

FRANCISCO MIGNONE (1897-1986)
Concerto for Piano and Orchestra

ISAAC ALBENIZ (1860-1909)
Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 78
(‘Concierto Fantástico’) for Piano & Orchestra

Clélia Iruzun piano
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Jac van Steen conductor

MIGNONE: Piano Concerto (27:41)

- 1 I Allegro 10:27
- 2 II Andante 7:36
- 3 III Allegretto marziale 9:38

ALBENIZ: Piano Concerto Op.78 (25:22)

- 4 I Allegro ma non troppo 11:22
- 5 II Andante 7:21
- 6 III Allegro 6:39

ALBENIZ

- 7 Suite Espagnole – No.1 Granada 4:54
- 8 Suite Espagnole – No.5 Sevilla 4:23

MIGNONE

- 9 1st Valsa de Esquina 3:15
- 10 5th Valsa de Esquina 2:31

Total duration: 68:08

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**Piano Concertos by
Albeniz & Mignone**

Clélia Iruzun - Piano
Jac van Steen - Conductor
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Piano Concertos by Mignone and Albeniz

Music is often regarded as a 'universal language', and indeed it is, for one does not have to speak in order to experience it: and whereas differently developed musical scales and instruments to those which Europeans have evolved were found – and, in turn, influenced – the newcomers, specifically through Asian and Oriental cultures, the primitive indigenous populations of North and South America did not have 'developed' music of any kind approximating to the relative sophistication of Europe.

If the North American immigrants were a broad mixture – in musical terms – of central European, Slavic and West African cultures, South America was unique in being discovered, populated and developed by mainly Hispanic culture, of a broad, highly developed and civilised nature particularly notable in music.

So what one might term the developed stylizations of South American art music retain an essential admixture of Iberian, Italianate, Provençal or other Mediterranean factors, including vivid instrumental colouration, rich harmonies and sudden changes of tonality or mood, only occasionally – as in the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos – admitting such other 'influences' as may be heard in the more primitive music of the indigenous population.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was by far the most important composer to come from South America, and if – in terms of refining his technical ability – he had to come to Europe to study, there is no denying the essential language of his native continent, unfettered by 'formal' procedures or, indeed, the tonal foundations, of European art music of around a century-and-a-half ago.

The profound influence of Villa-Lobos was such that succeeding South American composers no longer have to study in Europe: he showed the way for others to follow, amongst the most important being the exceptional Brazilian composer Francisco Mignone, born in São Paulo in 1897, thus making him of the generation following Villa-Lobos.

Yet Mignone was not of Hispanic extraction but of Italian: his father was a professional flautist, so there can be little doubt as to how Francisco's absorption of the prevailing musical standards of Brazil arose. Entranced by Heitor Villa-Lobos's pioneering works of an essentially Brazilian nature, Mignone likewise took to Europe (studying in Milan, as had his father) and completing his education in the 1920s.

Such early impacts as Mignone made can be judged from the fact that no less than Richard Strauss conducted one of the young composer's works with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and Arturo Toscanini also performed several of Mignone's symphonic works.

By the time of his Piano Concerto of 1958, Mignone had absorbed much of the prevailing post-war European styles, whilst retaining distinctive characteristics of Brazilian folk-music. Mignone's Piano Concerto has the customary three movements, at once grabbing attention through its dramatic and tonal unexpectedness. Ostensibly in C minor, the tonalities veer this way and that through piano writing notable for chordal complexity, a constant sense of forward momentum, and its dramatic juxtaposition of full, tutti writing for orchestra and the considerable demands Mignone makes of the soloist. The tonality may, at heart, be C minor (to which the movement eventually returns for the dramatic closing *stretto* bars) but the energy and dramatic dispositions

throughout declare a composer of intense seriousness of purpose, occasionally lightened by *scherzando* episodic writing. Across the three movements, the concentration of Mignone's thought is one of the work's most compelling characteristics, as well as the dramatic juxtaposition of soloist and orchestra. Although the first entry of the piano in the slow movement is marked 'violente', echoing the intensity of the first movement coda, much of this movement is relatively contemplative, if also restless and questioning. The finale exhibits a lightening of mood, if not of textural or technical adroitness until the final abrupt unison C rams the tonality home.

The orchestral writing is masterly, as is that for the solo instrument, with Mignone's demands from his virtuoso soloist often reminding one of the large-scaled pianism of Villa-Lobos, set alongside the lively brilliance of Manuel de Falla – as in his *Nights in his Gardens of Spain* (*Noches en los jardines de España*, 1916). It is the fire and intensity of Mignone's compositional thought contrasted with the frequent sensitivity of his filigree writing that betokens a composer fully aware of the capabilities of the modern concert grand piano.

What remains, of course, is the composer's character and nature – having written four *Fantásias brasileiras* for piano and orchestra (1929-36) one cannot but conclude that this full-scale Concerto is the composer's masterpiece in the genre – an intensely dramatic outpouring of feeling and character: one of the greatest piano concertos to come from the continent of South America.

In great contrast, Mignone's colourful and expressive series of songs often exhibit much poetry and expressive refinement – such as in the piano quintet version of his short ballet *Iara* (1942). A further contrast is that Mignone began his career in

popular music, under the name of Chico Bororô; in the solo pieces in Clélia Iruzun's programme are two of the many waltzes for piano which Mignone (using his own name) composed at various times, further demonstrating his natural eclecticism. In 1938, he began a generic series of waltzes for piano, each with the title *Valsa de Esquina*, from which we hear the first, in C minor, and fifth, in E minor – the first, a lament followed by a more lyrical melodic piece, as might be heard sung on a street corner by an itinerant musician.

Despite the studies in Europe by both Villa-Lobos and Mignone, that which they absorbed far from Brazil could never have entirely removed their national characteristics. Such transfusions upon that which a child would hear and absorb from birth as part of their artistic psyche were not solely encountered in composers of the early twentieth-century who, for reasons of geography as much as for anything else, had to study abroad. In the nineteenth-century, we find further examples – as in Edvard Grieg and Arthur Sullivan – who travelled to the Leipzig Conservatoire to complete their studies.

They were not the only foreign students at the Leipzig Conservatoire – one of the most admired music colleges in the world, attracting students from Scandinavia, England, and Spain – for it is there that, in 1876, the 16-year-old Isaac Albéniz enrolled as a student of the piano and of composition.

Albéniz, was not – as Grieg had been – an inexperienced, somewhat callow, youth: by the age of 16, he had already studied at the Paris Conservatoire, and had given concerts as a pianist world-wide – including South America, to where the young prodigy had travelled with his father, a high-ranking Spanish customs official, whose duties included many trips abroad.

But Albéniz's stay in Leipzig was not long; he wished to study with Liszt, but by then the itinerant nature of both musicians' lives prevented that from happening. Consequently, despite his Spanish background in his earliest years, the music Albéniz did compose up to his early twenties tended to reflect the European *musica lingua franca* of the time.

The turning point came in 1883 when Albéniz met the hugely influential Spanish composer and musicologist Felip Pedrell, nineteen years his senior, who had settled in Barcelona, intending to establish a genuinely Spanish school of composition. From this point, the still-young Albéniz turned to the emerging nationalism in his music – without, however, wholly abjuring the established forms.

We find aspects of this duality in his major concert work of the 1880s – the *Concierto Fantástico* Opus 78 for piano and orchestra. On the one hand, the traditionalism of the three-movement concerto, with a relatively lengthy orchestral exordium (*Allegro ma non troppo*), is retained, as is the general home tonality of A minor (one says 'general', as ethnic Spanish modalities occasionally enter the music), but on the other, the means to which tradition is put is quite new. The second movement, a dual *Rêverie et Scherzo* (*Andante-Presto*) was surely unique up to that time, but is carried off with such natural artistry and aplomb as to catch listeners unawares. It appears so natural and evolutionary that the problem Albéniz has set himself – how to compose a fast-moving finale after a scherzo-like ending of the previous movement – is quite brilliantly carried off, almost as if the problem did not exist, the nature of the finale's music itself contrasting finely with that of the Scherzo. The problem is further solved by beginning the finale in the unusual key of the supertonic – B minor – and by 'reminiscences' of earlier material, giving a quasi-symphonic overall link to the work.

The Concerto was premiered in Madrid in March 1887 with Albéniz as soloist and his one-time pupil Tomás Bretón conducting. It made an immediate impression, and within a few years had been heard in Paris and London. However one approaches this work, there is no doubting its profound originality and immediacy of appeal – not so much a 'Spanish' or 'Iberian' concerto, but one that speaks directly in a language to which listeners today respond with the same interest and delight as did those when the work first appeared.

It is sometimes claimed that Albéniz was a little uncertain in terms of orchestration – perhaps as a result of his somewhat piecemeal itinerant studies as a youth – and there is no doubt he occasionally turned to friends for assistance in that regard, yet a curious point is that much of his fame today rests upon transcriptions by other hands of the more popular of his solo piano pieces, those more clearly inspired by Spain and its heritage, for the guitar.

Consequently, listeners may be surprised at hearing works such as these played on the piano, when they are often encountered in versions for guitar: yet, as Clélia Iruzun reminds us in this collection, it is for the keyboard which this haunting music was first conceived. Albéniz's *Suite española* was written in 1886-7 and is dedicated to the Queen of Spain; together with the Concerto, the immediate success of both works declared the composer's identity and compositional mastery in no uncertain manner, the great cities of Granada (No 1) and Sevilla (No 3) offering their individual inspiration to a major composer whose embrace of the natural idioms of his homeland was now complete.

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Francisco Mignone

Francisco Mignone has a very special place in my life since my childhood. I first met him when I was seven years old and remained in touch with him until his death in 1986. I remember my visits to his apartment in Copacabana when I played for him, heard him improvise his own works and talk about music. He wrote a Suite of five pieces dedicated to me which I premiered in Rio de Janeiro in his presence when I was thirteen. It is a real privilege to have known such a towering figure in Brazilian music.



Clélia (15) and Mignone (81) celebrating their birthdays together in Rio.

Throughout my career I played his music in my concerts but there was one special work I always wanted to play and it was his Piano Concerto. I mentioned this to Mignone's widow, Maria Josephina, and she encouraged me to take up the challenge. She had performed the concerto in Brazil many years ago and had learnt the work with him. During our recent meetings I played it for her and she gave me valuable advice.

It is a work of great breadth, originality and virtuosity and in my view, the best piano concerto written by a Brazilian composer. The writing is very difficult, full of rhythmical challenges for orchestra and soloist but despite all that complexity Mignone manages to embrace the Brazilian spirit whilst writing music which is truly universal. This is an exciting work which deserves a place in the piano concerto repertoire.

Clélia Iruzun

Clélia Iruzun

With her combination of colourful Brazilian spirit and musicianship, London-based pianist Clélia Iruzun is a vibrant presence in the international scene in recent years.

Clélia studied at the School of Music at Rio de Janeiro Federal University and at the Royal Academy of Music graduating with the Recital Diploma and several prizes. She also worked with prestigious pianists such as Nelson Freire, Jacques Klein, Stephen Kovacevich and Fou Ts'ong, and the distinguished Brazilian teacher Mercês de Silva Telles in Paris. Great Brazilian composers such as Francisco Mignone, Arnaldo Rebello and Marlos Nobre have dedicated works to her and more recently Beetholven Cunha and Alexandre Rachid.

She won major prizes in her native Brazil and in international competitions such as those at Tunbridge Wells in the UK and Santander and Zaragoza in Spain.

Clélia Iruzun leads a busy international career as soloist having performed in Europe, the Americas and Asia, including concerts at the Grand Theatre in Shanghai, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, Konserthusets in Gothenburg and Stockholm, Poznan Philharmonie, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Wigmore Hall in London. She tours her native Brazil every year and has appeared in the main halls and series such as Sala Cecilia Meireles, Municipal Theatre in Rio and Sao Paulo and the Campos do Jordão Festival. She has also appeared several times on radio and television in many countries, including broadcasts for BBC Radio 3.

She has played several first performances of Brazilian works including the Piano Quintet by Henrique Oswald, the Octet by Villa-Lobos, Piano Sonata by João Guilherme Ripper, *Desafio for Piano and Guitar* and *Sonata Breve* by Marlos Nobre at the South Bank Centre

and Wigmore Hall. Additionally she has given first performances of Mignone's Fantasia No. 3 in Norway with the Kristiansand Orchestra, in London with the Lontano Ensemble and in Poland with the Poznan Philharmonic where she also premiered the *Concertante do Imaginario* by Marlos Nobre. She has also premiered English music by Arnold Bax and York Bowen in Brazil.

Clélia has made several successful CDs with a variety of repertoire, from Latin American composers to the Mendelssohn Concertos and more recently Maconchy's *Concertino* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Marlos Nobre Piano Music on the Lorelt label, and Ernesto Nazareth *Portrait of Rio* (Lorelt). For SOMM Recordings she has made two recordings of Frederic Mompou's piano music: Volume 1 (SOMMCD 0121) and Volume 2 (SOMMCD 0155), which was released in January 2016.



Jac van Steen

Jac van Steen was born in The Netherlands and studied orchestral and choral conducting at the Brabants Conservatory of Music. Since participating, in 1985, in the BBC Conductors' Seminar led by Sir Edward Downes, he has enjoyed a very busy career as conductor of the best orchestras in The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Germany. These have included the posts of Music Director and Chief Conductor of the National Ballet of The Netherlands, the orchestras of Bochum and Nürnberg, the Staatskapelle, Weimar, the Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra

of Dortmund (Germany) Musikkollegium Winterthur (Switzerland) and the post of Principal Guest Conductor for several years at the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and from 2013-14, the Prague Symphony Orchestra. In 2014-15 he assumed the position of Principal Guest Conductor of the Ulster Orchestra, Belfast.

Jac van Steen has participated in many recordings for the BBC, as well as live broadcasts of his concerts. There are a substantial number of CD recordings of his work with various orchestras (a.o. Dabringhaus & Grimm, SOMM, Bridge Records, NMC).

In addition to conducting the finest Dutch, German and UK orchestras, he is dedicated to teaching and is Professor of Conducting at the Royal Conservatory of Music in The Hague, where he has recently developed his brainchild: the National Masters for Orchestral Conducting (NMO) which will give young master student conductors the chance to work with the best Dutch Orchestras. He also works regularly with the Royal Northern College of Music and Chetham's School of Music (Manchester) as well as the Royal Academy and Royal College of Music (London) and the City of Birmingham Youth Orchestra.

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