

A Conversation with Alicia de Larrocha



Alicia de Larrocha



Alicia & Adele at breakfast



Adele Marcus

How lucky for us! Adele Marcus, Professor of Piano at Juilliard School of Music... and teacher of the world's greatest pianists, is just completing her first book in the series THE WAY THEY PLAY [PIANO]. In this first book, along with Jorge Bolet and Rudolf Firkusny, is our own Alicia de Larrocha... who just became MUSICAL AMERICA'S Musician of the Year!

Prof. Marcus allowed us to utilize the first draft of her interview. Her book will be out in a few months... look for it on the special order sheet bound in the center of your MHR.

It is with the greatest pleasure that I submit some of the questions I have posed to Madame Alicia de Larrocha over breakfast at her hotel a number of months ago; questions which could not be answered by her immediately since she felt limited in expressing herself in English.

I prevailed upon her to please allow me to send my questions to Barcelona, and at her leisure have her answer them in Spanish. They have been translated. Undoubtedly, many of the very personal phrases which she has used could not be conveyed completely in the English language. I do believe the essence is there.

It was not only interesting for me to have her agree to do this although we have been friends for many years, but it was

actually a conquest because she does not like interviews.

I admire Madame de Larrocha so enormously, not only as a very great artist, pianist, musician, and one who is totally dedicated to her work, but as a human being. The human element which manifests itself in her playing is very apparent when you know her on a human level.

The first question I asked was: "How do you study a new work; what is your initial approach and some of your practicing habits?" Her answer was: "If I am dealing with a work by a composer who is familiar to me, I go directly to the musical sense and to the core of what the composer seems to be telling me. I have never been fascinated by reading a work

from beginning to end to explore all of its notes exclusively. Notes displease me when nothing is expressed.

"Furthermore, for me it is of the utmost importance to find the proper fingering to express a musical idea. At times, it has taken me many years just to find a proper fingering, but even more, when the instrument or the acoustics of the hall do not respond the way I wish them to, I have often changed the fingering during the concert itself, for the simple purpose of obtaining the sound and character of the phrase that I think necessary.

"Sometimes, the fingering at that moment is not very orthodox but it does not matter. If I am really dealing with a work totally unknown to me, I prefer before anything else to sight read away from the piano. After having found and having formulated an idea of this work, I try to decipher it at the piano. I then begin to analyze at the instrument itself."

My next question was: "Do you memorize by ear, photographic memory, harmonic analysis, tactile (keyboard), or all four? What do you depend upon most?"

Her answer was: "I think all these ways are necessary and important. However, not one of them alone is; not one of them itself is naturally sufficient. The most important for me is that of analyzing the form of the work together with the harmonic aspect. To go over it, in my mind, is also very essential. There are other ways of absorbing and memorizing that are not frequently taken into account, but which are certainly specific instances and cases that can be of great help. Phrasings, agogics, dynamics and I also believe very much in the rhythmic aspects. Certain accents here and there can be an invaluable guide for the memory. It is also important to work on the left hand alone, and then on the right hand alone and at extremely slow tempi."

"Alicia, how have you managed such a vast repertoire which seems to be always at your fingertips? Do you go over old works periodically just to keep them fresh in your memory?"

"My repertoire unfortunately is not as extensive as I would wish it to be, for I

must confess that in my youth, I did not work as much as I should have. However, what I learned then is what I now can play most easily, and almost without keeping them up. The more recent pieces on the contrary are impossible for me to practice consistently and a great deal before recitals."

"What is your daily technical regimen, if any, like stretching exercises, etc.?"

"Since I am very irregular and variable with my life in general, my practicing habits are also the same. There has never been a discipline in my work, but what has been most striking in my playing is the spontaneous intuition and impetus which I have never been able to explain from where it comes. There are days in which I desire to play all with technique, thirds, sixths, octaves and especially chords, Chopin etudes etc. Other days I am only attracted to simple works of pure music. My greatest obsession is to feel my hands flexible and firm at the same time. For this reason, without ever being aware of it, I am always exercising the extension of my fingers, be it at the keyboard or at the top of a table, chair, any place."

"How do you practice the day of the concert? Do you practice much?"

"If I have a rehearsal with orchestra or must try out the piano, I do it in a reflective manner, and without giving of myself too much. I prefer to spare myself for the moment of the concert. If the piano is a heavy action, I work with a lot of weight in my fingers, and slowly, and if the acoustics are poor and dry, with the piano close, so that later at the concert everything will sound better and easier, almost always I work without a pedal. In this manner, I search for legatos and sonorities that afterwards with the pedal will enrich the result.

"Of course, this is all relative since there are days which, due to traveling, I have no time to try out the piano, and there are other days in which I don't even want to see the piano before the concert."

"Would you say a few things, Alicia, about tone, touch, phrasing and pedaling? Do you feel that these are the keynotes to the distinctive pianistic, musical style?"

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"All these factors, in my opinion, must go together and truly this makes a pianistic personality. The character and style of a work is given also by the sound. I believe every composer creates his character and atmosphere in sonority."

"Do you think that we can separate sound from style?"

"I believe every style has to have its characteristic sound; thus, in my opinion, style and sound must never be separated. I also believe that sound has to be adjusted according to the tempo."

"Would you please comment about suggestions for young people as to their need for discipline, total dedication, not to hurry in order to become superficially ready; whatever you feel and say will mean so much."

"It is very difficult to find and advise, or to give advice rather, what in my case, has been most prominently musical intuition. The only thing I can say is that in order to dedicate one's self to music, one has to have a true vocation and to love it truly, without settling or setting any conditions. The worst enemy of art is to be in a hurry. The command of an artist is not achieved with a deadline. A whole lifetime, no matter how long, is not enough to reach the goal of our ambitions."

"Thank you very much, Alicia de Larrocha. It has been a great honor to hear your comments and to interview you, and I know that your wonderful words will ring in many countries and the young, as well as the old, will certainly cherish every word you said."

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