela (distinct from the Romantic idylls of the earlier style) was performed in 1768. This form, a combination of spoken dialogue and musical numbers, lasted about twenty years and was then replaced in popularity by Italian opera and another popular form called the tonadilla. The tonadilla was a twenty-minute comic work designed to be performed for a run of about seven days and then discarded. Thousands of these trivial diversions were written until about 1830, at which point Manuel Breton de los Herreras (1796-1873) launched a movement to rejuvenate the native Spanish lyric theatre. The popularity of the newly constituted zarzuela, arising from that movement, grew during the latter half of the nineteenth century to the production level of the earlier tonadilla. The nineteenth zarzuela evolved into the zarzuela grande, which was an Italianate production in three acts having formal verse and a generally elegant presentation. By 1880, however, the lighter género chico form of the modern zarzuela was dominant and the grande form receded until a revival in the 1920s. This lighter form was an hour-long musical drama on a simple comedic subject and rooted in the urban spirit of Madrid. At this point, the zarzuela is a tonadilla in subject matter, attitude and musical form and a zarzuela only in name and the presence of spoken dialog (Chase 121-137). The influence of the zarzuela composer and musicologist Francisco Barbieri (1823-1894) on the followers of Pedrell was significant. Barbieri incorporated familiar elements into his work, including bullfighters, maías and

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6 The zarzuela was *Las Segadoras de Vallecas* by Jose de Nebra. The main subject was peasant women who worked as reapers in the fields (Chase 124).
majos, folk music and dance (Chase 136). His work set an example for nationalist composers like Albéniz and artists like Sarolla.

Chase maintains that Spanish music has been noteworthy for the common mixing of folk elements and art music, since at least the time of Scarlatti (17). Clearly there are diverse sources for this folk music, including Byzantine and Gregorian chant, as well as the music of the Moors, the Gypsies and the Jews. Spain’s geographic isolation served to preserve its musical traditions, perhaps better than elsewhere in Europe. Livermore cites the work of Julian Calvo, an organist from Murcia cathedral, as an example of the mid-nineteenth century accomplishment of church organists in preserving this tradition. Their formal training allowed them to recognize the modes of the music and preserve them in the manner in which they were locally performed (141). By the late nineteenth century, very rigorous musicological activity was extant in Spain, conducted by scholars like Eslava, Barbieri and Pedrell. Another factor in creating greater awareness of this older folk music was a café cantante opened by Silverio Franconetti y Aguilar in Seville in 1831. This establishment prompted the creation of others whose goal was, similarly, the performance of native Andalusian song and dance in urban venues (Livermore 168).

The purest folk music, and that which is most different from the rest of Europe and most commonly associated with Spain, is the cante jondo of Andalusia. This music is literally the song from the depths (Livermore 165). Spanish folk music favors a strong
rhythmic aspect and the cante jondo is distinguished by less-than-half-step sung intervals and strong vocal and instrumental percussive effects. The percussion sources include heel-stamping, castanets, finger snapping or complex strummed rhythmic patterns on the guitar (Trend 142). The insertion of seemingly random vocal ejaculations provides additional rhythmic emphasis, but is also indicative of the tradition of audience involvement in the musical performance. Some claim that cante jondo reflects the influence of synagogue chanting, but it is most commonly associated with the Moors (Manuel 323).

Each region of Spain had its own folk song traditions with the northern music (Castile) usually being perceived as less sexually suggestive, less macho and generally more refined. The southern music (Andalusia) was substantially more invigorated. A twofold controversy surrounds the Andalusian folk music. First, the gypsy influence (arguably migrating from Flanders) morphed much of the native music into a more flamboyant style that became known as flamenco (Livermore 166). This oft-termed “tourist” music was looked down upon, at the time, by the more sophisticated and knowledgeable Spaniards. Secondly, the nationalist thinkers of the Generation of ’98 tended to favor the culture of Castile. The northern Spanish culture was held to be more castizo (authentically Spanish) than the Moorish black, sexually suggestive and macho music and dance of Andalusia. This latter dispute about authentic Spanish music traveled well into the twentieth century; in 1922 Federico Garcia Lorca organized a cante jondo
festival to defend deep song as the authentic Spanish art and to prevent it from further cultural adulteration.

Given the forgoing explication of the state of Spanish music, it is not surprising that compositions by Spanish musicians did not develop a place in the symphonic repertoire due to the lack of sophistication of the conservatory, but not university, trained composers (Chase 289). At this time, a number of non-Spanish composers became enamored of Spanish musical elements. They acquired their knowledge of these musical customs either through travel on the peninsula, exposure to it at concerts like those at the Paris Expo of 1889, or even by digging out music from the library at the Paris Conservatory. They produced Spanish themed compositions, written in a style imitative of what was perceived to be the Spanish compositional mode. Bizet’s opera Carmen (1875) is a good example of this style “a l’espagnole,” which later became know as the “Spanish idiom.” Other composers, like Debussy and Ravel, are credited with a sophisticated utilization of Spanish and, especially, Andalusian elements. It could be said that the world was ready for the emergence of a Spanish composer of the first rank, and Isaac Albéniz was well positioned to be that composer.

Albéniz was very much a part of the fin-de-siècle music scene in Spain, despite spending much of his time in France. Along with the violinist Sarasate, he was an early exporter of the Spanish style through concert tours. His residence in Paris put him in contact with the French composers in the Spanish idiom (Debussy, Ravel and Chabrier). These
men were friends and musical colleagues. As shall be shown later, many analysts have detected the influence of Debussy in Albéniz’s suite *Iberia*, but Debussy’s first work in the Spanish idiom was *Lindajara*, composed in 1901. It seems reasonable to infer that, in this regard, Albéniz may well have been as much an influence on Debussy as the Frenchman was on him.

The relationship of Isaac Albéniz to the guitar was fundamental. According to Clark, Albéniz played the guitar and would certainly have been immersed in the guitar music that was so much a part of Spanish culture. Tomas Marco points out that there are numerous instances of guitar effects in the music of Albéniz and his peers that enhance the nationalist impulse of that generation of Spanish composers (147-150). Finally, Linton Powell, who devotes a whole chapter to the influence of the guitar on keyboard music, cautions that pianists should always “remember that at the back of many Spanish composers’ minds there is often a plucked instrument, the guitar” (154). It is not a coincidence that so much of Albéniz’s music has been transcribed (some almost verbatim) for solo or ensemble guitar performance.

If popular musical theater was a drag on Spanish music generally, it can well be said that it was a particularly depressing influence on the career of Isaac Albéniz. He tried repeatedly to write musical drama in a number of forms and styles and failed each time. Frequently he was forced to use bad libretti, but, because of his apparent lack of a dramatic sense, he seemed unable to properly evaluate dramatic quality when he had
the opportunity to make his own selection. Albeniz’s attempts to bring Spanish themes to grand opera and modern musical techniques to musical theater discouraged both audiences. This listener response is easily understood by noting the strict dividing line between the very Spanish zarzuela and the very Italian opera. Since musical theater was such a major factor in Spanish cultural life, and since Albeniz was not very good at it, this would have been a cause of the relegation of Albeniz to comparative obscurity in his own country.

Like the Europeans who became enamored of the Spanish idiom, Albeniz was an ardent fan of Andalusian folk songs and dances. He recognized their limitation for use in full scale art compositions, but he may well have been inspired to continue to use them in his increasingly virtuosic piano works through the example set by the foreign proponents of the Spanish idiom in the orchestral field. He had studied Spanish folk music on his travels and in Madrid with Pedrell, he had studied European technique at the Schola Cantorum in Paris, and he had even studied Gregorian chant (Clark, 110-111). He was thus in an advantageous position to synthesize the oriental flavor of Andalusian music with traditional and modern European forms.

In a diary entry from 1902, after a failed attempt at a lyric theater project in Madrid, Albéniz concludes; “the Spanish people sing a lot but think little” (Clark 128). The relationship of composers to their fellow countrymen was a matter of great importance
at this time in musical history. Many composers had taken on the role of
nationalistic promoters and educators, using music to uncover and support their
national heritage.

**Modern European music and nationalism**

To place Albéniz in the context of the musical environment of his time it will be
necessary to understand both the political and musical trends of the late nineteenth
century and their merger in musical nationalism. There were two key factors in the
development of European musical nationalism. The first was the continuing evolution
of musical style out of the Romantic era, and the second was the emergence of political
nationalism after the French revolution. To understand the technical development of
the nationalistic impulse in art music it is necessary first to trace its roots back into
European Romanticism.

Romanticism was a cultural movement that originated in the late 18th century and
impacted European art for most of the nineteenth century. The music of this era was
noteworthy for its expressive nature and its emphasis on creating an emotional
response in the listener. Arising out of a reaction to the structured and methodized
nature of the music of the classical era, it is “distinguished from classicism by a
tendency toward formal disintegration” (Dahlhaus Nineteenth 16). This change in the
structural rigidity of music resulted in a change in its form. The function of the form of a piece of instrumental music for a classical composer was to develop a theme, and these themes, if taken out of context, were often simple and very non-compelling melodic thoughts. While the working out of musical ideas is the paramount feature of a classical composition, in a Romantic work the form is devoted primarily to the presentation of melody (Dahlhaus Nineteenth 13). The continued unfettering of musical structure throughout the Romantic period was driven by both musical and extra-musical factors.

Paralleling the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century was the democratization of art. The industrial revolution created an ever more numerous, more prosperous and more educated middle class. Concomitantly, the nobility, the former patrons of the arts, were reduced in importance and relative affluence. Artistic influence shifted away from them to public artistic, social and economic institutions (Curtis 25). In short, the vicissitudes of the marketplace began to drive the nature of musical composition.

Indicative of the growing musical marketplace was the increase in the number of home pianos, the increased role of civic institutions in the presentation of music, and the increased leisure time of the audience. These developments made it possible for individual musicians to more easily enter into careers as professional composers, and as sellers of music to an increasingly affluent public. Composers did not need the patronage of a titled personage, but they did need to please a customer. The need to sell
product meant the need to excite the audience with new and unusual features. The demand for originality outstripped the ability of the old forms and techniques to provide, and hence the search for more exotic material and technique became critical.

As the century progressed musical elements from the common practice era were transformed. The new music dictated the use of new registers, enhanced coloration by varied instrumentation and even new instrumental performance techniques. Of utmost importance for the future of music was the increased experimentation in expanded tonality. While dissonance was formerly used for effect and was always satisfactorily resolved, dissonance was now being used as an integral element in compositional technique and standard triadic harmony gave way to increasing chromaticism (Morgan 3-5). The evolution in the Romantic era toward Impressionism began with the music of Chopin. His harmonic innovations and his exploitation of piano sonority as a vehicle for evocation of atmospheric effects made a great impression on Debussy (Palmer 53). The zenith of the Romantic period for the piano was the music of Franz Liszt whose program music, special effects and harmonic adventurism inspired both Debussy and Ravel (Palmer 54). These composers are important to Albeniz for two reasons. First, they invented musical Impressionism, from which he drew many of his compositional elements. Second, they developed (especially Liszt but also Wagner) the concept of “zeitgeist” which combined the nationalist/folk philosophical spirit of Hegel and Herder with the modern concept of citizen activism. Dahlhaus calls this spirit the “fusion of art and politics” (114).
Musical Impressionism, primarily associated with Claude Debussy, was a unique and arguably final step in the evolution of music out of the Romantic era and into the modernist style of the twentieth century. Although musical Impressionism is often considered to be an attempt to render visual reality in sound, Debussy eschewed the term, believing that he was offering up not so much the object as the meaning behind it (Palmer, 17). Debussy’s concern with the constant movement of light and colors means that his music is comprised of repeatable musical units; it is a mosaic of sounds with no dynamic thrust as is typical in classical music, and therefore it is held together by melodic, rhythmic and harmonic repetition and variation (Morgan, 48). In the common practice era, tonality created direction in music; the listener knew that he was being taken on a finite musical journey and could identify the beginning and the ending of that journey. A piece of Impressionistic music is, on the contrary, to be experienced as a thing unto itself and not in terms of where it is going or where it came from within the framework of the compositional structure. Impressionism is important to Albéniz because, by virtue of his exposure to it, he acquired an array of compositional tools that worked well with his folk-music-based work and it satisfied his professional musician’s need to expand his creative impact.

The evolution of the Romantic ideal was both an intellectual development in musical theory and a launch point for a new kind of professional musician – one who could be both a composer and a reformer. The phenomenon called the “cult of genius” was a
prime mover in the development of Romanticism as an intellectual, economic and political force (Dahlhaus Between 2). The public’s perception of musical geniuses had been concerned first with the performance aspect. Musical prodigies had existed since at least the time of Mozart, but the media attention associated with concertizers like Franz Liszt created a whole new dimension. These famous performers created a demand for new, fresh and accessible (to the ear) music and helped market music to the expanding middle class. But another aspect of the cult of genius was the perception of the composer as an agent of social change. Beginning perhaps with Beethoven, the perception developed that artists were especially equipped with skills and insights that imparted to them a responsibility and an ability to improve society and enlighten their audience. Like twenty-first century movie stars, the artists of late nineteenth century Europe often took on the role of social or political activist.

These trends in music provided the impetus for musicians to participate in the wave of nationalism that spread across Europe in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution paved the way for the modern nation-state in Western Europe. New nations were born from the amalgamation of smaller states or were formed from the disintegration of larger empires. Intellectuals promoted this movement by espousing the theories of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who held that nationhood is the “most legitimate form of large-scale sociopolitical organization” (Curtis, 21). Furthermore, according to him, the nation encompasses a people’s cultural

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7 The influence of the cult of genius may well have been a motivating factor in the creation of Albéniz’s famous, but apocryphal, stories about his early career.
and political lives. The root of this nationhood is the people or volk. Even if they
don’t know it, the people represent the essence of the nation-state. If nationalism is the
effort to unite people who have common cultural and political bonds into a single state,
then nationalism in music is the attempt to accomplish that purpose through music
(Curtis 26-37).

In Curtis’ analysis, nationalistic composers addressed a perceived deterioration in the
quality of their national cultures, and attempted to reverse this decline by creating a
national music that would serve as a culturally unifying force and enhance the
nationhood of their respective constituencies. Despite the assumption that these new
nations had rich cultures that sprang from their folk roots, it was believed that only
nationalist intellectuals could unlock this latent resource. Thus, many nationalist
composers (excepting Albéniz) viewed themselves as having the social obligation and
mission of uplifting the volk by offering them art that incorporated their rich cultural
heritage (29).

Techniques used by the nationalists included incorporating folk music into their
compositions, promoting the national language by using it as texts in their vocal works,
employing national mythology as themes in their drama and/or program music, and
evoking impressions of the national landscape (Curtis 47). Although using folk tunes in
art music may validate the folk element, there was a contradiction implicit in the fact
that the folk elements were not conducive to being incorporated wholesale into high art
compositions. Therefore these folk elements were understood to be only a source of inspiration for the artist, and they were often subjected to extensive modification at the hands of the composer. Serious music was expected to arise as an expression of the national spirit, but the nationalist composers were all seeking a quality level that would make their music universal, and this required extensively reworking and enhancement of the folk melodies. It follows that the nationalistic content is not in the music itself, but rather in the intent of the artist and the nature of the reception of music by its audience (Curtis 27). This point is strengthened by the fact that Richard Wagner used no direct folk tune quotations in his epic operas, while many other national composers used them extensively.

The use of folk elements was not really as significant to the nationalists’ program as was the perceived need to educate the masses. It was useful to quote folk elements so as to allow the bourgeois audiences to both identify the music as national and also to catch their attention and draw them into it in order to enhance its power to educate. Nevertheless, high art was deemed more powerful and better able to elevate the masses than popular music or unadulterated folk music; ultimately, the educational component came from the genius of the composers’ final product (Curtis 25).

In the view of Curtis, the nationalists arguably labored under two key misconceptions. First, there is no such thing as a national music. There is no way to isolate a musical component of an original composition and uniquely identify it as coming from a
particular nation within the Western music tradition because there is no one-to-one correspondence of musical convention and nation (29). Secondly, the composers and their public were under the erroneous view of nationhood originally espoused by Herder, believing that nations have a tangible existence that goes back hundreds if not thousands of years that can and should be drawn upon. More recent thinking is exemplified by Hobsbawm, who traces the various criteria used for the definition of nationhood and concludes that nations are not pre-established, unchanging entities (9). Therefore national music cannot be intrinsically tied to a nation by use of its native sources, but rather it becomes “national” through a process of public consensus (Curtis 28). Creating this consensus was the goal of the nationalist musicians.

A more unseemly side of the nationalist program was the attempt to create national cultural boundaries. The nationalist intellectuals’ agenda included proving that their national culture was unique and valuable. Of course the concept of “separate but equal” is inherently unstable, and it is a short logical leap to conclude that if a nation is unique and its culture rich, then other countries must be somehow inferior. For some nationalist composers the boundaries were soft (Smetana) and accepting of external cultural influences, while for others (Wagner) the boundaries were much more rigid.

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8 Curtis is making an only slightly hyperbolic statement here. Certainly a complete Basque dance number is recognizable as coming from that region, and so his point needs to be clarified in two ways. First, there are no unique national musical styles since music moves across borders and geographic barriers and is altered or merges with that of it neighbors. Second, Curtis looks to the basic music component, the instrument or the musical figure, and sees the same thing extant in the music of many cultures. An example of the latter would be the bagpipe drone, which can be found in the music of Poland, Spain and Scandinavia -- not just in Scotland.
Over time the emphasis on uniqueness turned the European norm from that of a shared universal ethic – an ethic that viewed all national traditions as a part of the greater Western musical heritage – into a chauvinistic and culturally arrogant one (Curtis 146-150).9

The label “Romanticism” as applied to music in the nineteenth century is too broad a term to cover one hundred years of unique musical talent, and “nationalism” was never an organized movement because it took on a different guise in virtually every country in Europe and even the United States. Nevertheless, the issues that have been presented in this section about those two musical phenomena influenced Isaac Albéniz in important ways.

As one of the premier pianists of his day and a child prodigy, Albéniz benefitted from the attitudes implicit in the cult of genius. Had he not made significant impression through his keyboard skills, he never would have been funded by a grant from King Alfonso XII for his serious training in northern Europe (Clark 36). It was noted earlier that famous Franz Liszt, as a prodigy and radical composer, influenced the career and, likely, the musical style of Albeniz.

The need of the Romantics for original material dovetailed with the need of the nationalists for authentic folk music. Both of these trends were very supportive of

9 As an example of the earlier pan-European sensibility, J. S. Bach drew heavily on Italian and French forms and styles without engendering any adverse public reaction.
Albéniz's love of Spanish folk music and his use of it in his compositions. It should be noted that one of the first uses of folk themes in a large-scale symphonic work was by Vincent d’Indy in his *Symphony on a Mountain Air* of 1886 (Hill 249). Living in Paris, Albéniz spent considerable time with many prominent and progressive French composers. He studied under D’Indy and was acquainted with Debussy, attending the 1894 premiere of the *Prelude a l’apres midi d’un faune*, the first Impressionist musical composition. He had to have been encouraged by the Impressionists’ use of modal keys, chromatic harmony, dominating rhythms and the geographically descriptive nature of their works. The legitimacy of his use of Spanish folk elements would have been even further reinforced by the fact that many of the French themselves were writing in the “Spanish idiom.”

In hindsight the most troublesome issue concerning the nationalists, especially Richard Wagner, was the fact that in promoting their own nation and its music, these practitioners tended to promote their culture as superior to others. Albéniz shared many of the nationalist’s tools and techniques, but not their motivations.

**Albéniz’s musical nationalism**

Despite having once been at the forefront of European musical style, the art scene in Spain had devolved into two forms of musical theater. The purely Spanish form was the
popular zarzuela, a mixture of songs interspersed with short dramatic bits. These productions were always in Spanish, seldom had any serious subject matter, and were often deemed, by foreign visitors, as being too crude for sophisticated audiences. The other musical drama readily available in the larger cities was opera, mostly Italian. There was nothing Spanish about the operas being presented and despite the best efforts of Barbieri and Pedrell, Spanish opera never achieved even a modicum of success.

Although there was a paucity of art music in Spain, it is nevertheless important that the popular and folk musical life was probably the strongest in Europe. Despite the fact that many opinion makers in Castile rejected both the new European style music and the music of Andalusia as not being authentically Spanish, the climate was right for a nationalist composer to succeed in Spain. This opportunity arose out of the combination of the generally acknowledged richness of the folk musical tradition with the political and philosophical eagerness to define Spain as a modern nation. Based on the calcified condition of the Spanish musical theater, the path of least resistance for a musician to become the Moses of Spanish art music would be through instrumental as opposed to vocal forms.

Open any standard academic survey text of Western musical history and there will be a section on late nineteenth century nationalist composers. In the middle of that section will be several paragraphs about Spanish nationalism and Albéniz will be included in
that discussion. Undeniably Albéniz’s music possessed attributes that qualify him stylistically as a member of the nationalist fraternity (Grout 583-596)\(^\text{10}\). Nevertheless, in order to properly appreciate the man and his music, it is important to understand the key ways in which his nationalistic impulse was unique.

In studying Albéniz, it is more efficient and more just to use the suite *Iberia* as the best example of his accomplishment. Broadly stated, in the first part of his career he is noted for the production of what is derogatorily referred to as salon music. This music was relatively easy to play with accessible melodies and some Spanish flavor. He matured in this style, but was diverted in the middle of his career to writing for the stage. He wrote one successful Spanish opera, some zarzuela of mixed notoriety and a number of rather poor grand operas unfortunately in the style of Richard Wagner. Late in his career he returned to composing for the piano. Having learned how to write large-scale pieces through his experience in composing opera, concerto and other grand classical-style works, he brought to his late piano pieces a maturity and sophistication lacking his earlier music. The suite *Iberia*, his last major work, incorporates the modernist techniques that he acquired in Paris, with the mature musical form that he learned from his large-scale production, and with his own very astute incorporation of authentic folkloric elements (Clark 278-282).

\(^{10}\) The reference is intentionally to the first edition of Grout in order to highlight the state of Albéniz scholarship prior to Walter Clark and the extent to which it has progressed.
Iberia was written from 1905 through 1908 mostly while Albéniz was living in Nice. Three out of the four premieres of the individual pieces were in Paris while none were in Spain. The reception in Spain was usually positive to performances of pieces from the suite despite the public’s hostility toward music that hinted of foreign influence. Clark speculates that the positive reception may have been the result of sympathy for the dying composer (251).

The defining musical elements of the nationalist composers’ style were delineated earlier, and table 1, at the end of this paper, illustrates the extent to which Iberia employs these techniques. The table is not an exhaustive compilation, but rather is designed to denote the presence of the typical nationalist elements in the work.

This table, except for the column entitled “sonata form,” defines the extent to which Isaac Albéniz is justifiably classified as a nationalist composer. The thesis of this paper is that what Albéniz practiced was his own form of nationalistic composition and his style and intent distanced him significantly from most of the composers commonly referred to as nationalists.

Benjamin Curtis’ book, Music Makes the Nation, is an essential reference on musical nationalism and he studies in detail three composers: Richard Wagner, Bedřich Smetana and Edvard Grieg. While it has been noted the European nationalists were not organized and did not adhere to a common creed, Curtis’ selection of these three
composers allows for some conclusions to be drawn about common behavioral and motivational threads encompassed by the broad term “nationalist.”

According to Curtis, Wagner was extremely pessimistic about the state of German music and the ability of the German public to understand its own musical folk roots. His contention was that he could actually reveal to the German people their true essence (57). His goal was to create a new German theater that would be able to educate and elevate the German people. The word theater refers to both the style of performance and the need for a physical venue in which to perform his new musical dramas (48). Curtis concludes that Wagner did not even believe that the Germans, at that time, had a valid national culture, but in his inimitable arrogant and chauvinist style, he contended that the fundamental German national culture could be developed (by him) and demonstrated as superior to those of the rest of Europe and beyond (54).

The second nationalist in Curtis’ book, Smetana, wrote out his perception of the decadence of Czech culture in an article he published in 1862. In that article he contended that there was a crisis in Czech cultural life as demonstrated by the lack of quality concerts and the triviality of most of the music available to the public. Smetana took it upon himself to remedy the fact that the public was more interested in being entertained than educated. He founded a music school and organized concerts of quality music. As with Wagner, his efforts were significantly directed toward building a

11 The article was entitled “Regarding our concerts,” and was published in the periodical Slavoj (Curtis, 59).
Czech musical theater, both as a functioning institution and also a brick-and-mortar facility. And also like Wagner, Smetana considered himself acting as a patriot in enhancing the status of Czech music and culture in international circles and in proclaiming the yearning of the Czech nation for independence (Curtis 59–69).

The third composer studied by Curtis was the Norwegian, Edvard Grieg. According to Curtis, Grieg's complaint was not about the condition of the arts, but rather the absence of them altogether. He agreed with Wagner and Smetana that his duty was to educate the ignorant public about the value of art. He did this first by leading orchestras and by organizing concerts presenting recent works by Norwegian composers. He also founded a music school dedicated to improving the national artistic climate. He claimed that training musicians first in their native musical tradition would render them somewhat immune to the influence of foreign music later in their education. There was in Grieg the same political and chauvinistic tendency that was exhibited in Wagner and Smetana; he believed strongly that nationalist music could serve nationalist political goals (73).

The pattern of the ideas and behavior of these typical nationalist composers is fairly consistent. They perceived a decline in the cultural life of their society, that could arguably be tied to a decline the fortunes of the country generally. The believed that intellectuals -- in this case musicians -- were indeed qualified and obligated to educate their ignorant countrymen in the music of the nation. These three nationalists took
activist roles in creating institutions and presenting concerts and lectures to accomplish their educational goals. Finally, they all succumbed, to some extent, to the impulse to build up their own culture at the expense of their neighbors.

Curtis reports that Norway was the least chauvinistic of the three countries, but, nevertheless, local critics were wont to complain about the deleterious effect of the empty Italian music being preformed and the inability of the German orchestral performers to interpret the Norwegian spirit (168). The Czechs were more focused on combatting the hegemony of the Germans. Smetana was not opposed to adopting some German musical innovations, and was, accordingly, accused of being a German spy (160). Regardless of the fact that sometimes chauvinism was simply self-defense, it still culminated in advancing the attitude of domestic cultural supremacy. Cultural advocacy all too often devolves to cultural chauvinism. Isaac Albéniz exhibited none of this behavior, and there is no evidence to support the proposition that he had any goals similar to those of the nationalists described by Curtis.

Albéniz was musically both more conservative and more modern than would be expected of a nationalist composer. As noted in the table, he used the sonata form in at least eight of the pieces in the suite Iberia. This musical form is a relic, albeit a useful one, of the classical era. What is interesting about Albéniz’s use of it is that while the

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12 Where he doesn’t use the sonata form he uses a ternary structure that, arguably, harkens back to Scarlatti. He is certainly not composing in the through-composed style of some of his contemporaries.
form requires that the composer perform some thematic development, Albéniz solves the problem of the limitation of folk themes for thematic development by refraining from quoting them directly. The music of *Iberia* can be clearly and closely assigned to the various Spanish dances and songs from whence it came, primarily based on the rhythms and the melodic patterns. However, the melody, harmony, variation in form and the technical pianistic sophistication sprang uniquely from the creative mind of Isaac Albéniz. Yet, the Spaniard is more devoted to the original folk elements than Curtis’ three composers, who were prone less to honoring the original folk music and more to exploiting it in pursuit of their broader goals.

Albéniz uses elements in his piano suite that are derived from developments of the modernist era, specifically the music of the Impressionists. According to Palmer, there was a kinship between the Debussy and Albéniz in the use certain musical features like the whole tone scale, the use of non-traditional modes, and added note sonorities (188). Unusual modes and sonorities are frequently found in folk music, but most scholars believe that Albéniz’s time in Paris legitimized their application to his art music and, to some extent, trained him in their use. Because French music, and especially Impressionism, was viewed askance by the nationalists in Germany and elsewhere, the use of Impressionistic techniques had no role in the nationalistic compositions envisioned by them because it was not part of their cultural legacy. The reception of the Spanish critics to *Iberia* was actually rather favorable, because, despite the inclusion of Impressionistic elements, the music was obviously Spanish in nature and of a high
compositional order (Clark, 251). Clearly, Isaac Albéniz had matured beyond the limits of a parochial national musical vision, and, at least with respect to the piano music, his audience was beginning to appreciate his accomplishment.

Perhaps the most important difference between Albéniz and the “typical” nationalist was that his nationalistic compositions grew out of a deep love for the music that he had discovered while traveling around Spain, but his advocacy stopped there. Albéniz was neither socially nor politically active. He wrote in his diary “The idea of a Fatherland can be considered an excusable egotistical sentiment, but never a virtue” (Clark 218). He was alienated from his government and frequently disillusioned by his people; but he was not about to try to change them.

The “creed” of the nationalists included a provision that the native language was an important part of the culture legacy. Thus, whenever possible, vocal works were written in the vernacular in order to glorify the beauty and precision of the mother tongue. All three of Curtis’ exemplary composers advocated this tenet and took pains to implement it musically and institutionally. While Albéniz did try to help in the development of a Spanish national opera, his efforts were short-lived, relatively unsuccessful and not central to his life and career goals. It is noteworthy that he even set operas to Coutts’ English libretti. Albéniz did not compose with an over-arching non-musical goal; he set about earning a living writing, but not exploiting, the music that he loved.
Another reason Albéniz did not need to be an activist concerning Spanish folk music was because it was not really in trouble. The rituals of special occasions and daily life in Spain had always been conducted to the accompaniment of folk music and dancing. Albéniz did not so much try to fix it as to glory in it. His music was a logical and generally welcome extension of what the people experienced in their daily lives. While it is true that high art music was in stagnation, Spanish folk culture was not in decline and did not need an intellectual to resurrect it or to teach it.

Rather than a leader or a firebrand or a cultural dictator, Isaac Albéniz was motivated to be more of a unifier. In the sometimes-heated controversy over what was culturally truly Spanish, Albéniz tried to placate all sides. In Iberia the place names and forms are not just Andalusian; for example Lavapiés has a Madrid setting. The folk music that he used came from a variety of provinces, his goal being expressed in this quote from a personal letter, “I want the Arabic Granada, that 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” (Clark 65).

The Spain of the late nineteenth century needed strong progressive nationalists to help define itself in the wake of continuous cultural and political decline and the ultimate embarrassment of the Spanish-American War. The Generation of ’98 tried to solve the Spanish problem, but they were generally a conservative lot and notoriously
unconcerned about music. Isaac Albéniz filled that void and put Spanish music back on the cultural map of the time and did much to overcome the stigma of the Black Legend. He did this without resorting to the chauvinistic manner or political posturing of his musical peers. In Spain he paved the way for successive generations of even more successful musicians, leaving the legacy of the suite *Iberia* as his ultimate accomplishment.
Addendum

The same Emile Verhaeren who co-authored the documentary *Espana Negra* wrote a book about the 1914 German invasion of his native Belgium. This gentle poet who had been the embodiment of socialist and humanitarian ideals now wrote a book full of self-acknowledged hatred for the invaders and the war they created. The common perception of the cause of the outbreak of World War I is that it was an unfortunate combination of ill-advised treaties, some bad luck and an almost universal lack of bold leadership on the part of the politicians. The reality is something substantially more incriminating of all the combatants. The following quote about Verhaeren and the times is from Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* and is worthy of inclusion in its entirety:

The world that used to be and the ideas that shaped it disappeared too, like the wraith of Verhaeren’s former self, down the corridors of August and the months that followed. Those deterrents – the brotherhood of socialists, the interlocking of finance, commerce, and other economic factors- which had been expected to make war impossible failed to function when the time came. **Nationhood** [emphasis added], like a wild gust of wind, arose and swept them aside (344).
The rotund expatriate Spaniard playing the piano, with a cigar in his mouth and his daughter looking on, the man for whom extreme patriotism was never a virtue, but a man who was nevertheless an ardent lover of his land and people, may well be more worthy of admiration than those of his perhaps more successful peers who took the dominance of their national culture as their life’s work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book &amp; number</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place Name/Programmatic Element</th>
<th>Folkloric element</th>
<th>Unusual Rhythm</th>
<th>Harmony/Modality</th>
<th>Modified Sonata form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-1</td>
<td>Evocacion</td>
<td>Jota navarra and/or fandanguillo</td>
<td>Syncopation, agogic accents,</td>
<td>Whole tone scale, French aug 6th</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-2</td>
<td>El Puerto</td>
<td>Fishing port town near Cadiz</td>
<td>Polo, bulerias, and siguiriyas</td>
<td>Frequent hemiola</td>
<td>Mixolydian &amp; Phrygian modes, whole tone harmonies</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-3</td>
<td>Fete-Dieu a Seville</td>
<td>Processional at Seville</td>
<td>Ratak plan, estribillo, saeta</td>
<td>Cross rhythms</td>
<td>Debussian chords</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-1</td>
<td>Rondena</td>
<td>City of Ronda in southwest Spain</td>
<td>Triple meter song related to the fandango</td>
<td>Alternation of 3/4 and 6/8, iterance as in jondo</td>
<td>Phyrgian mode, whole tone scale</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-2</td>
<td>Almeria</td>
<td>City on southeast coast</td>
<td>Siguidillas, jota copla</td>
<td>Alternation of 3/4 and 6/8, hemiola, tarantas rhythm</td>
<td>Phrygian and mixolydian mode, whole tone scale</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-3</td>
<td>Triana</td>
<td>Gypsy quarter in Seville</td>
<td>Juerga, sevillanas</td>
<td>Percussive effects imitating castnets and heel work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III-1</td>
<td>El Albaicin</td>
<td>Gypsy quarter of Granada</td>
<td>Bulerias, copla, malaguena</td>
<td>Hemiolic with agogic accents</td>
<td>Phrygian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III-3</td>
<td>Lavapies</td>
<td>District of Madrid</td>
<td>Habanera</td>
<td>Cross-rhythms</td>
<td>Frequent “wrong-note” sonorities</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-1</td>
<td>Malaga</td>
<td>Andalusian city</td>
<td>Malaguena</td>
<td>Syncopations in the melody over</td>
<td>Phrygian</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-2</td>
<td>Jerez</td>
<td>Andalusian city</td>
<td>Soleares</td>
<td>Complex metrical shifts</td>
<td>Phrygian, Debussian coda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-3</td>
<td>Eritana</td>
<td>Popular inn in Seville</td>
<td>Sevillanas</td>
<td>Strong dance rhythm</td>
<td>Added-note harmonies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Clark, 225 – 247 and Powell, 77 – 82.
Works Cited


