

**Francisco Tárrega** was known in his day as “the Sarasate of the guitar”: like his countryman, violinist Pablo de Sarasate, he composed for his instrument, toured widely, and helped advance the cause of its music. Tárrega’s concert tours took him throughout Europe, and he wrote original music as well as arranging the music of other composers. His ***Capricho árabe*** reminds us of the Moorish influence on Spanish life. While it does not sound especially Arabian to modern ears, its graceful and haunting melodies — with just a whiff of exotic harmonies — doubtless sounded daring and strange to audiences a century ago.

Among Tárrega’s original compositions are about twenty preludes for solo guitar. These are not preludes to anything, simply short works that are complete in themselves. The **Prelude No. 18 in D Major** has become one of the best known of Tárrega’s works in this form. Set in a slow 2/4, it flows gracefully along its triplet pulse. Even with the repeat, it spans barely a minute.

**Isaac Albéniz** found himself as a composer when he moved away from writing conventional virtuoso pieces and began to make use of Spanish material in his own music. Much of his piano music can easily and idiomatically be performed on the guitar; all of his pieces on this recital were originally written for piano. In 1888, he composed a set of twelve **Piezas características**. These “character pieces” are a group of dances, each dedicated to one of the composer’s friends or students. The last of them, ***Torre Bermeja*** (“Crimson Tower”), is a vigorous piece marked *Allegro molto*. It is in 3/8 and is sectional in form, with lyric episodes in a variety of keys intermingled within the rush of triplets that drives the music forward. Despite these sharp shifts of mood, the 3/8 meter remains constant.

**Francisco Tárrega’s *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*** may well be the best-known piece ever written for guitar. It takes the form of a tremolo study, in which the fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand pick out a rapid tremolo as the thumb and lower fingers play a simple, ostinato-like melody far below. This is shimmering, haunting music, and its delicate textures mask the many difficulties it creates for the performer.

**Isaac Albéniz** composed four of the eight movements that make up the ***Suite española*** in 1886, then completed the others over several years. Each of the eight movements depicts or was inspired by a particular place in Spain, with the exception of the final movement, a nocturne entitled *Cuba*. Though Albeniz published these movements as a set, individual movements have become famous on their own and are often played separately. ***Asturias***, the fifth piece, has the feel of perpetual motion. It is subtitled ***Leyenda*** (“Legend”).

**Miguel Llobet Solés** (who often used Llobet as his last name) was a Catalan guitarist and composer. He studied with Tárrega and toured throughout Europe and the United States. Though he composed

music of his own, he is best remembered for his many arrangements. ***El testament d'Amelia*** (“Amelia’s Will”) is an old Catalan folksong that tells the sad tale of the princess Amelia. Poisoned by her stepmother, she dictates a will that leaves her husband to that woman — she knows that the two of them have been having an affair. Marked *Andante espressivo*, the song is very sad and very beautiful. Andrés Segovia often uses it as an encore.

In 1889-90, **Isaac Albéniz** wrote a suite of six pieces for piano entitled ***España***. Each piece was meant to reflect the music of a particular part of Spain. The fifth, ***Capricho Catalan***, based on the music of Catalonia, uses an absolutely haunting melody that flows along above a syncopated accompaniment. Albéniz constantly reminds the performer to play *dolce* and *dolcissimo*. *Capricho Catalan* has been transcribed for guitar by many performers, and has become more popular on guitar than on piano.

Trained as a keyboard player, **Domenico Scarlatti** held positions in Naples, Florence, Venice, Rome, and Palermo before making the long trip to Lisbon, where he served as court harpsichordist to the King of Portugal. Scarlatti is remembered today for his 550 keyboard sonatas, most written over the final decade of his life. He called them *esercizi* (“exercises”), and while they are not actually in sonata form, they look ahead to that form as it would develop across the remainder of the century. Set in 3/8, the **Sonata in D Major** is a bright and energetic **Presto** consisting of two halves, both repeated. Full of runs and turns, it makes quick excursions into D minor along the way, and its quick pace and clean textures sound very good in transcription for guitar.

The ***La Folia*** tune originated in fifteenth-century Portugal, where it was originally a fast dance in triple time, performed so strenuously that the dancers seemed to have gone mad (*folia* means “mad” or “empty-headed”). Its solemn chordal progression and stately melody have made it attractive to a number of composers — most notably Corelli — as the basis of variations. Another of those smitten was the great Spanish guitarist Fernando Sor (1778-1839), who published his set of variations in 1810. Almost a century later, in 1908, **Miguel Llobet Solés** used this as the basis for his ***Variations on a Theme of Sor***. He begins with a statement of the theme and the first two variations of Sor’s version. From there, Solés creates variations of his own, pausing after the sixth to offer a brief interlude, an *Intermezzo* marked *Andante molto espressivo*. He then presents four more variations of increasing difficulty, with the eighth variation played entirely in harmonics and the ninth entirely by the left hand.

One of the greatest of all guitar players, **Agustín Barrios** (who sometimes took the last name Mangoré), learned to play in his native Paraguay. In 1910, at the age of 25, he left for a one-week tour of Argentina that turned into such a success, he was gone for the next fourteen years. As a performer, Barrios was said to be a virtuoso on the order of Paganini, and in 1914 became one of the first guitarists to make recordings. His ***Mazurka appassionata*** is one of his most famous pieces — and one of his most difficult.

Barrios sets the piece in the triple rhythm of the mazurka and then demands huge stretches from the guitarist, who must also play with the rhythmic freedom the mazurka demands.

**Antonio Lauro** began his musical studies on the violin and piano, but at age 15 he heard a recital of guitar music by Agustín Barrios and was so moved that he switched to the guitar. From an early age, Lauro was drawn to the folk music of Venezuela, particularly to the waltz-like dances native to the region of Venezuela and Colombia. He published a set of four Venezuelan waltzes — ***Cuatro valsés venezolanos*** — of which the third has become the best known. Nicknamed “Vals criollo” (“Creole Waltz”), it was later renamed ***Natalia*** by the composer. This is a quick-paced waltz marked *Allegro ritmico*, and it whips past in 90 seconds. By contrast, ***Ana Florencia*** is a gentle lullaby.

Cuban composer and guitarist **Leo Brouwer** has found the inspiration for much of his own art in the music and rituals brought to Cuba by African slaves. His ***El Decameron Negro*** (“The Black Decameron”) is a set of three pieces inspired by a group of nineteenth-century African stories collected by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, who in turn had taken his title from the fifteenth-century *Decameron* by Boccaccio. Brouwer composed *El Decameron Negro* in 1981 and dedicated it to guitarist Sharon Isbin. Each movement was inspired by one of Frobenius’ tales; listen for the sound of pounding horses’ hooves in the middle movement, which translates as “The Flight of the Lovers through the Valley of Echoes.”

**Sérgio Assad** has developed a distinguished career as a composer, arranger, and performer. His own compositions reflect his passion for the music of Brazil in its many forms — not just the folk music that animated Villa-Lobos but also jazz, classical, and Latin music in general. Assad has written a series of Brazilian Suites for solo guitar, and ***Caterete*** is the first movement of his ***Suite Brasileira No. 4***, composed in 2015. The score notes that a *catarete* is a dance from rural Brazil, popular with the people born of the intermarriage between Brazil’s indigenous and European populations. This is a very pleasing piece, and Assad’s performance marking of “Relaxed” is exactly right for it.

In the late 1920’s, Brazilian composer **Heitor Villa-Lobos** made his mark on writing for the guitar. In the ***Suite populaire brésilienne***, he gathered five of the many short pieces he had composed for guitar over the previous decades, and they have become a central part of the literature. Villa-Lobos fell in love with a particular form of Brazilian folk music, the *chôro*, a body of dances and serenades performed by groups of street musicians in Rio de Janeiro. While the literal meaning of *chôro* is simply “lament,” many of these pieces are animated, syncopated, and complex. The movements on this recital are the ***Valsa-chôro***, a slow waltz with a quicker interlude at its center; the ***Chôrinho*** (“little choro”), also slow but based on syncopated rhythms; and the graceful ***Mazurka-chôro***.

At the same time that he was assembling the *Suite*, Villa-Lobos composed his **Twelve Etudes for Guitar**. These etudes are just that — “studies” — and they present a guitarist with a variety of technical challenges. The last of them, **No. 12 in A Minor**, has become famous for its difficulty. It is a study in glissandi, as the guitarist must slide three-string patterns very quickly across the fingerboard. The work is in ternary form, with a pounding central section before the glissandi return and drive the etude to its exciting ending.

During the 1960s, **Astor Piazzolla** wrote a set of four pieces, each of them devoted to a particular season in Buenos Aires: ***Cuatro estaciones porteñas***. The meaning of *porteña* (or *porteño*) is elusive: it means port area, and specifically has come to refer to the port area of Buenos Aires, where the tango was born. By extension, *porteñas* has come to mean anyone or anything native to Buenos Aires. Piazzolla sometimes performed the four pieces as a group, and they have been arranged for solo violin and orchestra to form a modern counterpart to Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. This concert offers ***Invierno porteño***, the “winter” movement, in an arrangement for solo guitar. It is a tango marked *Lento e drammatico*.

Born in Tunisia, **Roland Dyens** made his career in Paris, where he taught at the National Conservatory of Music. Dyens played not only classical music but also jazz, pop, tango, Brazilian music, and many other genres. He was famed for his improvisation, and was once improvising at a concert when an audience member’s watch alarm went off, playing “O Susanna.” Dyens tried to play through this interruption, but the alarm continued, and finally he gave up and improvised a duet with the watch, to the delight of the audience. In 2003 Dyens published his ***Triaela***, a set of three pieces, each inspired by a different composer or kind of music. The final movement, ***Clown Down (Gismonti at the Circus)***, draws from the music of the Brazilian guitarist-composer Egberto Gismonti, who himself wrote a work titled *Circense*. This is a fiery, virtuoso piece: over a powerful ostinato come fierce bursts of sound, fragments of melody, snapped-off chords, glissandos, and moments when the strings are struck rather than plucked. *Clown Down* is a very fun piece — and a perfect way to conclude a concert.

— Eric Bromberger