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FEATURE REVIEW by Lynn René Bayley

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

The question as to whether Albéniz’s pianistic masterpiece should receive a warm, evocative performance or an extroverted one has been the subject of many debates within the critical world, yet it’s interesting that pianists of Spanish extraction generally prefer the former, pointing to the specific directions of Albéniz’s score as well as the feeling of reverie in which he wrote it as the basis for their interpretations. The young pianist Eduardo Fernández combines both approaches, giving us some explosive moments in this reading that offset the warm, rubato-filled, Chopinesque movements.

Albeniz: Iberia
 AUDIO CD; IMPORT
 Wea Spain

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And what exquisite playing this is! A warm, deep-in-the-keys performance, there are even moments—such as “Almería” in Book 2—where Fernández employs what one would describe as dislocated rhythm, playing the left hand very slightly out-of-synch with the right, to create a subtle but palpable unease in the listener that is thoroughly typical of Spanish flamenco music. Fernández uses the original score, which Albéniz in fact revised before his death, mostly to correct what he considered “impossible” fingerings and correcting supposed mistakes in the score, largely due to the fact that Joaquim Malats, one of the first people to see the score and who gave the premiere of “Triana,” made no mention of errors. Messiaen once claimed *Iberia* to be the greatest piano piece ever written. Fernández’s approach seems to me to combine the sensitivity of Artur Pizarro (Linn 355), whose version is five minutes slower, with the torrid reading of Juan Manuel Canizares (Sony 722398), who plays the four suites 10 minutes *faster*. Fernández takes as his basis the fact that not only was this a nostalgic-descriptive suite, but one strongly influenced by the surrealist movement of his day. He makes the music sound easier to play than it really is, but not in such a way as to be glib. On the contrary, though he basks in the reflective, nostalgic moments of the score, he takes equal delight in grabbing the extroverted, dance-like movements by the scruff of the neck and delighting in Albéniz’s very modern, almost Scriabinesque harmonic changes—listen, particularly, to Book 3. Small wonder that this music had such a strong effect on Messiaen.

Indeed, as both the series of pieces and Fernández’s performance

progress, you tend to like both the work and his handling of it more and more. Nothing on this disc sounds cookie-cutter in either the music or Fernández's approach to it. I am, quite simply, in awe of his achievement here. This is the kind of performance one could listen to 50 times over and not only never tire of, but find something you didn't catch the last 49 times on the 50th hearing. Bravo! **Lynn René Bayley**

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