




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FEATURE REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

 **ALBÉNIZ *Iberia*** • Eduardo Fernández (pn) • WARNER 5249807612 (79:36)

For most of my musically aware years, Alicia de Larrocha held dominion in this repertoire. To be sure, she had her run of challengers, some quite serious—Marc-André Hamelin for one, whose Hyperion recording I reviewed in *Fanfare* 29:1. And there have been others, too, even more recent, such as Arthur Pizzaro, whose Linn recording was reviewed by James Miller in 34:1. But while de Larrocha's crown may have been knocked a bit askew, no one had successfully engineered the coup that would dispossess her of the throne—until now.

Albeniz: Iberia
AUDIO CD; IMPORT
Wea Spain



De Larrocha died in 2009. Long live the queen. Meet the king in waiting, Eduardo Fernández. The Madrid-born pianist, compared to today's practically prenatal piano virtuosos, is not young—30 as of this writing—and as far as I can tell, this may be his debut commercial album, for I find no other recordings listed. Whether or not he is related to the famous guitarist of the same name who has amassed a large discography, I don't know, but beware; the Eduardo Fernández with nearly 50 entries listed at ArkivMusic is not *this* Eduardo Fernández. Which brings up an interesting question: How will the website distinguish between the two of them if and when this CD is posted?

So technically difficult is Albéniz's *Iberia*, it's said to contain passages that its own composer couldn't play. A number of measures could not even be written down, at least not in conventional two-staff notation, as, for example, in the third piece in Book 1, "Corpus Christi en Sevilla," where several bars marked *fffff* had to be notated on three staves.

The work is divided into four books, each containing three pieces. Composed between 1905 and 1908, it was clearly Albéniz's response to the French Impressionist movement in full bloom at the time. As transformed by Albéniz, the softer pastels and color washes of the Parisians became the flaming bright sparks of Spanish fandango and jota, the eroticism of Andalusian *cante jondo* and flamenco, and the sounds of guitars and castanets.

It's risky business to say that only a pianist with Spanish blood in his

or her veins can do *Iberia* full justice; surely Hamelin's readings of these pieces argue against such insular theories. Yet, it has to be said that beyond demonstrating a killer technique, Fernández's *Iberia* is a thrilling array of shimmering Latin lights and simmering Latin heat, and a palette of vibrant yellows and dangerous reds.

Commanding a touch of steel that never turns steely or brittle, Fernández draws enormous power from his instrument, achieving something that actually approximates Albéniz's impossible quintuple fortes in "Corpus Christi en Sevilla," yet he can tease from the keyboard the most delicate and subtle effects, as in "El Albaicín" from Book 3 in those magical moments where the modality shifts from minor to major.

But it's not just dynamics, fingering demands, and expressive extremes that challenge the player in these fiendishly difficult pieces; Albéniz as often deconstructs meter and rhythm in enormously complex ways to paint his Impressionist musical images. Think, for example, of how you would musically depict the intricate patterns of water eddying and pooling around a dock, and then look at just one of the 6/8 measures in "El Puerto" (The Port), where six eighth notes in the left hand are quite regularly divided into two groups of threes, but over them in the right hand you have four eighth notes written with bracketed 2s over them. It's a device one finds in some of Brahms's scores as well, but not usually embedded within such an elaborate, convoluted texture. For lack of a better term, I refer to it as "the triplet in reverse" contrivance. Where a triplet typically *compresses* three eighth notes into one beat in a simple meter, the "triplet in reverse" *expands* four eighth notes in a compound meter into six. In other words, the two sets of two bracketed eighth notes have to be stretched out to equal the six eighth-note beats of a 6/8 bar.

However the player accomplishes it—and I'm not saying that this is necessarily the most difficult rhythmic challenge one faces in *Iberia*—you have to admit that musically it's a brilliant aural depiction of the swirls of water one observes in harbors around piers. It's no wonder that *Iberia* was so admired by Debussy and said by Messiaen to occupy "the highest place among the more brilliant pieces for the king of the instruments." We'll give Messiaen a pass for confusing the piano with the organ, the reigning king of instruments ever since Guillaume de Machaut invested it with that royal title in the 14th century.

Absolutely stunning as Fernández's *Iberia* is, it could not have been heard in such detail and wide-ranging dynamic impact if not for this Warner recording. Spectacular sound may be an understatement. It's hard to imagine what Fernández might give us as an encore to this CD, but whatever it is, I shall wait for it with bated breath. This one is Want List material. Currently, it's available as an import item from Amazon (ArkivMusic hasn't listed it yet) and it's not cheap—\$23.95—but it's worth every penny. **Jerry Dubins**

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