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Alicia de Larrocha
Musician of the Year



ALICIA DE LARROCHA

Alicia de Larrocha is chosen MUSICAL AMERICA'S Musician of the Year in the same season that she celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of her debut as a pianist. Anyone celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of a public career can reasonably be expected to seem venerable, grave, and ancient. Yet to apply any of these adjectives to Alicia de Larrocha would be patently inappropriate, not to say ludicrous. Indeed, it is difficult to associate this wonderfully bright, animated, and youthfully vibrant pianist with a career half a century long—until one realizes that she made her debut at the tender age of five.

Although de Larrocha undoubtedly has been a splendid pianist from the start, in this country she has become the object of acclaim and adulation only during the last dozen years. And even in that time her rise to full recognition has been gradual. For a time she was admired as a great Spanish pianist. Then, as a great woman pianist. Now at last she is recognized for what she has been all along—simply, a great pianist. Her designation as Musician of the Year, we feel certain, will be among the most popular and least controversial ever made in the eighteen-year history of the award.

In fact, Alicia de Larrocha has become such a favorite figure on the concert stage, not to mention in the recording catalogue, that it is sometimes forgotten that her first visit to the United States, back in 1954, was only moderately successful.

De Larrocha was born in Barcelona and studied as a child with the famous pedagogue Frank Marshall, a Spaniard of English ancestry who himself had been a pupil of Granados. That first childhood concert must have been encouraging, because it led to a serious career that found her playing first throughout her own country and then, starting in 1947, in various European capitals. Alfred Wallenstein, having heard her give a concert in Spain, invited her to the United States to appear with him and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, of which he was then music director. She played a Mozart concerto and de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* and was well reviewed. On the way home she stopped off in New York for a Town Hall recital and again the reviews were appreciative, especially for her performances of Granados, Albéniz, and Surinach. It seemed like a good start—but somehow, nobody made a move toward inviting the tiny young woman back for a return American engagement.

So between 1955 and 1965 Alicia de Larrocha remained more or less at home. She says that this ten-year interregnum, puzzling though it now seems, never bothered her. She had plenty of concerts to give in Europe, she was raising two young children, and with her husband, pianist Juan Torra, was di-

recting the Marshall Piano Academy of Barcelona.

But most important of all, she was making records, especially records of Albéniz and Granados. Marked with the distinctive flair and flavor she has always brought to Spanish music, they began garnering all sorts of European awards, including a Grand Prix de Disque. When her recording of Albéniz's *Iberia* appeared in the United States there was forthwith created a kind of de Larrocha underground, made up of listeners who admired the color, vivacity, and musicianship of her playing. Among the aficionados was musical agent Herbert Breslin, who wrote in 1965 to Miss de Larrocha asking if (a) she would like to come to the United States and (b) she was managed by anyone here. The respective answers being (a) yes and (b) no, Breslin got busy, with the result that Miss de Larrocha has been returning regularly ever since under Columbia Artists management and with himself as personal representative.

A great many concertgoers and record collectors have discovered that Alicia de Larrocha, like Pablo Casals, Andres Segovia, and Victoria de los Angeles, is anything but a purely Spanish musician. Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Ravel—composers of varied nationalities and different epochs—have all found skilled and sympathetic treatment at her hands. She has become a kind of unofficial queen of New York's Mostly Mozart Festival. It was not too many years ago that she gave an astonishing total of ten concerts during one season in New York City alone—a marathon of concerto performances and solo recitals that few other pianists of the day would dare undertake. During the current season Miss de Larrocha is playing nearly a hundred concerts in the United States and about the same number abroad.

Remarkably, Miss de Larrocha has managed to become a master of the keyboard art despite a physique that others might find discouraging. Standing only four feet nine inches tall, and weighing only about a hundred pounds, she is, one might say, the tiniest concert artist of major stature. But she has always compensated for her small size with a plenitude of vivacity and virtuosity. Her fingers, she has said, after ten years of stretching exercises and abetted by an oversized pinky, can now span ten notes, adequate to meet all musical challenges. "I started at four with Bach and Mozart," she recalls. "My small hands made it difficult, but nobody discouraged me. As a child I couldn't reach enough keys to play Spanish music. It was good training; if you can't play Bach, you can't play Spanish music. In both you must keep the rhythm strict. Don't let anybody tell you that small girls cannot become pianists."

And she is perfectly right, of course. Small girls can even become the Musician of the Year.