

Lost Gems from the “Golden Age” of Spanish Piano Music

Andrés Isasi, Emiliana de Zubeldía
and Manuel Blancafort

There are few regions with a musical fabric as rich as Spain. Its geographical position as a relatively isolated peninsula simultaneously shaped it as both a stronghold of Medieval Catholicism and as an African gateway to Europe, creating something of an independent cultural and artistic ecosystem. Antiquated Spanish keyboard repertoires give a primordial sense of this emerging landscape, providing a glimpse into a musical world that seems to “operate under its own laws” (Parkins 2004, 300), with fascinating figures like Cabezón or Correa de Arauxo. Most piano students have likely never heard of either of these composers but will probably have heard of *and* studied adopted Spaniard Domenico Scarlatti, whose keyboard music owes much to the guitar and its magic “spell” (Kirkpatrick 1954, 205). But a true renaissance for Spanish keyboard music would have to wait until much later—the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century:

“No Spanish masterworks for piano were written in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was generally a time of light salon music, bombastic fantasias on operatic themes, or meager attempts to continue the

style galant. However, during the last decades of the century and the early part of the twentieth century, Isaac Albéniz and Enrique Granados ushered in a keyboard renaissance that resulted in Spain’s golden age of piano music. They instigated a rebirth of nationalism, aided by such important pioneers of Spanish nationalism as Felipe Pedrell and Federico Olmeda, both of whom helped to free Spanish music from the dominance of Italianism” (Powell 1980, Chapter 2).

It is, then, greatly regrettable that this incredible moment of keyboard music in Spain has been in some ways reduced, to borrow the words of Alex Ross¹, to a “pageant of masters” (Ross 2018). Some narratives—which are often implicit but just as often at risk of becoming completely submerged, particularly for those unfamiliar with the political-historical context of Spain—concern the specific regions of Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia. Each of these autonomous states preserves its own language; this fact alone might provide an illuminative context to the Gordian Knot of what is “Spanish.”

The three composers discussed in this article were contemporaries of the composer of

Iberia, and inclusion of them in a discussion of the Iberian peninsula’s “golden age” of piano music is surely long overdue. In recent years, some of these more specific local repertoires have been recovered by recordings and dissemination, but perhaps one of the most unconscionably overlooked of those historical, and recorded, oversights might be named in the Basque composer Andrés Isasi (1890–1940). His compatriot Emiliana de Zubeldía (1888–1987) was born in Basque country but later began a second life in Mexico, where she remained until her death. These very different Basque composers may suffer neglect for a variety of reasons. Both invited anonymity in some ways: Zubeldía by composing music under a pseudonym, by reinventing herself and her musical voice midway through her career and Isasi by lifelong reclusiveness, yet the music of both valuably enriches the mosaic of what is Iberian. Manuel Blancafort (1897–1987), a slightly more well-known Catalanian composer, is also considered here: often introverted, his music has been and continues to be overshadowed by that of his friend and fellow-composer Mompou, even while it has experienced a humble renaissance of recordings in recent years.



Figure 1: A Timeline of Iberian Keyboard Composers, 1510–1987.

Andrés Isasi (1890–1940)

Pianist and musicologist Mario Lerena notes of this composer: “(his) musical catalog...stands out as one of the most solid and interesting of Basque music of its time. With six symphonic poems and at least two symphonies, this composer can be considered one of the greatest Basque, and even Spanish, symphonists of any era. Furthermore, his collection of six string quartets is extraordinary. However, perhaps the most charismatic facet of his output is to be found in his Lieder for voice and piano, almost all featuring poems in Castilian by the composer himself. Along with this, there is an extensive piano output...” (Lerena 2012, 198).

Isasi’s piano output is indeed extensive. Quantity is, of course, not an indicator of quality, but in the case of Isasi, there are just too many treasures left unexplored.

This composer’s life and educational trajectory sheds light on the distinctive character of his music, which immediately distinguishes him from most of his contemporaries. Orphaned at age 12, Isasi’s upbringing fell largely to his grandfather who supported, most significantly, his study in Berlin with Engelbert Humperdinck, an associate and proponent of Wagner. Some have highlighted the contrast of Isasi’s path with that of most Spanish composers of keyboard music (Aresti 2015)—Granados and Albéniz both had strong ties with Paris, as did Isasi’s own Basque compatriots Donostia and Guridi. But Isasi was uniquely fascinated with Teutonic models and continued to be throughout his career. This fact may be, incidentally, partially responsible for his complete obscurity now. Upon his return to Basque Country, Isasi attempted to reintroduce himself to his home community as a composer of symphonic poems: “Public response to such overtly Germanic music, however, was lukewarm and Isasi, taciturn and unworldly by nature, retreated to the family home in Algorta, where he was able to compose in relative seclusion” (Whitehouse 2012).

Much of the piano music Isasi wrote is not only distinctive but highly attractive, and playing through much of it, one may begin to wonder where it has been hiding. Take, for instance, his standalone Funeral March.



Lento lugubre. And. Ysasi.

Example 1: Isasi, *Marcha Funebre*, mm. 1–8.

This piece opens with all the hallmarks of a character piece genre that is quintessentially Romantic: a dark, harmonically saturated pianistic tessitura, dotted rhythms immediately conjuring up the requisite funereal spirit, which later intensifies with rattling tremolo effects. However, the warm, unexpectedly “innig” quality of Isasi’s lyricism and harmonic color in this essay is something that is elusive in the two most recognizable examples from the piano repertoire—Beethoven’s Op. 26 and Chopin’s Op. 35. Beethoven uses the movement as a chance to exploit orchestral sound effects, and Chopin reverts to his, undeniably beautiful, moonlit *bel canto*. No less striking is the way Isasi’s later secondary dominant arrival at the relative major remains distinctive in expressive character while unmistakably echoing Chopin (measures 20–21). Throughout this episode as well as the larger canvas of the whole work, meticulously notated voice-leading and tracing of important inner contours seems to relate this music peripherally to the Continental examples Isasi admired. For example, the chordal spreads with which the “Piu Allegro, ma tranquillo” area closes are distinctly redolent of similar moments in the music of Liszt, such as the closing section of *Un Sospiro*.

Approaching the score from a “bird’s eye view” reveals a deliberate symmetry, even down to introductory and postludial sections that reflect each other. While the key of B-flat minor is never really challenged, an F major middle episode provides attractive and refreshingly lyrical expressive contrast. Isasi’s juxtaposition of local harmonic color is particularly effective at the end of this section: a 6-measure transitional episode adopts the dark parallel of F minor. In the example below, Isasi uses the inverse of this procedure to great effect.

Of many volumes of music, including substantial sets of miniatures (*Skizzen, Films, Horen Moriscas, Cromos*) as well as ambitious and experimental larger canvases, including three *Bal-lades* that belong in the company of similarly extended Continental examples, Isasi’s later work *Carnaval* deserves special mention. Dedicated to Granados, one might think of the similar two-movement “Book 2” of that composer’s *Goyescas*, or of the perennially attractive *Danzas Españolas*. Isasi’s first movement has every ounce of appeal found in either of these works and is imminently suited to the advanced pianist.

Allegretto $\text{♩} = 60$

PIANO *pp*

una corda

$\text{♩} = 72$

il basso pp

cantabile con fantasia Red. * Red. * Red. * Red. *

Example 2: Isasi, *Carnaval*, I. *Canción a la Luna*, mm. 1–12.

Evident immediately is that a kind of Commedia dell’arte narrative subtext is being played out. The melancholic music of “Pierrot” (the clown) uneasily shifts between various rhythmic underpinnings, seeming most comfortable in a kind of habanera, but eventually reaching an almost painfully dissonant climax, written in the score at this moment is the indication “Pierrot llora,” which then limps into an indecisive trill. This entire episode is restated verbatim. Then, in a masterful stroke, Isasi introduces a new character, “Colombina,” and the titular “song to the moon” is suddenly illuminated.

(Pierrot llora)
molto patetico

f

dr

(Colombina canta á lo lejos)
Molto lento

sempre ppp tranquillo e cantabile

una corda

Example 3: Isasi, *Carnaval*, I. *Canción a la Luna*, mm. 76–87.

This episode must be one of the most breathtaking, if not refreshingly simple, moments one could expect to encounter in the piano literature. The unexpected key of D-flat is luminous and celestial, while the soaring melodic thread seems to trace a constellation across the night sky, above a weightless and buoyant left-hand canvas. Combined, these musical materials instantly banish every memory of the painful dissonance and haltering dance-steps preceding, which now seem almost grotesque in comparison.

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The second movement of *Carnaval, Un Drame*, is an exciting, remarkably unfussy and pianistically satisfying essay deserving of much, much more attention than it has ever received. It is full of “big themes,” improvisatory fioritura and buttressed by the kind of architectural apparatus from which other of Isasi’s contemporaries might have benefited (one thinks of some of the most loosely “notated improvisations” of *Carnaval’s* dedicatee).

Title	Suggested Level
Balladen	Advanced
Berceuse	Advanced
Carnaval	Advanced
Cromos	Intermediate–Advanced
Films, Book I	Intermediate–Advanced
Hojas moriscas	Intermediate–Advanced
Impromptu, Intermezzo und Fuge	Advanced
Impromptu	Advanced
Marcha fúnebre	Advanced
Skizzen, Book I	Intermediate–Advanced
Sonata Sabattina	Advanced
Sonata Marinera No. 3	Advanced
Sonatina No. 1	Intermediate–Advanced
Vals de juventud	Intermediate–Advanced

Figure 2: Isasi, List of Works for Piano with Suggested Levels.²

Emiliana de Zubeldía (1888–1987)

If external factors played a part in the marginalization of Isasi and his output, another of his contemporaries seems, in certain ways, to have actively sought a kind of anonymity in some aspects of her life. Emiliana de Zubeldía was born in Basque country like Isasi, but unlike him, one observes something of a withheld promise in the way her education unfolded. Showing a strong attraction to and gift for music at an exceptionally tender age, she began piano and theory lessons at age 6 (Camarena 2020, 78) and was matriculated at a local music school in Pamplona, beginning formal training at the age of 8. At 15, she left to begin studies in Madrid, and two years later graduated with honors. Subsequently, she was accepted into the well-known piano class of Blanche Selva, a proponent of Franck, at Vincent d’Indy’s Schola Cantorum in Paris, apparently without an entrance exam. She remained there three years, but her studies abruptly ended upon the death of her father, which precipitated Emiliana’s relocation to Pamplona. At this point “her Basque heritage directed women her age to make one of three life choices: marry into another Basque household, join a religious order, or emigrate” (Silva 2010, 9). At age 31 (1919), Zubeldía married a chemist; she began composing under the pseudonym “Emily Bydwealth,” turning out light fare and saccharine potboilers with French titles for socialites. Silva notes “She considered these works simple and ridiculous and perhaps felt these frivolities were not worthy of her real name” (Silva 2010, 10). Also, around this time (1920), she was hired in a local position as a piano professor. In Zubeldía’s 32nd year, she took a sabbatical, returning to Paris to resume lessons with Blanche Selva; during this time, she discovered her husband was having an affair. This marked a turn of events in Zubeldía’s life; she had no desire to return to her husband in Pamplona or her teaching position there. Thus, she prolonged her stay in Paris, commuting to Madrid during summers to earn a teaching degree. In 1924, Zubeldía formally gave up her position in Pamplona, and in the next years she began traveling, concertizing in Europe and abroad.

Zubeldía’s “years of pilgrimage” then began. In 1927, she embarked on an international concert tour that took her to the Americas; perhaps most significantly, she met music theorist Augusto Novaro (1891–1960) in New York in 1930. From this point in time, Zubeldía’s life and music changed irreversibly. “She was profoundly affected by his harmonic theories and her musical language evolved accordingly” (Stevenson 2001). Indeed, Zubeldía was such a devout proponent of Novaro, she followed him to Mexico in 1937. She would remain there for the rest of her life, beginning the immigration process in 1942. While creating this new life, Zubeldía changed her birth year: instead of 1888, it was listed as 1904 in official Mexican immigration documents. All the while she continued to concertize and perform specifically Basque music and, interestingly, “never completed her citizenship application, but was a legal resident of Mexico... she did not become a citizen because she identified herself as Basque and took great pride in her Spanish heritage” (Silva 2010, 12). Zubeldía became the nucleus of a vibrant musical orbit, centered in the University of Sonora. In this role she almost single-handedly built a whole musical community: “During the almost 40 years that she spent in Hermosilla, she lived in a hotel room, without a home. She continued teaching, accumulated all kinds of accolades up until a few months before she passed away of 99 years old” (Ruiz 2016).

Her piano output is comparable in scope to that of Isasi: there are large works, with at least one piano sonata, as well as collections of smaller pieces, including at least 11 *tientos*—a specifically Iberian, 16th-century genre that was popular with the above-mentioned Cabezón. While Zubeldía’s association with Navaro changed her music, she “came to Mexico as a ready-made composer” (Pulido 1983, 127) and was so before meeting Navaro. Of her many keyboard works, one of the most beautiful is certainly the *Esquisses d’une après-midi Basque*, sometimes referred to simply as the “Basque Preludes.” Eva Sandoval significantly notes this set of preludes was “written in 1923, in a moment when she had decided not to return to Pamplona” (Sandoval 2021). With the biographical context in mind, one might find that, next to the Bydweath catalogue, this music is refreshingly “honest”; not only has the pseudonym been abandoned (suggesting Zubeldía’s proud ownership), but the music itself seems to reflect personal impressions, treading lightly where Bydweath stamped in tawdry caricature.

It is perhaps the second piece that immediately stands out in this regard.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It is in 2/4 time and D major. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The score consists of two systems of music. The first system has a treble clef with a melody of eighth notes in triplets, starting with a dynamic of *mf*. The piano accompaniment in the bass clef features chords and triplets. The second system continues the melody, which ends with a *Ritard.* (ritardando) and then returns to *a Tempo*. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and triplets.

Example 4: Zubeldía, *Esquisses d’une après-midi Basque*, II. *L’Écho dans la montagne*, mm. 1–9.

The title of this piece is “The echo at the mountain,” and this is evidenced in the simplicity of conception and musical materials. Zubeldía conveys the “echo” effect literally with her imitative tenor, but there is something special about this music in the way it organically expands both in range and texture—it is as if the idea of mountainous gravity is embroidered into the music’s fabric. The application of *rubato* in phrasing here is something not just suggested but demanded by the physical reach required for saturated chordal harmonies at measure 4. Just on the heels of this gentle peak, the music breathtakingly sinks into the key of the leading tone, only to quickly pivot back to the tonic by third. Even if still “conservative” by standards of Zubeldía’s later music, or other music written in the 1920s, this piece leaves a lasting, haunting impression in less than a minute.

The other pieces in this set are equally deserving of attention. The fourth, *La petite fleur solitaire*, seems a more melancholy relative of *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, painted in whole-tone colors. The fifth piece, *Un souvenir d’Usandizaga - Au bord du ruisseau*, is a strangely neglected entry in the ever-popular Impressionistic repertoire of water musics. Its cascading, “black-white” arpeggiations ensnare a nearly pentatonic melodic thread, which, in the closing systems, funnels into a whole-tone waterfall. This piece is imminently suited to the budding piano student, offering a “flashy” return on investment.

Allegretto
Destacando bien la melodía y el acompañamiento pianísimo siempre

mf
pp

PIANO

Example 5: Zubeldía, *Esquisses d’une après-midi Basque, V. Un souvenir d’Usandizaga - Au bord du ruisseau*, mm. 1–5.

Title	Suggested Level
Cinco estudios para piano	Advanced
Dans la terrasse	Advanced
Danza de la muñeca de cristal	Advanced
Esquisses d'une apres-midi basque	Intermediate–Advanced
Estudio No. 10	Advanced
Estudio No. 11	Advanced
Fuga a cuatro voces	Advanced
Fuga para órgano o piano a 5 voces	Advanced
La petite fleur solitaire	Intermediate
Las Fuentes de la Alhambra	Advanced
Le Printemps retourne	Advanced
Nocturno Lejano	Advanced
Once tientos	Advanced
(Pieza en) Tono de re Mayor	Intermediate
Preludio II	Advanced
Preludio y Fuga	Advanced
Retour à la maison	Advanced
Sonata No. 1 para piano	Advanced
Sonata No. 2 para piano	Advanced
Sonata No. 3 para piano	Advanced
Sonata No. 4 para piano (Basque – clavecin)	Advanced
Sonata en 3 movimientos	Advanced
Sous le vieux roble	Advanced
Souvenir de Biarritz	Advanced
The Broken-Winged Butterfly	Advanced
Tiento (A)	Advanced
Tiento (B)	Advanced

Figure 3: Zubeldia, List of Works for Piano with Suggested Levels.²

Manuel Blancafort (1897–1987)

Of the composers considered here, the third may be the most familiar. Even then, Catalan composer Manuel Blancafort is often a name only read in a footnote or, like Zubeldía, “reduced to a paragraph” (Silva 2010, iii). Blancafort’s music is often related to the more familiar Mompou, but the sheer volume of his piano output eclipses that of both Mompou and the two composers above.

Mostly autodidactic as a musician and composer, he was born in Barcelona to a local hotel proprietor and entrepreneur who founded the Victoria pianola-roll factory. This business, in which Blancafort came to be involved throughout his early years and young adulthood, became something of a networking opportunity and provided Blancafort with enviable

opportunities, both to experience music abroad and to meet many celebrated musicians and composers. Blancafort seems to have formed something of a “group of 2” together with the slightly older Mompou. Both sought to create something specific in Catalanian music composition (one thinks of contemporaneous groups such as “Les Six”); the piano features prominently in all Blancafort’s subsequent compositional efforts (Aleyxandre 2001).

Surveying this piano oeuvre, one is immediately struck by the almost unbelievable 70-year span of his library; standard throughout are the kinds of concentrated gem-like essays developed by Mompou. Recent efforts have ventured toward putting all of this repertoire on record—a recent review of one such album finds Blancafort’s music “understated, even haunting... piano pieces well worth exploring” (Lamb 2004). The same reviewer adopts the Mompou comparison: “The two were friends and close contemporaries—born four years apart, dead withing six months of each other. The comparison extends to both composers’ pieces being mostly short and understated. Yet... [Blancafort’s pieces] do not approach the pianistic ambition even of Mompou” (Lamb 2004). This phrase is not a disparagement but will speak meaningfully for those familiar with Mompou’s “primitivista” style.

Of the sets in this particular album, and indeed of Blancafort’s whole output for piano, is one which is particularly full of treasures: *Cants íntims*. This set immediately reflects the composer’s introverted, withdrawn “tendency to melancholy” (Villalba 2004) as well as Blancafort’s self-proclaimed inspirations as a composer: “He wrote most of his early works after returning from long days spent in the mountains, in sunshine, wind, fog or rain” (Villalba 2004). In each of these pieces a high criterion is placed on lyricism. Blancafort eschews the overladen chromaticism and contrapuntal excess of his immediate predecessors as well as the objective, mathematical lab-work of early contemporaries. A piece in which all of these qualities are immediately evident is second from the set, *He anat a reposar a la platja i el cel era tot gris* (I went to the beach to relax and the sky above was grey).

Example 6: Blancafort, *Cants íntims* I, II. *He anat a reposar a la platja i el cel era tot gris*.

This canvas makes no effort to formalize metrical organization or structure, even while it is clearly in 6/8 meter and ternary form. An almost somnolent, vaguely lugubrious character imbues the music, underlining the Satie-like phrase that serves as its title, and yet, the opulence of harmony and warm sense of lyricism are miles away from that composer’s ironies. Blancafort’s rhythmically stultified, consonance-bound palette in the outer sections is nearly hypnotic, as is sometimes the beach’s most undulating and sun-drenched breakers. The inner episode provides a foil with more movement and a less-settled harmonic character, but this serves only to amplify the warm satiation of the opening area when it returns. One wonders if a few rays of sun found their way through that grey sky.

It would be reductive to categorize Blancafort as a composer of introverted half-whispers alone. Pianist Miquel Villalba notes that the *Cants íntims*, composed for Blancafort’s then-fiancée, show but one side of a “dual” nature in which one can frequently find a more “playful, extrovert side” (Villalba 2004). One representative work—which by its title alone suggests this second side to the composer—is the now nearly forgotten *El Parc d’Atraccions*. Ironically, this piece may very well have been the most famous or recognizable from his oeuvre to many of his contemporaries. Blancafort benefited in his day from the advocacy of his compatriot and old-school virtuoso Ricardo Viñes, who is much more well-known for his premiering of many works of the so-called “Impressionist” school. *El Parc d’Atraccions* was the work that Viñes introduced to unfamiliar audiences. There is, in fact, a recorded performance of Viñes himself performing two movements from this work (Potvin 2020, 43); these pieces are charming and pitch-perfect portraits, which manage to avoid garishness. The piano has never been a more successful imitator of the circus calliope than in Blancafort’s *Polka de l’Equilibriste* from this suite, in which the most hilarious of steam-powered circus sounds become corporeal.

Title	Suggested Level
5 Nocturnos	Intermediate–Advanced
Airs et mélodies	Intermediate–Advanced
American Souvenir	Intermediate–Advanced
Chansons de la Montagne	Intermediate–Advanced
Chants Intimes - Livre 1	Intermediate–Advanced
Chants Intimes - Livre 2	Intermediate–Advanced
Chemins	Advanced
Conseils de Turina	Intermediate–Advanced
Hommage à Chaplin	Intermediate–Advanced
Jeux et Danses aux Champs	Advanced
Le Parc d’Attractions	Advanced
Notas de antaño	Intermediate–Advanced
Obsessió	Advanced
Pastorale	Intermediate–Advanced
Pieces Breves	Intermediate–Advanced
Pieces de Jeunesse	Beginner - Intermediate
Pieces Spirituelles	Intermediate–Advanced
Remembrances	Intermediate–Advanced
Romance, Intermede et Marche	Advanced
Sonatine “Antique”	Advanced
Souvenir	Intermediate–Advanced
Souvenirs d’Autrefois	Intermediate–Advanced
Tema de dansa	Intermediate–Advanced
Tonadas	Intermediate–Advanced

Figure 4: Blancafort, List of Works for Piano with Suggested Levels.²

Toward a More Unified Spanish Keyboard Literature

The Iberian peninsula has contributed richly to the history of keyboard literature. The earliest extant repertoires distantly evince its distinctive and vibrant idiosyncrasies, which are made more explicit and exhilarating in the sonatas of Scarlatti. But many scholars of keyboard history would echo the above-cited opinion that the true “golden age” of Spanish piano music might be described as an early-20th-century phenomenon. While the well-researched and performed repertoires of Albéniz and Granados are certainly deserving of the attention lavished on them, there is still a sense, when looking at figures who have fallen through the cracks, that there is much to recover and reclaim. The many local eddies and currents of this rich region must not be lost in a mainstream idea of what is Spanish as represented by these select few.

A more specific example to illustrate: Albéniz’s *Iberia*, often cited as a kind of “Portrait of Spain,” really might more accurately be described as “Albéniz’s Portrait of Spain.” Far from being an all-embracing homage to every region of the peninsula, it spends most of its time in Southern Spain (the favorite region of Andalusia). Even while the *jota*, a Northern folk idiom, is sympathetically, and perhaps symbolically, combined with a Southern *fandango* in its first movement *Evocación*, when one surveys all four volumes of *Iberia*, Albéniz leaves most of Spain unexplored. This is not to say either that he should have done, as there is much music from Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country that may speak for itself. Our hope is that this paper will provide some small context for those interested in exploring these long-neglected and in some cases, completely forgotten repertoires. ◀◀

NOTES

1. In his eloquent article on Florence Price, Ross uses the phrase to comment on reductive and intellectually haphazard biases toward the non-canonical music.
2. The keyboard music of Emiliana de Zubeldia and Andres Isasi is, to our knowledge, all or mostly out-of-print (this year, that of Isasi will pass into the public domain). However, all the scores discussed above may be acquired from the Basque Archive of Music (ERESBIL); website: <http://www.eresbil.eus/>. The music of Blancafort is more accessible, with many editions published by Salabert available through many standard online sheet music distributors and available through music apps such as nKoda.

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Younggun Kim, a Korean-Canadian pianist, is known for his blazing technical capacity and a lush sound supported by a natural phrasing sense (Timothy Gilligan, *New York Concert Review*). He teaches at the University of Toronto and at Queen’s University.

