Reflections on Isaac Albéniz’s *Cordoba*

Before performing it two years ago I studied the piano score and changed a few things. Prior to recording it in June 2014, I was inspired by Julian Bream’s arrangement and employed some of his ideas.

In the 1100s, Cordoba was a cultural capitol of the world. It was a city where at one time Jews, Christians and Muslims lived in peace. Great philosophers like Maimonides and Avverroes lived there. The society of the time advanced science, medicine and astronomy.

The work commences with a still, reflective, almost Renaissance-like introduction. The passage culminates with a cadence in the dominant and a fermata after which point the familiar and hypnotizing descending two-bar figuring begins, leading us into a melody only a master could write. The key change from minor to major back to minor is a compositional technique employed often by Albéniz. Because he does this so convincingly and musically I never tire of it. One could say the summit of the work is its double forte passage in the D major section of the work. It is often played with the *rasqueado* technique — a tip of the hat to the world of Flamenco music so vital in Cordoba. I love how Albéniz restates the famous tow bar “intro” before the main melody after the last fermata at the end of the piece.

The original piano score contains several ritardandi, ralentandi, and dynamics. I believe they are essential for the interpreter to observe. Even with these numerous indications the piece allows the performer a tremendous amount of elasticity.

Cordoba exploits the guitar to its extreme. There are wonderfully varied textures, tessitura and timbral qualities throughout. The guitarist is asked to make triple pianissimos as well as double fortés. Its octave passages, particularly in the D major section, are among most expressive and emotional we have in the repertoire.

It is a piece that one can find new truths throughout different periods of one’s career. In short, it is an honor to play. It was also an honor to be a small part of such a unique guitar festival in one of the most astounding cities the world has known. I shall always be indebted to Paco for inviting me year after year.

Below is Albéniz’s statement about Cordoba from the opening page of his piano score.

*In the silence of the night,*
interrupted by the whispering
*aromatic breeze of jasmines,* the
Guzulas accompany the Serenatas
And their *fervent melodies,* which
*Diffuse in the air notes as sweet as the
Sound of the palms swaying in the
Sky above.*
Canción del jinete
Córdoba.
Lejana y sola.
Jaca negra, luna grande,
y aceitunas en mi alforja.
Aunque sepa los caminos,
yo nunca llegaré a Córdoba.
Por el llano, por el viento,
jaca negra, luna roja.
La muerte me está mirando
desde las torres de Córdoba.
¡Ay que camino tan largo!
¡Ay mi jaca valerosa!
¡Ay que la muerte me espera,
antes de llegar a Córdoba!
Córdoba.
Lejana y sola.
- Federico García Lorca

Horseman’s Song
Cordoba.
Distant and alone.
A black nag, the giant moon,
and olives in my saddlebag.
Even if I know the way,
I never will reach Córdoba.
Over the plain, through the wind,
A black nag, the bloody moon.
The Reaper is watching me
From the tall towers of Cordoba.
Oh, such a long road!
Oh, my valiant nag!
Oh, the Reaper awaits me
before I ever reach Cordoba!
Cordoba.
Distant and alone.
- Translation, Charles W. Johnson

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