

IBERIAN ICONS

10:00 AM
SUNDAY 12 OCTOBER 2025
LECTURE HALL



Ernesto NAZARETH (1863 – 1934)

Nenê

Antonio de CABEZÓN (1510 – 1566)

Diferencias sobre “El canto del caballero”

José XIMÉNEZ (1601 – 1672)

Tiento

Domenico SCARLATTI (1685 – 1757)

Keyboard Sonata in D major, K. 490

Keyboard Sonata in D major, K. 491

Keyboard Sonata in A minor, K. 175

Carlos SEIXAS (1704 – 1742)

Keyboard Sonata No. 15 in C minor

Rafael ANGLÉS (1730 – 1816)

Keyboard Sonata in F major

Federico MOMPOU (1893 – 1987)

Cançó i dansa núm. 6

Ernesto LECUONA (1895 – 1963)

La conga de medianoche from *Danzas afro-cubanas*

Isaac ALBÉNIZ (1860 – 1909)

El Albaicín from *Iberia*

Marc-André HAMELIN (born 1961)

Étude No. 6 in D minor, “Esercizio per pianoforte (Omaggio a Domenico Scarlatti)”

Peter de Jager, *Piano*

I have always found the music and culture of the Iberian peninsula scintillating, for perhaps mysterious reasons. It provides a fascinating counterpoint to the more familiar Germanic traditions, drawing as it does from its own quite distinct folk music. The inhabitants of this region, like the French in the early 20th century, seem to value music not merely as an abstract, 'absolute' experience, but one with an almost mystical power to evoke place and symbolism. It is also, of course, a region of very great ethnic and cultural diversity. With the ancient Celtiberians mixing with the Greeks, Romans, and then Arabs, who ruled much of the land for many centuries, it's no wonder that almost every administrative region has its own distinct identity and cultural heritage. Add to that the enormous multiplicity of musics arising from six centuries of intermingling of Spanish and Portuguese colonial traditions with those of the hundreds of indigenous South and Central American peoples, as well as (perhaps more significantly) the African elements brought by the enslaved population, and one has an endlessly vibrant and diverse world of art to explore, one which exists far beyond the reductive stereotypes that are often applied to it.

– NAZARETH *Nenê*

Brazilian composer Ernesto Nazareth bridges the divide between classical piano and popular dance styles. In this way he could be seen as a South American counterpart to Scott Joplin. He composed many of what he called "Brazilian tangos", and his music forms a core part of the repertoire for the genre now known as *choro*, with its characteristic syncopated rhythm. Written around 1895, *Nenê* (*Baby*) is a charmingly playful piece, one of many works to which Nazareth gave affectionate little titles.

– CABEZÓN *Diferencias sobre "El canto del caballero"*

Antonio de Cabezón was the defining keyboard personality during the Spanish Golden Age (1500 – 1650), at which point Spain, as part of the Habsburg Empire, and enriched by their colonies in the New World, saw an immense flourishing of culture. Blind from childhood, Cabezón served for the majority of his life as organist at the royal court, where the "strange and smooth" nature of his playing was remarked upon. A particularly Spanish skill was the ability to improvise *diferencias* (variations) on popular tunes, and we can see from surviving examples that this was carried out to a very high level. Taking as a base the melody of *El canto del caballero* (*The Song of the Knight* – probably a popular song), Cabezón spins elegant, hocketing counterpoint, showing feeling and inventiveness but eschewing mere displays of virtuosic figuration.

– XIMÉNEZ *Tiento*

During the 17th century, however, displays of virtuosity became increasingly de rigueur, as magnificently illustrated in this *tiento* by José Ximénez, organist from 1627 at La Seo, the cathedral in Zaragoza (north-eastern Spain). The word *tiento* is from the root *tentar*, which means 'to touch', thus being cognate with the Italian term *toccata*, although the title *tiento* is given to several different genres which in Italian might be distinguished as *ricercare*, *toccata*, *canzona* or *fantasia*. This is a *tiento* of the Baroque type, consisting of chord sequences with elaborate repetitive figuration above or below, broken only by a slower melodic section in the middle. One can criticise these pieces as being formulaic, but if one imagines them akin to an extended jazz solo, there is a real excitement in the constant flow of invention and subtle variation. Jazz-like too are some of the surprising syncopations drawn from folk music, as well as a subtle rhythmic 'swing'.

– D. SCARLATTI Keyboard Sonatas K. 490, 491 & 175

It may seem paradoxical to think of Italian-born Domenico Scarlatti as a great Iberian composer, but the majority of his professional life was at the Spanish and Portuguese courts, and there are pieces of his where the influence of a distinctly Iberian style is unmistakable. Recent scholarship has continued to uncover how close the links are between particular sonatas and particular folk genres. The Sonata K. 490 is very clearly based on a *saeta* rhythm, a processional form played in the streets of Seville during Holy Week. Its apparent companion piece (at least paired as such by harpsichordist and cataloguer Ralph Kirkpatrick) K. 491 has been shown by Melbourne Conservatorium graduate Luisa Morales to match exactly the form, and danced etiquette, of a fandango. And K. 175 revels in seemingly daring tone clusters meant to evoke the heavy strumming of what we now think of as flamenco guitar style.

– SEIXAS Keyboard Sonata No. 15 in C minor

The music of Scarlatti's indigenous contemporaries in many ways seems more conservative – a little more polished from the raw folk style. And yet a lot of this music is compelling, and remains little known, especially on the Portuguese side. To me, Scarlatti is one of the great artists of all time, an unparalleled musical observer, and the idea of there being a whole 'school' operating in a similar musical sphere is a very intriguing one. Names such as Antonio Soler are somewhat generally known, Vicente Rodríguez and Sebastián Albero less so, and truly obscure are figures such as João de Sousa Carvalho, José Joaquim dos Santos, Pedro António Avondano, and many others.

The most well-known Portuguese composer of this period is undoubtedly Carlos Seixas. This particular sonata I find fascinating because its form is like a mosaic, with a set of self-contained, modular phrases forming a subtly unpredictable labyrinth which seems never to lead to the same exact place twice. While the writing is a little sparer than Scarlatti (although some evidence suggests that at least in certain types of pieces the repeats were thickened with improvised accompanimental figuration), there are still hints of Phrygian harmony and guitar-like flourishes.

– ANGLÉS Keyboard Sonata in F major

Even progressing into the early classical or galant period, there remains an intriguing shadow repertoire in Iberia which still often displays some evocation of folk elements. A wonderful anthology of such pieces collected and edited by pioneering scholar and composer Joaquín Nin provided me with a high-quality selection, and the formally compressed but highly expressive works by Rafael Anglés I found particularly attractive. The free alternation of major and minor modes which we see in Scarlatti is also evident here in this sonata. This piece is only of modest technical demands, and I think would make an excellent work for a younger or intermediate pianist.

– MOMPOU *Cançó i dansa núm. 6*

Federico (or Frederic) Mompou is a composer equally at home in his birthplace of Barcelona as in his adopted city of Paris. His family owned a bell factory, and the sonorities of bells permeate his entire output; this is music of a true contemplative spirit. His harmonies could be superficially described as ‘impressionistic’, but I hear in them an austere and mystical quality which seems to me distinctly Iberian. His pieces entitled *Cançons i danses* (Songs and Dances) are often based on existing folk melodies, but couched in his fresh and penetrating harmonies. There seems an enormous amount of profound meaning to be wrung from every note of his music, which has always been a significant touchstone for me personally.

– LECUONA *La conga de medianoche* from *Danzas afro-cubanas*

Cuban pianist Ernesto Lecuona, much like Nazareth, brought Latin genres, often specifically Afro-Cuban ones, into a classical piano idiom. I find the veiled and furtive nature of this piece (*The Midnight Conga*) intriguing, its unusually dissonant opening perhaps depicting a disquieted nocturnal scene, before the joy of dance bursts forth in an unstoppable manner.

– ALBÉNIZ *El Albaicín* from *Iberia*

Isaac Albéniz’s monumental suite *Iberia* is one of the great Everests of piano music. Ever since I encountered it as a teenager, the complexity of its textures and the acerbic crunch of its harmonies had me fully under its sway, as I tried to wrap my fingers around its great tangle of notes to unlock the addictive rhythms and melodies that lay beneath. The concept of *evocación* and the idea of a pan-Iberian nationalism distinct from the rest of Europe was being explored in literary circles around this time, and Albéniz’s extraordinarily rich depiction of various regions and cultures very much seeks kinship with these ideals. In this way, the music can also be compared with the evocative quality of French impressionism, although the means by which the music searches outside of itself are set purposefully apart from the French model.

El Albaicín is noted in the score as the Gypsy quarter of Granada, a city with deep historic ties especially to Spain’s Islamic period. Albéniz evokes a wonderful sense of melancholy, interspersing insistently picked guitar figures with deeply expressive melodies clearly modelled on the yearning vocal lines of the *cante jondo*, the deep song of flamenco, a style which surely owes much to the intensely emotional melismatic singing we still find in music of the Middle East.

– HAMELIN *Étude No. 6 in D minor, “Esercizio per pianoforte (Omaggio a Domenico Scarlatti)”*

In the guise of a programmed encore, a modern reading of Scarlatti is found in this étude by the godlike French-Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin. I mentioned before that to me Scarlatti is one of the great artists of all time; it seems to me that Mr Hamelin doesn’t necessarily share my high regard. His title (“Exercise for Piano (Homage to Domenico Scarlatti)”), being in Italian, also seems to sidestep the point that in many ways I want to demonstrate in putting together this very program: that, in fact, Scarlatti’s greatness is directly attributable and proportional to his identity as one of the great *Iberian* composers. Nevertheless, this tricky little romp is an irresistibly humorous lampooning of certain notable habits of Scarlatti’s style and of acrobatic virtuosity in general.