

Title: Oscar Esplá – Fiction and facts
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Introduction

Music encyclopedias do their best to provide accurate biographic information on composers. However, in the case of Spanish composer Oscar Esplá, respectable encyclopedias like *Grove* and the Spanish SGAE *Diccionario de la música* have not yet come to terms with the fourteen years which Esplá lived in Belgium and they continue to provide information which is incorrect or which is blown out of proportions, while I take the opportunity here to signal a few obscurities that keep popping up in writings about the composer.

The information which follows summarizes what I think requires revision in standard reference works. In the case of *Grove*, I have been informed that my suggestions will be given attention (confirmation on my letter of 21 February 2001 to Macmillan Reference). The publisher of the *Diccionario*, SGAE, has never replied to any of my inquiries or comments.

This article is therefor also a cry for help. While a serious amount of time was spent in tracking sources to which standard works refer, I need the help of others to clarify a few mysteries which still hang around the personality of Oscar Esplá and in particular about the things that have been written by others and himself referring to the sources that seem to be reiterated while the origin of some can, as yet, not be identified.

Karel Willems

Beginning with the entry about Esplá in the *Diccionario* written by Enrique Franco Manera (Volume 4, p786-794, 1999) it should be noted that this author refers to a publication by a Karel Willems, *Un grand musicien espagnol*, Amsterdam 1952, in the bibliography and in text:

Dice Karell [sic] Willems que difficilmente se encontrará en el canto levantino español ninguna de las escalas que algunos críticos le atribuyen [p.787]

This small article of eight pages has surfaced and has now been commented and edited on the Internet. All activities undertaken to establish the identity of this Mr. Willems have been fruitless. One of Esplá's children told me that a Mr. Willems, not the playwright Paul Willems, visited the house when they lived in Flanders after the war.

Shelly

On page 788, the article by Franco mentions the authors Lehner and Shelly by Adolfo Salazar in his *Música y músicos de hoy*, Madrid 1928, which mentions both writers. During his journalistic period at the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* while under Nazi rule, Esplá refers three times to Shelly:

Parmi les esthéticiens qui aiment de s'exprimer en termes transcendentals [sic], parfois peu scientifiques, sur la IX^e Symphonie, l'Américain Shelly fait une belle phrase dans un sens métaphysique pour nous assurer qu'il voit dans cette œuvre gigantesque l'Univers entier condensé dans une synthèse de joie, de liberté et d'amour de l'Humanité [October 29, 1940].

Des processus harmoniques analogiques remplissent les œuvres de Bruckner. Ces successions harmoniques « tournantes » appartiennent déjà aux « séries imaginatives automatiques » de Shelly (Psychology of Invention) [September 18, 1941]

[...] et le critique américain Shelly, de même que l'espagnol del Villar, cité par Collet, voient dans les œuvres les plus récentes d'Oscar Esplà l'évolution artistique la plus intéressante de l'époque actuelle [October 13, 1943 signed 'interim']

It is therefore safe to assume that a publication by Shelly existed before 1928. We have a book title, an author name which could be misspelled, his nationality, and we know that he was esthetician and music critic. So far, the publication is at large.

Lehner

Not only in the Salazar book, but used by Esplà himself in references found in articles he wrote for *Le Soir*. In the same article about Beethovens's 9th symphony, Esplà expresses his disapproval of what Lehner has written:

Ajoutons que cela, cependant, vaut mieux que la pauvreté de compréhension d'un Ayrton, d'un Lehner, ou même Fétis [October 29, 1940].

while in a review on Bruckner's 8th symphony:

La « plénitude et l'énormité », le « défaut d'homogénéité », dont parle Riemann, quand il compare Bruckner et Brahms, sont ici d'une application plus relative, de même que les considérations de Lehner à ce sujet (Moderne Musikaesthetik) [September 18, 1941].

A côté de cette tendance aux grands blocs sonores, d'une unité plus apparente que réelle, comme observent Riemann et Lehner, nous avons la concision homogène d'un Brahms dont l'art est aussi allemand que celui de Bruckner, mais conçu à travers un autre concept de la mesure et de la proportion ; moins opposé à l'esprit actuel fait de vitesse, de dynamisme et d'objectivité [March 20, 1942].

Again there is a book reference, in German this time, but again it is a publication which has not made it to any national library and no copy has as yet been located.

An incomprehensible miss

The *SGAE Diccionario* has a minor reference to the time the Spanish composer lived in Belgium:

[...] un sinfín de comentarios críticos, fruta de su etapa en Bruselas, publicados principalmente en *La Libre Belgique* [p. 793].

It does not tell us when and how long this 'etapa' was (1936-1949) and mentions the wrong newspaper. In fact this couldn't be more off the mark. During the time that Esplà was a music critic for *Le Soir* (1940-1944), the mentioned *La Libre Belgique* was a publication forbidden and suppressed by the occupying Germans. The underground movement had managed to issue a number of editions in the form of typewritten sheets and primitively stenciled copies of '*La Libre*' and in one of them [#28, February 1, 1942], the Nazi controlled *Le Soir* is attacked for not mentioning an anti-German manifestation during a performance of Carmen. After the liberation, '*La Libre*' reappeared and it is not until November 1947 that Esplà is mentioned by this newspaper after the first Belgian performance of the Sonata del Sur. Esplà never wrote in *La Libre Belgique*.

Spanish translations from *Le Soir* articles

While at *Le Soir* during the war years, Esplà published 237 articles on music. Only 15 of these articles and parts of 11 others were translated into Spanish and appeared in *Escritos de Oscar Esplà, vol 3* by Antonio Iglesias in 1986. The *Diccionario* provides the titles of these articles [p. 793]. Obviously, Iglesias had to make a choice and the selection is representative, though the author failed to comment

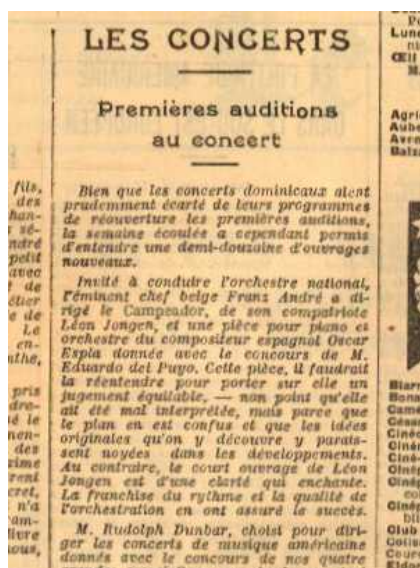
on the difficulties with the ruling class which Esplá had after publication of his article “Organisation de la vie musicale” (Organización de la vida musical) [July 3rd, 1942].

Another misinterpretation of Antonio Iglesias

While Iglesias is a formidable documenter with a list of excellent books on Spanish music and an authority on Esplá, he sometimes gets carried away with his enthusiasm. In his booklet

Oscar Esplá, Joaquín Rodrigo, Rodolfo Halffter, Manuel de Falla, I. Albéniz-C. Halffter, Isaac Albéniz, Joaquín Turina. Sus obras para piano y orquesta, Madrid, 1994

it is said on page 15 that first performance of the Sonata del Sur in Paris, in October 1945 was a big success (“Obtuvo un gran éxito del público y las reseñas críticas se volcaron en el elogio”). The reviewer of *Le Monde*, René Dumesnil did not give a favorable review saying “... the blueprint is obscure and the original ideas one discovers appear to be drowned in the developments”. Here follows the clipping from *Le Monde*, October 17, 1945, page 7:



Suggestions made to Grove

In my crusade to eradicate the fiction around Esplá, I have documented the items in a letter to the most prestigious music encyclopedia in the English Language, the Grove which is issued by Macmillan in the United Kingdom. Here is the text which I presented them in February 2001.

Dear Sirs,

The new edition as available on the Internet has the entry written by Emiliano García Alcázar. I know Emiliano well, I think he is the most qualified person to write this entry in the Grove dictionary, and we have a good working relationship. I will send a copy of this letter to him. The entry is much more complete than the previous Bourligueux article. Yet, the new article has a number of statements which I consider incorrect or tendentious:

(1)

“... the Madrid Conservatory (which he directed, 1936-9)”

He was appointed director on August 31, 1936. On September 3, 1936 he received permission from the Dirección General de Bellas Artes to leave the country for the duration of three months “para realizar en el extranjero diversos trabajos de orden artístico como Compositor”. Esplá and his family took the

boat from Alicante to Marseilles, a British destroyer assigned to humanitarian duties. They stayed a while in Lyons, then moved on to Brussels where they lived a while in a hotel. The Esplá's are inscribed in the Belgian population register on November 13, 1936 and continue to live at the same Brussels address until March 18, 1947. He is not to return to Spain until August 1950. Esplá is one of those members struck from the staff of the Madrid Conservatory for disappearance, on March 31, 1939. This means that Esplá could not have served more than a few weeks as director since he was physically not there. It remains to be established who in practice exercised the function of director of the Conservatory in a city under siege. After the fall of Madrid, the directorship fell in the hands of Nationalist musicians, Turina and Sopena.

Suggestion: Refer to the fact that within weeks after his appointment as director of the Madrid Conservatory he moved to Belgium and that he never actually exercised the function.

(2)

“In 1946 he was made director of the Laboratoire Musical Scientifique in Brussels, researching in the field of acoustics and the psychology of music”.

This sounds as if the Lab was an existing institution and that Esplá was appointed as director. In the Belgian music history there is no mentioning of such an institution. In fact, a charitable organization for artists in need (OCA) gave him a six month contract, including living quarters and a salary to set up an operation for the making of educational films about dance. This came as a very welcome offer since his economical situation was close to starvation. The contract was valid as of September 1, 1948. He was brought in contact with the organization by a friend, Berthe Nyssens, who also acted as an assistant once he had the post. He invented the name of the laboratory himself and had stationary printed. The address of this laboratory was his home address.

When the contract was up for renewal, Esplá was fired on the grounds that he had not done enough on the choreographic movie project. In fact, he had used much of his time to establish a relation with the UNESCO in Paris as he saw that to be a way out of Belgium. During that time he also composed the Sonata española (Hommage à Chopin). Esplá consulted a lawyer and the outcome of the settlement was that Esplá could continue to live in the house until the end of August 1949. The total existence of the Lab is therefor less than seven months as it was dissolved after the letter in which his employment is terminated. The results of his studies on acoustics and the psychology of music were transferred to OCA and have not been recovered. The organization itself disappeared and my attempts to locate its archives have been unsuccessful though I do have the correspondence between the organization and Esplá and his lawyer.

It must be said that Esplá is himself responsible for creating a hagiographic view on his person. In a letter to a journalist (one you refer to: Juan de Dios Aguilar Gómez), written in 1958, Esplá says: “He dirigido en [Bruselas] el Laboratorio Internacional de Investigaciones Musicales Científicas”, so it was post mortem promoted to an international laboratory: Spanish Mr. Esplá and his part time Belgian assistant lady friend.

Suggestion: Take out the reference to the Laboratoire Musical Scientifique, since it is not part of (Belgian) music history, the results of the laboratory's research have not been made available, and because it was a one man operation, blown out of proportions. If you want to mention the lab, please provide the correct period (September 1948 – March 1949).

(3)

“In his voluntary exile in Belgium as a result of the Spanish Civil War ...”

Until the end of the Civil War he was indeed in voluntary exile but from then on he could not go back because of his Republican sympathies. As he writes himself in 1947: “Depuis que je suis condamné, comme vous le savez, par le tribunal de Franco, parce que je n’ai pas adhéré à son régime, et que mes biens, même mes droits d’auteur, ont été confisqués en Espagne, ...”, so not returning to Spain was a matter of survival rather than a realistic choice. There are plenty of examples of Republican Spaniards returning to Spain being jailed or executed. Other Spanish authors also use the expression “voluntary”, thereby ignoring the post-Civil War tensions as well as the fact that Esplá, during the Second World War could not travel freely. Esplá used his time in France in 1949 and 1950 to secure the documents to return to Spain eliminating the chance of being arrested upon entry. The Belgian period of Esplá can best be summarized as follows:

1936-1939 Exile during the Spanish Civil War, living of his savings taken from Spain and some concerts, private teaching.

1939-1940 Not able to go back to Spain for fear of reprisal, living on the odd concert and private teaching, some jury income.

1940-1944 Working for “Le Soir”, his best years economically. Not free to travel.

1944-1948 Poverty. Some income from concerts and publications outside Belgium. He had two private students. During this period he moved from SGAE to SABAM which made him independent from the performance fee restrictions imposed by the Spanish government.

1948-1949 The Lab with a decent income.

1949-1950 Paris. No evident income. He received some money from Unesco and prepared compositions with Parisian publishers such as Salabert.

Suggestion: drop the wording “voluntary exile” and/or elaborate on his situation.

(4)

“... worked as composer and as a music critic on Le Soir.”

The newspaper he worked for from 1940 to 1944 was indeed called “Le Soir”. It must be said that the war-time newspaper was stolen by the German occupier from the legal owners and put under control of the Nazi Propaganda-Abteilung. Today, this war-time newspaper is referred to as the “stolen Le Soir” and when after the war, the legal owners took possession of their facilities, all those who collaborated with the German propaganda, including Esplá, were no longer mentioned. In fact, the war-time journalists, including Esplá, were forbidden to exercise their profession afterwards. When Esplá died in 1976, “Le Soir” did not mention that he was ever in Belgium. It should be understood that due to his collaboration with a Nazi controlled medium, Esplá was considered a persona non grata without any future in Belgium, even if he was not convicted of collaboration with the enemy like most of his colleagues. His boss at “Le Soir” was sentenced to death... Still today, the biggest Belgian newspaper does not consider the war-time newspaper with the stolen name and facilities as part of its history. While Spain was “neutral” during the Second World War, Spaniards such as Iglesias have difficulty understanding this period of Belgian history, calling the newspaper respectable in context with Esplá. If in fact, the Belgian years of Esplá are not at all known in Spanish music history it is also because those years did not do his reputation any good.

Suggestion: refer to “Le Soir” with the years (1940-1944) and/or “under control of the German Propaganda-Abteilung”.

(5)

There is no mentioning that Esplá lived in Belgium (1936-1949) and in France (1949-1950).

Suggestion: Mention that from November 1936 till September 1949, Esplá lived in Belgium, then moved to France where he lived from October 1949 till his return to Spain in August 1950.

(6)

There is a reference to a publication by K. Willems, as there was in the Bourligueux article. I think it not to be wise to maintain this reference since neither Emiliano García Alcázar, nor myself have been able to put our hand on a copy of this mysterious book/article. The Fondo Oscar Esplá in Alicante does not have this publication. This Mr. K. Willems is referred to as a Belgian journalist, elsewhere as a Dutch journalist living in the United States. All actions to trace this person, his publication(s), or to establish his complete first name (it was encountered as Karel) have hitherto been unsuccessful.

Suggestion: drop the K. Willems reference.

[Added June 2005: The document does exist as documented elsewhere].

(7)

“He was invited by UNESCO in Paris to establish an international conference on the adoption of a single tuning standard (1948)”

Being invited to something is not necessarily a fact worth mentioning. It would be interesting to know if he played an active role in the conference. If he assisted, it is more likely to be 1949 or 1950. In a letter written by Esplá to the Belgian association for composers etc., SABAM dated March 25, 1950, when Esplá lived in Paris: “Chargé par l’UNESCO d’établir les bases pour une conférence internationale à l’objet d’adopter un diapason universel, je me trouve à Paris depuis quelques mois [...]”. Esplá did not travel to Paris in 1948 but went to Paris in early 1949 to meet with representatives of the French authors association and in mid April to meet with the Secretary General of the UNESCO. Then he moved to Paris early October 1949 to stay there until August 1950. I have indications that other composers took part in this conference: Villa-Lobos, Panufnik, Hanson, Malipiero, Florent Schmitt, Ibert, Martinů, Chávez, Tansman, Berkeley. UNESCO has not been cooperative in my research and I cannot be affirmative in a date or the result of the conference. I suppose your organization must have the means to find out when this conference took place and what was decided.

Suggestion: drop the “(1948)” attribute until further research establishes a correct year.

(8)

In the list of publications I miss a major reference which was financed by the Caja de Ahorros del Mediterráneo (CAM for short) which houses the Fondo Oscar Esplá in Alicante:

Exposición Óscar Esplá y la música de su tiempo, Alicante, May 1993. ISBN 84-75599-129-7, Con el patrocinio de CAM Fundación Cultural.

Suggestion: Add this reference. There is no author mentioned. It is sold out but many libraries in Spain have a copy, so do I.

(9)

The claim that he studied with Saint-Saëns in Paris is unqualified. Esplá himself never made a reference to this and his children maintain that he did not study with the French composer. Saint-Saëns and Esplá met in Vienna while the former was in the jury of the competition where Esplá landed his first international recognition. While there are many personal references to his studies with Reger, it would be safe not to refer to Saint-Saëns as his teacher. I have Esplá listed as living in Alicante in 1912-1913.

Suggestion: take out the reference to Saint-Saëns as his teacher until further research establishes if this was indeed the case.

Accents in Spanish names are missing in the item I printed from the Internet. This could be a technical restriction which I hope is not replicated in your new edition.

Using a US spelling checker, you must have noticed that I have a comparable “technical” issue.

I have extensive supportive material for the claims on the function as director at the Madrid Conservatory and the “laboratory” in Brussels. All this material is exposed in my book “Oscar Esplá in Belgium (1936-1949)”, currently being printed in the United States. [it appeared in August 2001]

Another book which I have prepared is “Oscar Esplá. Ses écrits de la période belge” which is the collection of all the articles Esplá wrote in the war-time “Le Soir” and some which he wrote in 1947 that were published in France. I still need to find a publisher.

A third book will be a thematic reference, but this is still in an embryonic stage. It will require me to live in Spain to do this properly and this will probably not be sooner than 2008, the year I plan to retire.

I just recently wrote an article in Dutch about Esplá’s war-time journalism which will shortly appear in the magazine of the Belgian Musicological Society. [it appeared in Vol. LVI, 2002]

With kind regards, [...]