



- [Clarinet Anthology](#)
- [Previous ClarinetFest Presentations](#)
- [Electronic Archived Issues](#)
- [Clarinet Journal Back Issues](#)
- [Links](#)

Julián Menéndez Rediscovered: Works for Clarinet

ClarinetFest® 1999
Oskar Espina-Ruiz

When I started my research on Julián Menéndez in 2000 he was a fading legend in Spain, his music was mostly inaccessible and no serious research or analysis work had been done on his life and works. Outside Spain he was completely unknown. However, I did know a few of his pieces for clarinet, as well as his revision of the Complete Clarinet Method by Romero, from my years at the Leioa Conservatory in Bilbao.

Julián Menéndez (1895, Bilbao – 1975, Madrid), from his earliest musical training, stood out as a clarinet virtuoso. In 1914 Menéndez moved to Madrid to further his clarinet and composition studies. By studying clarinet with Miguel Yuste (1870-1947), Menéndez later became the third and highest figure representing the Spanish school of clarinet, which Antonio Romero (1815-1886) started. The two positions he held until his retirement in 1955 were those of principal clarinetist in the Madrid Symphony Orchestra and the Madrid Symphonic Band, where he became a living legend. Joaquín Turina and other critics elevated Menéndez to the summit of the clarinet world. In 1933 Stokowski offered Menéndez the principal clarinet position at the Philadelphia Orchestra. Menéndez, however, decided to stay in Spain, where he had already started a revolution in the clarinet world, as much for his compositions as for his performance.

Menéndez's oeuvre, even though it was written in the 20th century, evolves strictly within the European schools of the 19th century. Menéndez's works for clarinet were composed in two distinctive styles of composition.

The revolution that Menéndez brought to the clarinet world lies in his expansion of the technical and expressive potential of the instrument. Menéndez did not compose for the clarinet as it is known within the symphonic repertoire, but for the clarinet as he himself knew and developed while leading the Madrid Symphonic Band. Within this distinct context of the symphonic band, the clarinet is an agile, flexible and tireless instrument owing to the fact that it is required to play the first violin parts of the orchestral repertoire. Particularly during the Menéndez era, 1914-1955, the Madrid Symphonic Band stood out for its extraordinary performances of the symphonic repertoire, with works like Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* or Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. In this context the clarinet plays with superb fluidity the solo as well as the accompaniment, with its range extending to the altissimo register. In Menéndez's music the clarinet accompaniments stand out for their complexity and virtuosity, while the solos offer an enormous richness of expression. Menéndez's writing employs keys not usually found in the clarinet repertoire as well as numerous and adventurous chromatic modulations. This is not due to any particular fondness for difficulty but, rather, due to the language in use then, and now, in the Madrid Symphonic Band. Its entire repertoire was played on the clarinet in B flat. This forces the clarinetist to master the most difficult keys and modulations without the luxury of changing to the clarinet in A which would make the score easier by permitting the clarinetist to play in keys better suited to the clarinet's mechanism.

Menéndez's music is an invaluable addition to the international clarinet repertoire. Slowly, but surely, Menéndez's music is gaining international recognition. After listening to my recent recording of the complete works for clarinet and piano by Menéndez —the first ever monographic recording of his works, in a double CD, released in Tokyo in July 2004— Charles Neidich wrote: "Menéndez's music, I realized listening to these CDs, fills an important niche for the clarinet. (...) Menéndez, judging by his compositions, must have been a formidable virtuoso." Richard Stoltzman wrote: "You have opened a beautiful treasure chest of repertoire for the world of clarinetists." J. Vicente Peñarocha, student of Julián Menéndez, Principal Clarinetist of the National Orchestra of Spain and Professor of Clarinet at the Madrid Royal Superior Conservatory wrote: "This

recording (...) is the result of the profound knowledge of Oskar Espina Ruiz, of his excellent technique and his sensitivity, and of his acknowledgement and appreciation of the figure and the oeuvre of an extraordinary clarinetist and excellent musician.”

In 2003 the Metropolitan Museum of Art included a clarinet of Julián Menéndez in its Musical Instruments Galleries. The Menéndez clarinet shares pride of place with the instrument of another eminent clarinetist of the 20th century, the American Benny Goodman. The plaque next to Menéndez’s clarinet reads: “The Spanish Basque Julián Menéndez (1895-1975) was a clarinetist of legendary virtuosity with the Madrid Symphony Orchestra and Madrid Symphonic Band. His compositions for the instrument represent a unique style of writing and greatly expanded the technical and expressive possibilities of the clarinet. Menéndez’s works are comparable in inspiration and scope to those written for piano by Albéniz and Granados.” — The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.