

PROGRAM NOTES

Gabriela Montero, piano

Domenico Scarlatti

Sonata in C-sharp Minor, K.247

Sonata in G Major, K.427

Scarlatti is a family name as musically distinguished in Italy as Gabrieli. Domenico's father Alessandro (1660-1725) was an important and prolific composer of operas and cantatas. Two of his sisters and one brother were trained operatic singers; another brother, Francesco (1666-1741?), was a violinist and composer. Domenico's brother Pietro Filippo Scarlatti (1679-1750) was an organist and composer. Domenico's nephew Giuseppe (c. 1718-1777) was a prominent composer of operas and ballets. Modern listeners, however, are most likely to be familiar with the Scarlatti name through Domenico's keyboard music. His substantial output of operas, oratorios, cantatas and instrumental ensemble music has been virtually eclipsed by the significance and imagination of his more than 550 keyboard sonatas.

Domenico was the sixth of ten children. His early musical education is obscure; however, he must have evidenced great talent quite early, because in 1701, one month shy of his sixteenth birthday, he became organist and composer of the Naples royal chapel. Alessandro sent him to Venice in 1705, where he worked for four years, after which he held positions in Rome from 1709 to 1719. In August 1719, he accepted an appointment to the King of Portugal that affected the balance of his career. Excepting periodic visits to Italy in the 1720s, Scarlatti spent the rest of his life in the Iberian Peninsula. The Portuguese King had a musical daughter, the Infanta Maria Barbara. When she married Crown Prince Fernando of Spain in 1728, Scarlatti went with her and was attached to the Spanish court until his death. He was known in Spain as Domingo Escarlatti. Maria Barbara's residences are known to have had early pianos as well as Flemish harpsichords. Many of Scarlatti's sonatas transfer beautifully to the modern piano. They have been widely performed and recorded on both harpsichord and piano.

The sonatas are single movement works in two-part (binary) form. Each one is a self-contained study of a particular technical or musical problem. They comprise an encyclopedic variety of gestures, moods, irregular phrases, and experiments in momentary dissonance. The keyboard style is brilliant. Technical flourishes abound, including crossed hands at high speed, double trills, wide leaps, repeated double notes, double trills and broken octaves. Some of the sonatas are monothematic, exploring the peculiarities of one melodic gesture in depth. Others have two or three themes that intertwine. Sometimes Scarlatti incorporates Spanish dance rhythms, emulating the strumming of a vihuela or guitar.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the principle of contrast was not yet prevalent in sonata structures. Within a single movement, a composer established one mood, then explored its nuances. In some of his sonatas, Scarlatti begins to break from this mold, making his works forerunners of sonata form in its more familiar late-eighteenth-century iterations.

Modern scholars have determined that Scarlatti wrote most of his sonatas in pairs, linked by shared tonality. Ms. Montero has grouped her selections accordingly on both halves of this program, with careful attention to key centers, even in pieces by different composers. Works in C-sharp minor and G major appear on both halves, as do pieces in related keys.

Antonio Soler

Sonata in C-sharp Minor, R.21

Sonata in G Major, R.45

Antonio Soler was educated at the celebrated Escolanía music school in the Monserrat monastery, studying organ and composition. He was ordained in 1752 and, by 1757 was *maestro di capilla* at the royal monastery of El Escorial, where he had initially served as organist. A younger contemporary of Domenico Scarlatti, Soler may have studied with the Italian-born master during summers when the Spanish royal court was in residence at El Escorial. Soler's many one-movement keyboard sonatas certainly emulated Scarlatti's models. They favor binary form but are more adventuresome in their modulations than Scarlatti's sonatas. Soler often adopted Spanish dance rhythms and into his music.

Frédéric Chopin: Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 39

Chopin's four *Scherzi* share little in common with the Beethovenian sonata scherzo other than triple meter and ternary form. Larger in scale than their prototype, each is a major one-movement work that maximizes the expressive contrasts of which the piano is capable. The Scherzo No.3, composed and published in 1837, is the most dramatic of them.

Dark, passionate, and poetic, the Scherzo represents Chopin in full command as a composer. Physically, however, he was failing, increasingly compromised by the toll that consumption [tuberculosis] was taking on his frail constitution. He began it on the Spanish Mediterranean island of Mallorca, on the heels of the splendid *Préludes*, Op.28, and completed it at George Sand's country estate of Nohant. Sand was nonplussed by this new work, writing of its "obstinate battle with the language of communicability."

Indeed, the Third Scherzo is elusive, dark, passionate, poetic, and enigmatic. Its introduction includes all twelve tones, further confounding us with rhythmic ambiguity: two measures of four beats within a triple-meter time signature. Chopin see-saws between intensity and lyric narrative, with loose connections to sonata form. After a while, we barely notice that these structural underpinnings are there. Still, their musico-architectural anchor gives us our aural roots.

Perhaps the most magical moment occurs during the central trio. Chopin decorates a chorale with a cascade of delicate filigree that seems to sum up romantic pianism in one splendid, inimitable gesture. He surprises us again in the coda, which concludes in major mode

Chopin dedicated the Scherzo to Adolf Gutmann, a German pianist who began studying with him in 1834 at age 15. When the Bohemian piano virtuoso Ignaz Moscheles visited Chopin, the

composer summoned Gutmann to play the C-sharp minor Scherzo. “I am unfortunately too weak to play my things for [Moscheles], so you must play,” Chopin told the youth. Heinrich Lenz described Gutmann as “strong enough to punch a hole through a table,” one indication of the stamina this Scherzo demands.

Enrique Granados: 8 *Valses Poéticos*

Spain produced a bumper crop of wonderful composers at the turn of the 20th century, including Manuel de Falla, Isaac Albéniz, and Enrique Granados. The latter is best known for his magnificent piano cycle *Goyescas*, inspired by the art of Francisco Goya. His music blended European traditions with Spanish traditional dances and songs.

Valses poéticos (1887, pub.1894) is one of several collections of character pieces Granados wrote for piano. The structure is seven short waltzes with a prelude and postlude. The prelude is in 2/4 time; the postlude reprises the first waltz. In mood and textural changes, Granados’s set anticipates Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales* by nearly a quarter-century.

Isaac Albéniz

Triana from Iberia

Sevilla from Suite Española, Op. 47

A biography of Isaac Albéniz reads rather like a turn-of-the-century adventure novel. A child prodigy who performed in public by the age of four, he was touring in Paris and composing by age seven. He ran away from the Madrid Conservatory at nine, spending five years first in the Spanish provinces, then in South America, the Caribbean, and the United States, as both pianist and stevedore! After returning to his homeland, he secured grants to study in Brussels, Leipzig, and briefly in Budapest with the ageing Franz Liszt (1811-1886).

Albéniz finally settled in Paris, but his music never forsook the characteristic flavor of his native Spain. He was a key developer of an indigenous Spanish musical style, drawing his inspiration from the vivid drama of his country’s landscape and culture. *Iberia*, his masterpiece, is a collection of twelve-tone poems for solo piano published in four volumes between 1906 and 1909. Like the earlier *Suite Española* (1886) and *Cantos de España* (1896), it consists of descriptive sound-pictures of particular locales and events, usually using Spanish dance rhythms and harmonies. As a solo piano composition, *Iberia* is intricate, technically demanding, and symphonic in its approach to the keyboard. Its twelve movements comprise some 75 minutes of music. Consequently, *Iberia* is rarely performed in its entirety.

Triana, from *Iberia*’s Book II, is the most familiar excerpt. The title refers to a suburb of Seville that has become its Gypsy quarter and is the spiritual center of *flamenco* dancing. We can practically smell the city’s night life, pulsing with the sultry sound of guitar, castanets, and

tambourine. Pedal points and whole-tone scales add mystery and tension along with sensuality. Essentially cast as free variations, *Triana* includes a *sevillanas* [a faster Andalusian variant of the *seguidilla*] and a toreros' march, which would precede a bullfight.

Albeniz's *Suite Española*, Op.47 consists of eight colorful pieces, descriptive of Spanish cities or regions. Seville is the capital of the southern Spanish province of Andalusia. The *Sevilla* movement is a clear pianistic imitation of guitar textures; the music evokes *flamenco* dancing. Like most of Albéniz's miniatures, its form is ternary, with a pensive, nostalgic middle section.

Frédéric Chopin

***Boléro*, Op. 19**

Prelude Op. 28, No. 15

Among Chopin's 74 published opus numbers (about a dozen of which appeared posthumously), there is only one *Boléro*. Whereas he composed dozens of mazurkas, waltzes, and nocturnes, 24 preludes and 24 *études*, four ballades and four scherzi, and some 16 polonaises, the *Boléro* stands alone. Like Ravel's more famous work from 1928, Chopin based his on the romantic Spanish dance in triple time, whose origins lay in the 18th-century *seguidilla*.

Chopin's 1833 *Boléro* is a rare instance of him saluting a culture other than that of his native Poland. This one opens with a dazzling introduction of lightning-fast right-hand triplets. It then settles into a sectional piece: first waltz-like, then more akin to a polonaise. Bridge passages feature dazzling cadenza-like figuration. Despite its titular nod to Spain, the writing is unmistakably Chopin's: flirtatious and fleet, at once bold and graceful.

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Historically, keyboard preludes were either paired with fugues or combined with several succeeding movements in the same key as a suite. As the term implies, a prelude was a precursor, an introduction to something additional that followed – generally something more important than the prelude itself. In grouping 24 Preludes together, Chopin was breaking from pianistic tradition by making them the main event. In effect, he was elevating the miniature piano piece to loftier status.

The Preludes contain some of Chopin's best-known music. No. 15 in D-flat major—the longest of the 24—is known as the “Raindrop” Prelude because of its steady repeated eighth notes, whose gentle pulse morphs into thunderous pounding in the stormy middle section. The return to the tranquil dynamic and mood of the opening feels completely transformed after the drama.

Alicia de Larrocha

Sueño Infantil ***Minué Triste***

The Catalan pianist Alicia de Larrocha was a superb interpreter of Albéniz, Granados, Falla, Turina, and Mompou; her Mozart was also widely admired. As a child and teenager, she composed nearly 50 short pieces for piano, voice, and chamber ensemble. They were subsequently published as *Pecados de Juventud* (Youthful Sins). *Sueño infantil* can be translated either as ‘childish Dream’ or ‘child’s sleep.’ The gentle, soothing melody of this miniature argues for the latter title. Her *Minué triste* (Sad Minuet) is more adventuresome harmonically, introducing startling modulations in the span of barely a minute.

Federico Mompou: *Cançó i dansa* No. 6

Two things are essential to know about Mompou. One is that he was Catalan; the other is his propensity for bell sounds.

Born in Barcelona to a mother of French descent and a Catalan father, Mompou appeared to be headed toward a career as a pianist. He heard the French pianist Marguerite Long play an all-Fauré program in 1909, when he was 16, and realized he was destined to be a composer rather than a performer. After securing a letter of recommendation from his older countryman Enrique Granados, he set out for Paris.

Like many of his countrymen (Granados, Albéniz, Falla, Joaquín Nin, and later Rodrigo) Mompou found the magnet of Parisian life irresistible. Arriving in 1911, he enrolled at the Conservatoire to study piano and harmony, immersing himself in the panoply of cultural options available. He came of age in the heady atmosphere of the French capital and cultivated a circle that included composers, sculptors, painters, and literati. When the First World War erupted, Mompou left France for Barcelona. He returned to Paris in 1921 and was based there for two decades.

Not surprisingly, there is abundant French influence in Mompou’s compositions. He is frequently compared to Erik Satie, but most listeners also discern an impressionist flavor in his works, reminiscent of Debussy. Yet the pull of native Catalan music remained strong as well. Mompou was particularly fascinated by 15th-century Catalan music of the high Renaissance, an era when Spain was one of Europe’s richest and most powerful countries and support for church music was lavish.

Most of Mompou’s piano pieces are miniature tone poems in a quasi-impressionist style. Many omit key signatures, bar lines, and perfect cadences, which links them to Satie’s iconoclasm. Their distinctive character, however, derives primarily from Mompou’s unique harmonic vocabulary. Neither fish nor fowl, it is an amalgam of tonal, modal, occasionally pentatonic scales and chords, and Catalan folk tunes. He was determined to plumb the essence of music by

returning to its most primitive elements.

One near-constant element is bell-like sonorities. They are an autobiographical *recuerdo*: Mompou grew up within earshot of his father's bell foundry and was fascinated by the sound of bells his entire life. Another recurrent trait is the innocent lilt of Catalan folk music. These snatches of melody have the timelessness of tradition. One senses that Catalonian children have sung these tunes for centuries.

Cançons i danses is a collection of 15 pieces he composed between 1918 and 1972, primarily for piano. Unlike his bell-inspired pieces, these are more direct and clearly descended from Catalan folklore and dance rhythms. Each one comprises two parts. The first is a plaintive song. It is followed by a driven, energetic dance that, in the case of No.6, is both extroverted and virtuosic.

Enrique Granados: *Andaluza* from *12 Danzas españolas*, Op. 37

Although Granados did not write for guitar, the sound of Spanish guitar permeates much of his music. His *Danzas españolas* take their impetus from Spanish landscape and folklore. *Andaluza* (in the original) is the most famous movement from the set and has been arranged for many other instruments. Granados evokes the strumming effects of the rhythmic Spanish guitar, punctuated by the click of castanets. The surging passion and strong syncopation of the opening contrasts with sultry, melancholy phrases in the calmer B section. Granados navigates back and forth between these two ideas, finding compromise at the close.

Franz Liszt: *Rhapsodie espagnole*

Liszt was unquestionably the greatest pianist of the nineteenth century and may well have been the greatest pianist who ever lived. His virtuosity expanded piano technique to the same degree that Paganini expanded the violin's, introducing dazzling technical *tours de force* that brought audiences literally to their feet and left them, figuratively, in the palm of his hand.

Liszt was still touring actively when he composed his *Rhapsodie espagnole*. The piece derives from Iberian folk tunes he heard while touring Spain and Portugal in 1845. The first is the famous *Folia*, whose roots go back to Renaissance times. After a flashy introduction, *Folia* appears with several variations that grown increasingly more difficult. The second tune is a lively *jota aragonesa* that he had previously used in an 1845 *Grande fantaisie*, again expanded in free variations. Replete with dramatic gestures and pianistic bravura, Liszt's *Rhapsodie* is a classic showpiece for the virtuoso pianist, designed both to entertain and to dazzle.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026