

Antes de *Iberia*: de Masarnau a Albéniz

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Pre-Iberia: from Masarnau to Albéniz

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STYLE EVOLUTION IN THE PIANO WORKS OF ISAAC ALBÉNIZ

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Este artículo ofrece una visión general de la evolución estilística en la obra para piano de Albéniz. La culminación del legado pianístico de Albéniz es Iberia, su obra más sofisticada, obra maestra de la literatura para piano del siglo XX. Seguir los pasos compositivos que le llevaron a Iberia, es un ejercicio de comprensión de la evolución hacia esa obra maestra.

Las primeras composiciones de Albéniz son de estilo bastante sencillo, piezas de salón a menudo diseñadas imitando a Chopin, Schubert y Liszt. A finales de 1880 –y seguramente bajo la influencia de Felip Pedrell- Albéniz comienza a incorporar elementos del folclore español en su lenguaje. Estas piezas muestran a menudo una estructura simple, de un característico sabor español, encantadoras y vivas rítmicamente. Sin embargo, Albéniz siguió escribiendo obras que miraban hacia antiguas tradiciones, incluyendo sus Suites anciennes y algunas de las Sonatas. Las Sonatas en particular, pueden haber jugado un rol fundamental, al desarrollar en ellas Albéniz las herramientas que necesitaba para escribir los complejos movimientos que caracterizan Iberia.

La última gran, y a la vez extraordinaria, transformación estilística de Albéniz ocurre entre 1896 y 1897, cuando vivía en Paris. Los cambios se hacen evidentes en el rico vocabulario armónico de Espagne (souvenirs) desde 1896, y en la compleja polifonía de La Vega desde 1897. Este proceso culmina con su gran opus, Iberia, escrita entre 1905 y 1908. Albéniz creó una obra que es a la vez, muy elaborada estructuralmente y de una gran osadía armónica. La textura de la música es intrincada y la sofisticación rítmica muy destacada. El resultado es una escritura para piano brillante.

beria by Isaac Albéniz is one of the greatest masterpieces in piano literature. Retracing Albéniz's compositional path to *Iberia* proves illuminating in understanding the evolution of this masterwork.

Between roughly the years 1880 and 1890, Albéniz wrote mainly piano music, though this output was interspersed with a few sets of songs and three zarzuelas. These first piano compositions were simple, often short salon pieces modeled after Chopin, Schubert, and Liszt, e.g., waltzes, mazurkas, and pavanes. Additionally, he began to explore the rich Spanish musical tradition, writing beautiful pieces with a characteristically Spanish flavor.

In the early 1890s Albéniz lived in London and for a few years wrote mostly songs and works for the stage. Around 1894, Albéniz moved to Paris,

was impressed by the wealth and variety of the music he heard, and was deeply influenced by the circle of French Impressionist composers of the time. It was a decisive turning point in his development as a composer. Empowered with new knowledge and a fresh way to look at music, Albéniz began writing compositions for the piano that show a profound transformation in his style. This process culminated in his monumental *Iberia*, written between 1905 and 1908.

Early works

Albéniz was a child prodigy, and his musical career began early in his life. As a young man, he became an extremely successful touring virtuoso, often including his own compositions in his numerous performances. He had a broad repertory covering a wide range of styles, from Rameau and Bach to Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt. This intimate knowledge of keyboard literature left a definite mark in his musical production. He wrote at least seven sonatas, and several *Suites Anciennes*, which are suites of Neo-Baroque Dances.

But Romantic composers seemed to exert a special influence on the young Albéniz. Pieces such as his *Barcarola* op. 23, and *Estudio-Impromtu* op. 56, are kindred spirits with similar character pieces by Chopin, Schubert, and Brahms. Overall, the singular charm of these early works springs directly from the traditional European salon style of the time. Although unfailingly sincere and charming, they are in simple part forms, usually ABA, and they display numerous verbatim repetitions of phrases and large sections.

The set of *Seis pequeños valses* op. 25, from around 1887, gives us a glimpse of the influence of Chopin in the young Albéniz.² Number 6 - one of the most remarkable - may have been modeled after Chopin's Waltz in A-flat major op. 64, n° 3. The key and formal plan are related, and the melodic contour is also similar, reaching C⁵ in both cases (Examples 1-2).

Even the static middle section over a pedal point is alike in the two waltzes, with repetitive rhythmic patterns that recall those of the mazurka (Examples 3-4).

In his études, Albéniz shows a different facet of his personality. *Deseo*, *estudio de concierto*, op. 40, was written in Barcelona, in 1883. It is an ambitious work, remarkably virtuosic, and may have been inspired by Franz Liszt's *Fantasia quasi sonata après une Lecture du Dante*. Its introduction opens with powerful tritone intervals in the bass answered by soft chords in the upper register of the piano in a dramatic move quite typical of Liszt (Examples 5-6).

EXAMPLE 1. Albéniz, Seis pequeños valses, op. 25, no. 6, T. 47 F, mm.1-8





EXAMPLE 2. Chopin, Waltz in A-flat Major, op. 64, no. 3, mm. 1-8

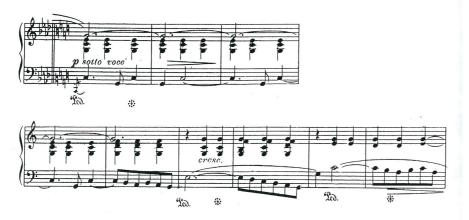


EXAMPLE 3. Albéniz, Seis pequeños valses, op. 25, no. 6, T. 47 F, mm. 25-36





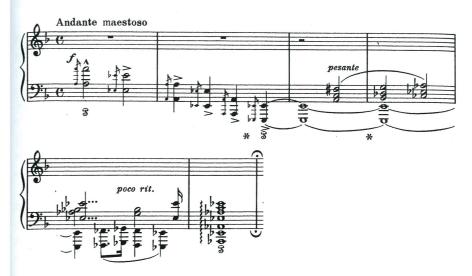
EXAMPLE 4. Chopin, Waltz in A-flat Major, op. 64, no. 3, mm. 73-81



EXAMPLE 5. Albéniz, Deseo, estudio de concierto, op. 40, T. 53, mm. 1-6



EXAMPLE 6. Liszt, Sonata quasi una fantasia après la lecture du Dante, mm. 1-6



Then, in both pieces, an agitated mood and chromatic descending lines characterize the main thematic idea (Examples 7-8).

EXAMPLE 7. Albéniz, Deseo, estudio de concierto, op. 40, T. 53, mm. 15-17



EXAMPLE 8. Liszt, Sonata quasi una fantasia après la lecture du Dante, mm. 35-37



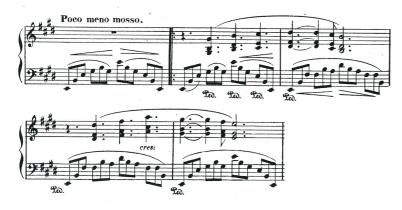
In the middle of the first section, a new lyrical idea emerges in the tenor voice (Example 9).

EXAMPLE 9. Albéniz, Deseo, estudio de concierto, op. 40, T. 53, mm. 49-52



This new idea, much transformed in character, is used later by Albéniz as the main theme of the middle section. It is presented in a much slower version, over a nocturne-like figuration using a compositional device also present in Liszt's work (Example 10).

EXAMPLE 10. Albéniz, Deseo, estudio de concierto, op. 40, T. 53, mm. 102-106



This Lisztian procedure of thematic transformation changing drastically the character of an idea is one that Albéniz will use often in his mature works. It is in fact quite significant to see Albéniz use this compositional tool so early in his career.

Beginning of Spanish influence

Around the year 1883, a number of pieces flowed from the composer's pen that had a distinct Spanish flavor: "Granada (Serenata)" (ca. 1885) and "Sevilla (Sevillanas)" (ca. 1883) from the *Suite Española* were among the first ones. These pieces enjoyed immediate success. Charming in character and simple in structure, they are very effective. Although there is a significant change in the color of Albéniz's Spanish pieces, the overall thrust of his musical language remained quite simple and unpretentious. He also continued to write works in the European tradition with no marked Spanish character, such as his Fourth and Fifth Sonatas opp. 72 and 82, respectively.

This trend towards nationalism in music was not restricted just to Spain. Around 1860, Nationalist movements gained momentum in other European countries, especially Russia, Norway, and Bohemia. Given the wealth of folk music in Spain, it is not surprising that, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a nationalist movement gained momentum in Spanish music.

Dance rhythms, the influence of flamenco music

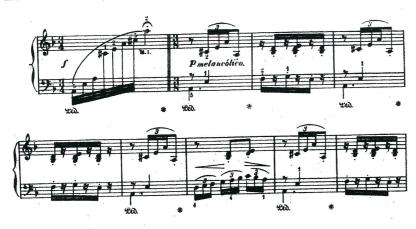
Few other countries in the world posses the extraordinary variety of dance rhythms that Spain offers. Although Albéniz was from Catalunya, in the north, he was most often inspired by *flamenco* and the music of Andalusia, with the dark and profound *cante jondo* of the gypsies. *Cante jondo* means deep or profound song and is the most serious and moving variety of *flamenco* or Spanish Gypsy song, often dealing with themes of death, anguish or religion.³ Among the many dances Albéniz used in his Spanish pieces are the *tango*, *malagueña*, *polo*, and *bulería*. Albéniz did not actually use these rhythms in a straightforward manner, or in a literal way. Rhythms are always stylized, sometimes only suggesting a particular dance rhythm, or mixed, thus creating a marvelous, captivating atmosphere. Albéniz is also fond of using modal scales - also associated with flamenco music - Phrygian specially, but also the Aeolian and Mixolydian modes.⁴

One of the best known and refined of Albéniz's *malagueñas*, "Rumores de la caleta" ("Murmurs of the Cove"), is from his *Recuerdos de viaje* op. 71. It begins with the typical rhythm of *malagueñas* (Example 11).

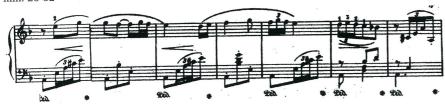
In the *copla* (or song verse) of this *malagueña* we can hear the seductive lure of *cante jondo* with the effective and expressive use of melodic ornamenta-

tion, and a Phrygian mode undercurrent that impart an oriental flavor to it. Its free-flowing rhythm is interrupted by guitar figurations (Example 12).

EXAMPLE 11. Albéniz, "Rumores de la caleta," from Recuerdos de viaje, op.71, no. 6, T. 72 F, mm. 1-9



EXAMPLE 12. Albéniz, "Rumores de la caleta", from *Recuerdos de viaje*, op.71, no. 6, T. 72 F, mm. 26-32



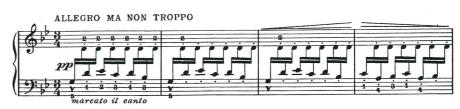
Transfer of instrumental guitar idioms to the piano

In addition to using dance rhythms, *cante jondo*, and modal scales in his Spanish pieces, Albéniz took instrumental idioms typical of the guitar and transferred them to the piano.

"Asturias (Leyenda)" from the *Suite española* op. 47, is such an example. Asturias is also known as the *Preludio* from *Cantos de España* op. 232, a more adequate title (as Jacinto Torres points out in his groundbreaking *Catálogo*), since its musical style is unrelated to the music of the Asturias region.⁵ In this work, there is a wonderful evocation of plucked guitar strings or *punteado*. Its

main theme mimics a guitaristic figuration featuring alternating melodic notes plucked around an open string (Example 13).

EXAMPLE 13. Albéniz, "Asturias (Leyenda)", from Suite Española, op. 47, no. 5, T. 61 E, mm. 1-4



Strumming of guitar chords or *rasgueado* is suggested in the beautiful "Granada, (Serenata)", with its repeated rolled chords in the right hand (Example 14).

EXAMPLE 14. Albéniz, "Granada (Serenata)", from Suite Española, op. 47, no.1, T. 61 A, mm. 1-11



Mature compositions

During the early 1890s, Albéniz dedicated much of his energy to writing songs and operas. Three important stage works were also written during this time: *The Magic Opal, Henry Clifford* and *Pepita Jiménez*. Working on these large-scale compositions proved to be most significant for the growth of Albéniz's musical language. It helped him develop some of the new compositional tools he was to use in *Iberia*. As Walter Clark states in his superb book, writing these

operas - which are long, complex compositions - may have given Albéniz the ability to create piano works that were substantially longer and structurally more cohesive than his earlier compositions.6

Albéniz moved to Paris sometimes around 1894, and soon after he began to write new compositions for the piano. These works revealed the emergence of a different composer. The change first became apparent in the rich harmonic vocabulary of Espagne (Souvenirs), and the complex polyphony of La Vega, from around 1897. This transformative process culminated in Iberia, subtitled "twelve new 'impressions' in four books", written between 1905 and 1908. In Iberia, Albéniz left behind the simple, transparent style of his youth and created a work that is both structurally elaborate and harmonically daring. The fabric of the music becomes intricate and the rhythmic sophistication is striking. There is an unprecedented range of dynamics from ppppp to fffff which foresees piano works by later twentieth-century composers. The writing for the piano is brilliant.

Harmony

Regarding Albéniz's harmonic musical thinking, perhaps the best description comes from the British music critic and writer Ernest Newman, who wrote the following:

> Albéniz had the real logical faculty in music. He thinks continually and coherently right through his seemingly complicated harmonies, and has a technique that enables him to say lucidly anything, however remote from the ordinary track, that he may want to say.7

While in France, Albéniz was in close proximity to the Impressionist composers and was deeply impressed and influenced by their works. Albéniz's music from this period is characterized by intense chromaticism and dissonance, with emphasis on seconds and sevenths, modulations to distant tonal areas, and by the use of modal scales and whole tone scales.8

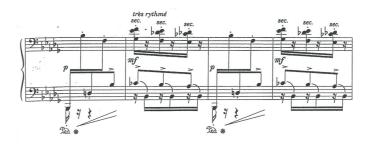
For example, the emphasis is on seconds and sevenths in the following two passages from "El Albaicín" (Examples 15-16).

These sharp harmonic clashes accentuate the strong rhythms of the bulerías present in "El Albaicín" and illustrate Albéniz's keen sense of color. The descending tetrachord Eb-Db-Cb-Bb (mm. 298-9) is typical of much Spanish music and it occurs again and again in Iberia. It may appear just as a bass line, or as a large-scale structural design occupying several measures.9

EXAMPLE 15. Albéniz, "El Albaicín", from Iberia (vol. 3), T. 105 G, mm. 107-111



EXAMPLE 16. Albéniz, "El Albaicín", from Iberia (vol. 3), T. 105 G, mm. 297-300



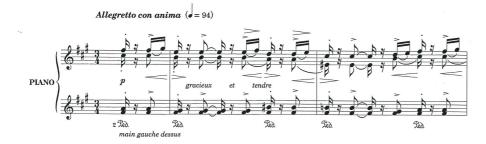
Structure, Texture

In Iberia, Albéniz no longer uses the standard ABA form that was so predominant in his earlier compositions. In fact, he frequently uses the tonalities of his thematic ideas, including the material of the coplas, in a manner that is consistent with that in a sonata form, that is with two thematic ideas in different keys. This is important, because it is one of the features that provides cohesiveness to his works and also allows Albéniz to expand the length of his pieces.¹⁰

"Triana", from the second book of Iberia is a case in point. It is easy to see in the structure of "Triana" a free adaptation of sonata form, as it is based on two thematic ideas that are subjected to development. ¹¹ Near the end of the piece Albéniz combines contrapuntally the head of the second theme with its own tail, the latter being really a variation of the first theme. The result is a joyful and irresistible passage (Examples 17-19).

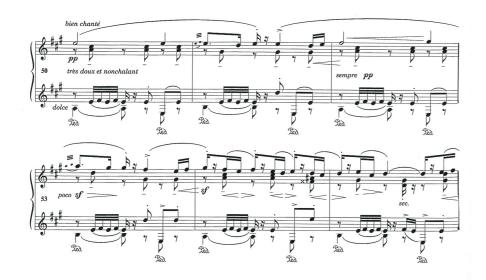
Another compositional tool Abéniz frequently used in Iberia was thematic transformation, a procedure that had appeared in his music early in his career, as in his etude Deseo from 1883, mentioned earlier. Two striking Examples of Albéniz's use of this procedure are present in "Fête-Dieu à Séville" and "El Albaicín".

EXAMPLE 17. Albéniz, "Triana", from Iberia (vol. 2), T. 105 F, first theme, mm. 1-5





EXAMPLE 18. Albéniz, "Triana", from Iberia (vol. 2), T. 105 F, second theme, mm. 50-55



EXAMPLE 19. Albéniz, "Triana", from *Iberia* (vol. 2), T. 105 F, contrapuntal combination of first and second themes, mm. 110-112





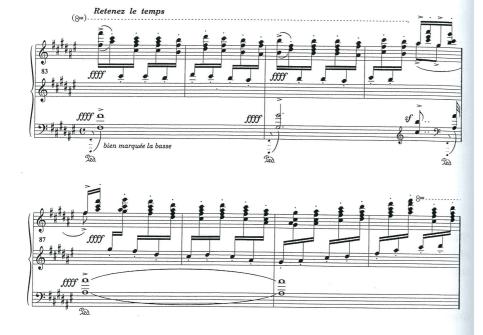
"Fête-Dieu à Séville" is a most extraordinary musical painting of a religious celebration. The piece begins with a march-like theme evoking a procession going through the narrow streets of Seville (Example 20).

EXAMPLE 20. Albéniz, "Fête-Dieu à Séville", from Iberia (vol. 1), T. 105 C, mm. 8-17



Typical of the processions in this Andalusian city is the saeta, a word that literally means "arrow of song". Toward the center of "Fête-Dieu à Séville", Albéniz inserts a piercing saeta in fortissimo octaves against the initial march-like theme, which is now utterly transformed (Example 21).

EXAMPLE 21. Albéniz, "Fête-Dieu à Séville", from Iberia (vol. 1), T. 105 C, mm. 83-90

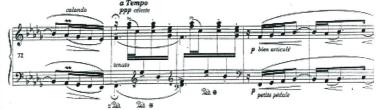


Another striking example of character transformation occurs in "El Albaicín". The copla of this composition has overtones of cante jondo and Phrygian colorings. It is doubled at the fifteenth and is interrupted by guitaristic figurations (example 22).

In the middle section, Albéniz entirely changes the character and harmonic setting of this simple melodic line and creates a climax of extraordinary intensity that serves to construct the central body of the piece. There are dense and complex harmonies underlying this Phrygian melodic line (example 23).

EXAMPLE 22. Albéniz, "El Albaicín", from Iberia (vol. 3), T. 105 G, mm. 69-76





EXAMPLE 23. Albéniz, "El Albaicín", from Iberia (vol. 3), T. 105 G, mm. 165-169



Technique

Iberia makes extraordinary technical demands on the pianist as it pushes the boundaries of the instrument's capabilities. Iberia is difficult to read, its crossed rhythms are difficult to perform accurately, and it requires the ability to render complex rhythm and textures with absolute clarity and pianistic control.

The examples presented in "Triana" (example 19), and "Fête-Dieu à Séville" (example 21), are but two of many such technically complex moments in Iberia. Other notorious passages famous for their difficulty, which addition-

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ally require the rearranging of the notes between the hands, occur in "Almería" and "El Polo", but are particularly remarkable for their intricacy in "Lavapiés", from the third book of *Iberia*.

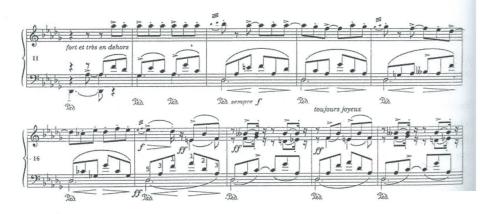
Rhythm

Many facets of *Iberia* are truly extraordinary. Particularly striking are the wealth of colors, the sparkling character of the music, and its complex modulations. There is also a somber melancholy that permeates throughout the whole composition. But it is the uniqueness of its striking rhythms which holds such a special appeal. He mixes and sometimes opposes conflicting dance rhythms and meters to create an extraordinary palette of sonorities. Albéniz on many occasions said that he wanted to create "Spanish music with a universal accent". He was indeed successful in his mission. Flamenco's rich vocabulary of rhythmic gestures gave Albéniz an invaluable source of material from which to draw.

"El Puerto" represents a luminous picture of a busy fishing port. The *zapateado*, a dance in 6/8 with frequent use of hemiola seems to be the main inspiration for the piece. It is danced tapping in rhythm the heels to the floor and slapping the hands on the soles of the shoes¹² (example 24).

"Málaga" (1907) was inspired by the Mediterranean seaport, which also gave its name to the ever-popular song and dance *malagueña*. "Málaga" is another case where the handling of contrasting tonal centers suggests a sona-

EXAMPLE 24. Albéniz, "El Puerto", from Iberia (vol. 1), T. 105 B, mm. 11-20



ta-form framework. ¹³ Regarding the *malagueña*, French composer Emmanuel Chabrier wrote:

It is impossible to write down the malague $\|a\|$... the dancers intuitively syncopate measures in a thousand ways, striking with their heels an unbelievable numbers of rhythms. 14

But in "Málaga", Albéniz fully captures the energy and complexity of the dance (example 25).

EXAMPLE 25. Albéniz, "Málaga", from Iberia (vol. 4), T. 105 J, mm. 1-8





The *habanera*, a song and dance in duple meter, with a rolling rhythmic motion, suffuses "Lavapiés", a marvelous musical painting. "Lavapiés" was inspired by a working-class neighborhood in the city of Madrid. This is the only piece in *Iberia* not directly inspired by Andalusian dances or landscapes. Albéniz here uses dissonant sonorities, Phrygian colorings, the whole-tone scale, and even the sounds of an *organillo* (barrel organ), to paint this picture in sound of a lively and boisterous urban setting (example 26).

EXAMPLE 26. Albéniz, "Lavapiés", from Iberia (vol. 3.), T. 105 I, mm. 1-8



With Iberia, Albéniz wrote his swan song: a truly great masterpiece of the piano literature. Debussy greatly admired *Iberia* and wrote the following comment about it:

Isaac Albéniz, who was first known as an incomparable virtuoso, acquired later a marvelous knowledge of the craft of composition. Although he does not in any way resemble Liszt, he reminds one of him in the generous lavishness of his ideas. He was the first to turn to account the harmonic melancholy, the peculiar humor of his native country (he was a Catalan).

There are few works of music equal to *El Albaicín in* the third volume of *Iberia*, where one recaptures the fragrance of the blossom-filled nights of Spain... It is like the muffled sound of the guitar sighing in the night, with sudden awakenings and nervous starts. Without actually repeating folk-themes, it is as though this music comes from one who has drunk of them and has absorbed them, to the point of making them pass into his own music so that it is impossible to perceive the line of demarcation.

Eritaña in the fourth book of Iberia portrays the joy of dawn, happy to have found a tavern where the wine is cool. An incessantly changing crowd bursts into laughter, laughter scanned by the tinkling of the tambourines. Never has music achieved such diverse, such colorful impression. One's eyes close as if blinded by these vivid images. . . $^{\rm 15}$

NOTES

- Gabriel Laplane, Albéniz, sa vie, son oeuvre, préface de Francis Poulenc, Geneva: Editions du Milieu du Monde, 1956, p. 34.
- ² All the dates of composition of Albéniz's works come from Jacinto Torres, Catálogo Sistemático Descriptivo de las Obras Musicales de Isaac Albéniz, Madrid: Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 2001.
- ³ Stanley Sadie, ed., The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980 ed.), s.v. "Flamenco".
- ⁴ Walter Clark, Issac Albéniz, Portrait of a Romantic, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 64.
- ⁵ Torres, Catálogo, p. 293.
- 6 Clark, Romantic, p. 280.
- Ernest Newman, "Music and Musicians: Albéniz and His Merlin", New Witness 10 (20 December 1917), p. 495. Also quoted in Carl Van Vetchen, "Isaac Albéniz" Excavations, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, pp. 251-2.
- ⁸ Clark, Romantic, p. 277.
- ⁹ Paul Buck Mast, "Style and Structure in 'Iberia' by Isaac Albéniz", Ph.D dissertation, The University of Rochester 1974, p. 165.
- 10 Clark, Romantic, p. 225.
- 11 Mast, Style and Structure, p. 273.
- 12 Enciclopedia della musica (1963 ed.) s.v. "Zapateado."
- 13 Clark, Romantic, 243.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Van Vetchen, Excavations, p. 48.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Léon Vallas, The Theories of Claude Debussy, trans. Marie O'Brien, London: Oxford University Press 1929, pp. 162-3.

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