



YSL T-1207

RAFAEL ARROYO

“Among pianists you have never heard of, Rafael Arroyo (1910–1971) deserves to be saved from neglect and widely admired. The degree to which he has been forgotten seems a little astonishing given his remarkable musicality and the fact that he recorded at least one LP for Decca along with mention of releases on Adès, Club, and Odeon - none of these appears to be in print. Online information is otherwise extremely scarce - Arroyo is listed as Spanish but not his place of birth. He studied in Paris with teachers that included Marguerite Long after initial training in piano, harmony, and composition in Madrid. I see no mention of Arroyo appearing in the U.S., and his career seems to have centered on France and Spain.

It's always a pleasure to find a true artist among the forgotten, and producer Yves St-Laurent, who has a laudable history of discovering obscure live material from France, has unearthed a rarity in this recital from Chartres Cathedral in 1961. In his excellent remastering the sound, which is mono and perhaps from a private recording, is quite listenable, the only flaw being the shallow bass. The perspective is close, with no hint of cathedral echo. The absence of deep bass is more than compensated for by Arroyo's authority performing a wide range of works from his specialty, classic Spanish piano music.

The acid test for such a recital is Albéniz's virtuosic keyboard music, and here we get seven works, including five from his masterpiece, IBERIA. Two other pioneers in the modern nationalist movement in Spain, Falla and Turina, are nodded to. The rest of the program will be a connoisseur's delight and a pleasure for non-specialists to encounter, probably for the first time.

Arroyo is superb in Albéniz, one of the great tonal painters for the piano. The opening work, a depiction of Córdoba from the five CANTOS DE ESPAÑA, is too kaleidoscopic to be called a song. In fact one hears the major elements in Albéniz's palette: the picturesque (tolling church bells), Spanish dance rhythms (here the flamenco), folk melody, and hints of the liturgical, usually as processions. These ingredients are compressed and simplified in Córdoba, where the technical demands are small compared with the elaboration of every element in IBERIA. What I listen for in that work is atmosphere and poetry in addition to a feeling for Spanish dance and the Impressionist transparency that arose from Albéniz's French connection.

Arroyo's performance of Evocación (Book 1, #1) is one of the most exquisite you will ever hear, exemplifying his refined touch, elegant rubato, and tender poetry in the melodic line. Nothing else in the four books of IBERIA is so light-as-air, but Arroyo makes each number sound that way. He moves without break into El Puerto (Book 1, #2), where the trick is to maintain the several dances alongside piano writing as demanding as the most difficult Debussy Préludes. Arroyo manages every difficulty with wonderful poise and grace. But then, his playing continually exhibits those qualities, extending to the earthy flamenco style of El Albaicín (Book 3, #1), whose technical demands are daunting, although not pitched to the grueling level of Fête-dieu à Séville (Book 1, #3). All told, these excerpts from IBERIA rise to the highest quality.

Space forbids detailing the rest of the program. It might be worth noting that the eighteenth-century priest and composer Mateo Albéniz (1755–1831) is no relation to Isaac Albéniz. Antonio Soler's Keyboard Sonata in D is rendered like the most playful, quick-witted Scarlatti sonata with a Spanish soul. Many general listeners will recognize the Spanish dance from Falla's LA VIDA BREVE, which works beautifully transcribed for piano. There are three related composers named Halffter, all totally unknown to me. Ernesto (1905–89) was born in Madrid, the son of a Prussian jeweler; he pursued a career as a conductor and composer. Here we get two lively numbers from his ballet, SONATINA, in a neoclassical Spanish style that includes imitations of a strumming guitar. I see no entry in FANFARE for the composer of Arroyo's rousing encore, Viva Navarra, by Joaquín Larregla y Urbietta (1865–1945). Like Albéniz, Larregla was a composer-pianist, and this, his most famous work, is a four-minute showpiece of tunes that are reminiscent of Chabrier's ESPAÑA and just as entertaining. This release easily qualifies as my favorite recital of the year from an obscure pianist, and no lover of Spanish piano music should hesitate to try it. As a final side note, there is applause after every piece, but this is a small drawback."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE