

## ARCHITECTURE AND MUSIC AROUND THE ALHAMBRA. REMINISCENCES OF A DREAMLIKE WORLD: LA PUERTA DEL VINO (DEBUSSY)

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### ABSTRACT

Orientalism, as a variant of exoticism in the Romantic period, adopted a series of topics linked to distant countries and oriental cultures, including Spanish lands, especially Andalusian. This phenomenon was especially prolific in the world of the arts around the Alhambra, «doubly romantic for its medieval and oriental origin» (Raquejo, 1989).

Alhambriism was developed by traveling writers in the early 19th century, eager for suggestive scenarios in which to recreate their poems and stories. Later it spread to the plastic arts, with painters such as François Antoine Bossuet, John Frederick Lewis, David Roberts, Gustave Doré or Jenaro Pérez Villaamil. In the case of architecture, Alhambriism was nourished by parallel sources. On the one hand, the awakening to the conservation of the Alhambra as a monument witness to a dreamy period in the history of Spain, and the first interventions by Rafael Contreras, still under babbling and unscientific criteria. On the other hand, the impulse to decorativism through the seminal studies of Owen Jones and Jules Goussier, convinced that «in the Alhambra the exemplary paradigm of the most perfect ornamental and chromatic system of all historical styles had existed was hidden» (Villafranca).

Music also found fertile ground for creativity in the Alhambra between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, within the nationalist romantic movement. However, it was mainly the Spanish

composers who chose the Alhambra to reflect the national identity: Tárrega, Turina, Albéniz, Bretón, De Monasterio, to which we should add a Debussy influenced by Falla.

The communication aims ultimately to investigate through analysis the musical resources used by the last-mentioned composer, Claude Debussy, to evoke with sounds the architecture and the sensual atmosphere of the Alhambra in one of the most representative works of Alhambriism in music: *La Puerta del Vino* (The Wine Gate).

### KEYWORDS

Romanticism; nationalism; exoticism; orientalism; Granada (Spain).

### 1. ORIENTALISM, EXOTICISM AND ALHAMBRIISM

During the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, a cultural movement against Classicism and the Enlightenment emerged in Europe and America: Romanticism, a new current that exalts the individuality of each work and the personal expression and interpretation of art and reality.

On the other hand, the 19th century represents for Europe a series of accelerated changes in the artistic sphere, and a scientific, philosophical and historical progress that

aroused, among other aspects, an interest in the Orient and Eastern culture. Studies of the European Islamic past proliferated and opened the doors to a new orientalist discourse through literature. This latter contributed to the proliferation of the new trend thanks to authors such as Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Georges Borrow, Prosper Mérimée or Théophile Gautier. Under an orientalist gaze, these romantic travellers laboriously sought sources of inspiration and knowledge to inspire their works, which they found in the Iberian Peninsula by equating it with the Orient and with this exotic reality they imagined.

Al-Andalus and Muslim culture made Spain one of the richest European countries in terms of oriental art. That is why romantic artists will turn their gaze to the architecture, landscapes and culture of the Arab society that had left a beautiful legacy after eight centuries of coexistence. In particular, the romantic gaze focuses on the Andalusian region, from which a new ideal, unreal and mythologised vision of an orientalised Spain was generated, which became an obligatory destination for every romantic artist in search of inspiration. The Spanish exiles themselves played a fundamental role in this romantic and orientalist exaltation, establishing contact with foreign artists and spreading the image

of Spain there. In turn, there are countless Europeans who visited the peninsula attracted by these ideas, and spread their work in their origin countries. In particular, they focused their admiration on the city of Granada. Not only it was the greatest exponent of the contrast of cultures between West and East in Spain, but also represented a unique and incomparable example of wealth, brilliance, exoticism and colour, where the Alhambra and the Generalife played a fundamental role.

From this breeding ground arised the Alhambriism, a new artistic current that gave rise to an infinite number of works throughout Europe inspired by the Granada monument. This tendency had its beginnings mainly in the literary field. However, few artists resisted drawing the gardens, palaces or fragments of Granada and its Alhambra, of which a large number of engravings and sketches are preserved. Noteworthy among them was the architect Owen Jones, who found valuable knowledge about ornament and color in the Nasrid complex from a purely scientific approach, which he incorporated into his influential book *The grammar of ornament*. He produced an endless number of meticulous drawings, surveys, tracings and details that became a key reference point for the development of architectural Alhambriism.



Figure 1. The architectural complex of the Alhambra, seen from the city of Granada (Spain)

The Alhambra was in the cross hairs of the architectural debate of the century, and its spaces and ornamental elements were replicated and taken as inspiration by architects such as Agustín Ortiz de Villajos, Rafael Contreras, Narciso Pascual and Colomer, Émile Boeswillwald or Owen Jones himself. This architectural trend became a symbol of luxury, wealth, identity and spectacle. It was applied in exhibition pavilions as a symbol of national identity, as well as in Arab cabinets in aristocratic and high bourgeois residences and interior design in entertainment and show business establishments.

Parallel to architectural Alhambrism and within the field of 19th century music, Romantic composers –both Spanish and European– took as reference the spaces that these palaces offered as a source of extramusical inspiration to evoke the sensations and experiences that they themselves lived or imagined. This source of inspiration is what romantic artists called *programmatic music*, a music based on ideas, images, external stories that support it. In the case of Alhambrism, the source of romantic inspiration is the architecture of the Granada monument, its landscapes, its legends and its atmospheres.

Some of the Spanish musicians who composed following the Alhambrist line were Isaac Albéniz, Manuel de Falla, Ángel Barrios, Tomás Bretón, Ruperto Chapí, Jesús de Monasterio, Joaquín Turina, Francisco Tárrega. However, it should be highlighted the role played by the French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918), the leading exponent of this genre outside Spain. Considered a reference of musical impressionism, Debussy is characterized by his complete detachment from musical rules in order to give free rein to his freedom as an artist, filling all his works with colour and sonority. He proposed completely new harmonic structures, giving greater importance to rhythm and tries to express, through music, every nuance of colour, reflection or freedom of movement, as it could be found in a painting by Monet.

The characteristics listed allow us to understand the growing interest of this author for the orientalism and exoticism that surrounded the image of Spain and the Alhambra, whose colours, atmospheres and itineraries allowed Debussy to develop his creative talents in pieces like *Lindaraja*, *La soirée dans Grenade* or *La Puerta del Vino*. We will discuss the latter in more detail.

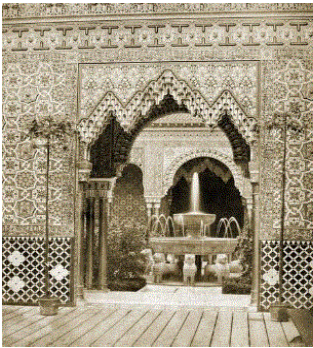


Figure 2. Architectural Alhambrism: a) Owen Jones: *The Alhambra Court, in the Crystal Palace (1851)*, London; b) Rafael Contreras: *Neo-Nasrid courtyard of the Anglada Palace (1874-1878)*, Madrid



Figure 3. Romantic views of the Wine Gate: a) David Roberts: *Charles V's Palace with the Wine Gate* (1833); b) Frederick Lewis: *Sketches and drawings of the Alhambra* (1835)

## 2. LA PUERTA DEL VINO, CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1913)

### 2.1 Context of the work

In late 1909, Manuel de Falla (1876-1946) sent a congratulatory postcard to his friend Claude Debussy (1862-1918) featuring the image of the Wine Gate of the Alhambra in Granada. The image shows the inner and eastern face of the gate, taken from the square of the Palace of Charles V, which is opposite the scene. The exact date on which the image was taken and when it was sent is unknown, but the fact is that it was the trigger that prompted the French composer to write a new prelude for piano, which was included third on the second album of *Préludes*, published in 1913.

The Wine Gate is the main access to the Medina of the Alhambra, inside the fortified complex. Its erection dates from the early 14th century, although the decoration of the interior doorway was carried out half a century later (Patronato de la Alhambra, s/f). It consists of two levels: the lower one, made of masonry, where the passage opens through a tubule arch (or pointed horseshoe), while the upper one, made of brick<sup>1</sup>, contains an open-plan room. Of the eastern side stand

out the exquisite decoration of the spandrels of the arch, developed using square tiles with ornaments of leaves and branches with shades of green, blue and yellow on a white background, plasterboard framing the window of the upper floor, some remains of paintings on plaster, and brick rigging seen in reddish tones arranged obliquely over the arch.

However, the architectural features shown on the postcard acquire an impressionistic nuance due to the play of light and shadow in the image (Fig. 4c). To the sharp contrast between the dark interior of the arch and the illuminated background plane is added the shifting projection of the shadow of a nearby but absent tree, and the oblique shadow line of the adjacent eaves. The exotic medieval forms, the fictitious colouring of the photograph or the deterioration of old constructions<sup>2</sup> are reminiscent of romantic picturesqueness. The composer's complicity with the postcard received is shown in his letter of reply to Falla, dated January 3, 1910, in which he stated: «You have flattered my taste for beautiful images on one of the sides I am most passionate about, for you know how much I love, unfortunately without knowing it, your country» (Debussy 2005: 1237; Otaola, 2007).

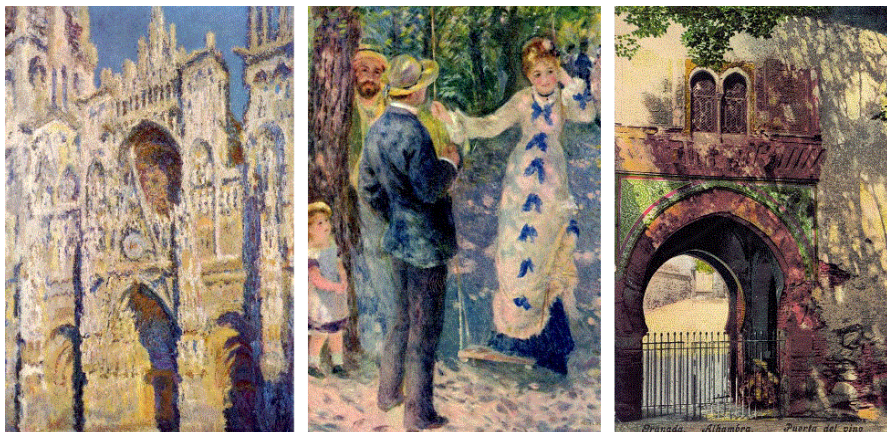


Figure 4. (a y b): Pictorial Impressionism a) Claude Monet: *La Cathédrale de Rouen, Le portail et la Sant de gira-Romain, plein soleil; harmonie bleue, 1892-1893*. Musée d'Orsay, Paris ; b) *La Balançoire (1876)*, Auguste Renoir. Musée d'Orsay. C) *Purger y Co. version 2, s. f. München: Postcard sent by Falla to Debussy at the end of 1909*

## 2.2 Evocation of architecture in Debussy's *La Puerta del Vino*

One might wonder whether Debussy, when composing the suggestive atmosphere of *La Puerta del Vino*, was directly inspired by the architectural features of the building and the impressions and feelings aroused by the image, or whether, on the contrary, creation occurred indirectly through topical resources associated with Andalusian exoticism, including music. It is difficult to give a concrete answer, but possibly it is a mixture of all the above.

It is worth remembering first of all that Debussy never visited the Alhambra and that the most he ever spent in Spain was a few hours to attend a bullfight in San Sebastián.<sup>3</sup> The approach to the Wine Gate is therefore produced through the image. «If you cannot afford to travel, do it through imagination»,<sup>4</sup> Debussy himself once said. No less important in this scenario is Debussy's contact with Spanish composers and their music in Paris.<sup>5</sup>

## The formal structure

In general, the structure of Debussy's music resembles a mosaic, in which subtle variations of repeating musical units and contrasting units that continue to maintain common elements manage to give unity to the work through a network of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic associations (Morgan 1994: 66). On the other hand, while in Classicism the musical form of prelude used to anticipate a major work of greater length, in Romanticism preludes become autonomous pieces susceptible of being performed independently through the hand of Chopin (Llácer 1980: 127).

In particular, the prelude *La Puerta del Vino* responds to a ternary structure A-B-A' (Table 1), that is, «a contrasting central section followed by a thematic/tonal repetition of the first part» (Pomeroy 2004: 47), to which a final Coda is added. This formal scheme, recurrent in the Debussyan repertoire, is here of a closed type according to Pomeroy (2004: 47), since the first part ends in the tonic (c 41) followed by a central section B in a contrasting tonal area (cc 42-65).<sup>6</sup>

Section A (cc 1-41) consists of a brief and «rough» introduction (cc 1-4) that anticipates the character of the piece. It is followed by the theme (cc 5-16) and its reworkings progressing through joint degrees (cc 17-30), ending with a passage of chord progressions (cc 31-41) that concludes on the tonic chord. As for section B (cc 42-65), it starts with the same introductory beats as the beginning of the piece, but suddenly tonality changes (c 44). The discourse takes up previous motif material in passages of different character (*âpre, passionnément, ironique, gracieux*) or tempo (*en retenant*). The last section, A' (cc 66-84), deals with the variation of the first to complete the specular scheme. It begins with the theme (cc 66-74) and continues with its shortened reworkings, the last of which (cc 84-85) marks a progressive departure distancing that prepares the definitive extinction in the last bars (Coda, cc 85-90).

Is it possible to relate this A-B-A' scheme to the axial layout of the Nasrid building? Hardly. Although it is true that both have a false symmetry, this formal structure is quite frequent in Debussy's repertoire, not only in his preludes (Pomeroy, 2004: 47). Moreover, the emphasis on the musical work occurs at the ends A and A', whereas in the architectural work the entire ornamental apparatus is concentrated in the central part ("B"). In addition, in the postcard sent by Falla, the framing does not even cover the entire façade, but rather focuses on the gateway.

### About rhythm

Debussy uses the «Mouvement de Habanera», a recurring rhythm among French composers when evoking the image of Spain,<sup>7</sup> despite its Cuban origin. Debussy himself had already used it in his above-mentioned alhambrist works *Lindaraja* (1901) and *Soirée dans Grenade* (1903). It consists of a slow binary rhythm formed by a first beat with dotted quaver and semiquaver, and a second beat with double quaver. (Fig. 5a).

This rhythm permeates the whole piece, as an *ostinato* on the bass, except for sporadic passages. To this substrate, foreign rhythmic units are superimposed by groups of figures that show a desire to escape from constraint. In this sense, Debussy's piece seems to be in tune with the uninhibited, fresh, decorative and apparent character of Nasrid architecture, in contrast to the rigor and forcefulness of the neighbouring Palace of Charles V, which would get on with Wagnerian grandiloquence.

Section A (D <sub>b</sub> or Re <sub>b</sub> )	cc. 1-41
Section B (B <sub>b</sub> or Si <sub>b</sub> )	cc. 42-65
Section C (D <sub>b</sub> or Re <sub>b</sub> )	cc. 66-84
Coda	cc. 85-90

Table 1. Structure of *La Puerta del Vino*, according to Bruhn (1997)



Figure 5. a) Habanera ostinato rhythm in the bass of *La Puerta del Vino*; b) beginning of the melodic theme by diatonic ascending tritone (cc 5-8)

### Melodic discourse

Unlike the traditional melody, the thematic concept in Debussy's music consists of «a series of collections of short motivic particles that are variations on other interconnected

mutually [as if they were objects observed from different perspectives (Burkholder 1984: 928)], rather than derivations of a single primary melodic resource established as a starting point at the beginning» (Morgan 1994: 60).



Figure 6. Detail of ornamentation on the Eastern facade of the Wine Gate (Alhambra, Granada): arabesque in spandrels (*albanegas*), plasterwork and remains of paint on plaster (Source: <https://andaltura.com/la-alhambra-y-el-generalife/puertas-de-la-alhambra-y-el-generalife/puerta-del-vino/>).

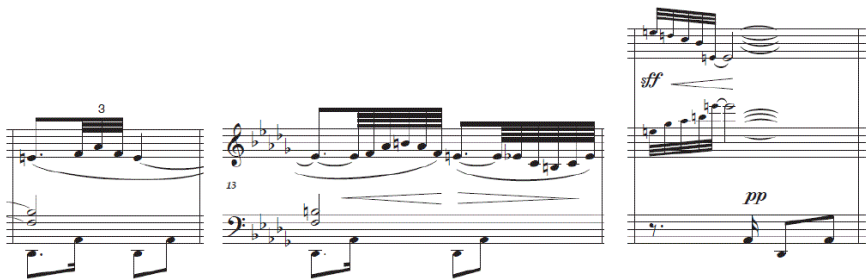


Figure 7. Detail of melodic ornaments in the prelude *La Puerta del Vino* (Debussy) (from left to right): flourish (c 11), melisma (cc 13 and 14) and converging arpeggios (c 21).

In the most expressive passages, the discourse unfolds into three different levels: while in the foreground the melody advances by joint degrees, alternating rhythmic patterns of three and two notes, in an intermediate level pedal notes appear and in the distance the Habanera rhythm resounds. The architectural analogy is served by estimating the different approaches of visualization: overview, background vision and detail.

The theme begins with a melancholic tritone ascending by diatonic ensemble degrees with decreasing figuration (cc 5-9) (Fig. 5b). Upon reaching the first resting place, the melody is adorned with a flourish that emphasizes the listening of the augmented second interval (c 11), characteristic of the minor Hispano-Arabic mode.<sup>8</sup> This ornamentation would be identified with the *jipío* or *lamento* of flamenco singing. Shortly afterwards, the ornament takes on greater prominence, being applied in a series of melismas that emulate other melodic formulas of the *cante jondo* (Otaola 2007: 8). One of the most effective moments is the converging arpeggios of ornamentation that recall the plucking and strumming of the guitar.

The mentioned motives resources are impressions that evoke the gypsy, the Andalusian, the Nasrid, through the turns of *flamenco* singing and the melancholy sound of the guitar. «Debussy identified Spain with the guitar, which for him was not an instrument of joy and joy but melancholy and intimate» (Otaola 2007: 4). Exotic scales help to recreate an orientalist atmosphere. All these arguments are nonetheless musical.

As for the evocation of architecture, several interpretations appear. If we resort to the idea of *arabesque* –the ornamentation formed by tracery, foliage...– present both in the arabesque work of the spandrels and in the plasterwork that escort the geminated recess on the upper floor, the musical ornaments of the piece (flourishes, runs, *arpeggios*...) would only be alluding to the rich architectural ornamentation of the Gate built (leaves, branches, palmettes...).<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect that can be put in parallel is light and colour. Both the tiling and the overall appearance of the façade provide a chromatic play rich in contrasts. In music, the concept of chromatism refers to the use of alterations outside the basic tonality. Debussy is given to dissonant passages –especially in section B– from which emanate flashes, vibrations, mystery. Thus, from the chromatic richness of the piece a link can be inferred with the contrasts of colour and the ephemeral play of lights and shadows on the ancient walls of the Gate.

### The Spanish character

Debussy prescribes an interpretation *avec de brusques oppositions d'extrême violence et de passionnée douceur*. And already in the first bars a strong contrast is heard between the violent *acciacature* of the first bars and the placid *très expressif* of the melodic theme. This abrupt confrontation would represent the contradictions and nuances of the Spanish character, but also the contrasts of textures –stone, brick, tile, plaster– and of lights and shadows –the illuminated background in contrast with the dark interior of the arch–.

The rich variety of indications for the control of dynamics, articulation, *tempo* and expression reflect Debussy's interest in sonority itself (Hinson s/f). Other notations –metronomic indication, fingering, pedal notation–, however, are entrusted to the performer's discretion and have consequently been omitted.

### Debussynian harmony

The tonic D (=Re) (sections A and A') and B (=Si) (section B) are at the base of the entire prelude, although they cannot be considered tonalities in the traditional sense of the term, due to the high level of dissonance, the frequent tonal ambiguities and the modal character that surrounds the whole work. Hinson (s/f) speaks of polytonal harmony. Debussy's free way of understanding harmony leads him, for example, not to resolve dissonances and to accept with pleasure the progression in parallel movement.



Both D and B appear as pedal notes, being one of the most extensive examples of these ostinato-shaped designs (Gironés 2018: 80). Each of them actually works as a double pedal: D-A in the first case and B -F in the second, inseparably linked to the rhythmic pattern.

When establishing architectural-musical affinities, the same concept of harmony is transversely comparable in its broad meaning of «proportion and correspondence of some things with others in the whole that compose» (DLE 2021). It is clear that one is the order of the building and another the order of the piece, but the same absence of fixed rules that is observed in the gate is openly evident in the piano prelude.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Both musical and architectural Alhambriism draw from the picturesque and orientalism. However, the architectural one is much more literal, it could be said that it is a revival, but not so in the case of music. Arabic music is not used as such to replicate, but rather the musical topics associated with Spanish.

Debussy's prelude represents a late manifestation of the musical Alhambriism, which maintains the aura of mystery and exoticism of the romantic texts of Chateaubriand or Irving, and the paintings which Lewis or Roberts had anticipated throughout the 19th century, through a personal synthesis of exquisite mastery.

Starting from the creative substrate of the composer, the references that he uses to elaborate the prelude come from resources extracted from Andalusian folklore and the sound of the guitar, as well as from the impressions raised when observing the picture of the Nasrid monument, surely stimulated without being aware of it by the figure of the sender. Consequently, it is not possible to understand the piece without the existence of the *flamenco* singing, just as it would not be understood without the intermediation of the precise photograph, an image that gathered in

itself all the impressionist-painterly potential that the French composer was able to develop. It is difficult to find a reliable musical description of the architectural fact, but rather a series of affinities that reflect a particular mood, atmosphere and feelings derived indirectly from this Alhambra's Gate. These impressions would mainly revolve around the freedom and uninhibited character of Nasrid architecture, the contrasts of light and shadow, the backlighting effect of the arch, the play of material and chromatic textures, the ornamental richness, the different planes of vision and listening, the harmonic order not subject to strict rules, the instantaneity of the moment, and less probably, the symmetrical tripartite structure.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The photograph predates the restoration undertaken by Leopoldo Torres Balbás between 1923 and 1927. This is why the brickwork is still hidden by an added plaster.

<sup>2</sup> According to Alois Riegl, the antique value of a monument "manifests itself rather in an imperfection, in lack of closed character, in a tendency to erosion of form and colour" (The Modern Cult of Monuments: Character and Origin, 1903).

<sup>3</sup> According to Lesure (1982: 101), this visit would have taken place during the summer of 1880.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to André Messager (Debussy, 2005: 778).

<sup>5</sup> It is the case of Ricardo Viñes, Isaac Albéniz or Manuel de Falla.

<sup>6</sup> The absence of repetitions means that this formal interpretation is not categorical. In fact, other authors propose slightly different schemes. The one proposed here is based on Bruhn (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Other French composers who adopted the Habanera rhythm to evoke the Spanish character were Georges Bizet: Carmen (1875); Jules Massenet: Le Cid (1885); Camille Saint-Saëns: Havanaise (1887); Maurice Ravel: Habanera for two pianos (1898).

<sup>8</sup> In reality, it is a minor third interval that is perceived as an augmented second.

<sup>9</sup> Curiously, Debussy composed Deux Arabesques for piano around 1890.

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