

Clavier April 1982



# Alicia de Larrocha

In November 1981 Alicia de Larrocha gave a recital at Oberlin College, performing works of Schumann and Chopin. She brought to the music the inspired depths of musicality and artistic refinement that have endeared her to her large following. The audience responded to her playing enthusiastically with excited applause, foot stomping, and a standing ovation.

Few people realized, however, that she had only recently returned to the concert stage. With her husband gravely ill in Barcelona, torn between her concert commitments and a desire to remain by his bedside, she had cancelled the first part of her fall tour, which would have taken her to Russia and other parts of the world.

In addition to her performing, de Larrocha is Director of the Marshall School of Music in Barcelona, a position she inherited from her teacher, Frank Marshall, who in turn replaced his teacher, Enrique Granados, after his death.

On the afternoon of her Oberlin concert, de Larrocha agreed to an interview in Spanish. Her comments reveal the thoughts of a teacher, concert artist, and perpetual student in the art of music-making.

by Olga Llano Kuehl

*What repertoire did you assign to your pupils?*

The works of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, and others.

*Did you assign any particular technical exercises?*

Scales and arpeggios are necessary, but for each pupil I designed specific exercises to meet his particular needs. No method or approach fits every pupil, as you know.

*Much has been said about your small hand. You are fortunate because your fifth finger is the same height as your index finger and that increases your reach. Do you have any special exercises for extension?*

Yes, I have always done stretching exercises; and my fifth finger seemed to grow even after I matured. However, one must be exceedingly careful not to force the hand. Many pianists — some even recently, such as Gary Graffman — have injured their hands by working too strenuously. I have a pianist-friend in Holland to whom this happened.

At any age a pianist can work at improving his stretch with chords of extension: forming three-note quartal harmonies using the middle three fingers, and building seventh and ninth chords with all the fingers. The best time, however, is when a pupil is young and his hand is flexible. A pianist should not be obsessed with the hand, though; instead he must concentrate on the music.

*Should a pianist adapt music to small hands or simply avoid certain pieces?*

If you cannot arrive at musical results, it is better to avoid certain works; however, if by increasing your hand span or by rearranging or redistributing notes you can still realize the spirit of the music, then that is the best solution.

*Good musical common sense.*

Yes.

*Are there any works you no longer perform?*

Yes, some of the more strenuous ones. I gradually reduce the number of these: pieces like Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 3, for example.

*Why is this?*

*Los añitos* [loosely translated, the "approaching" or "little years"].



Olga Llano Kuehl holds a D.M.A. in piano performance from the University of Cincinnati and has studied with Alicia de Larrocha.





*Are you learning new music?*

I am learning more Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and occasionally a contemporary work by a friend.

*Your teacher, Frank Marshall, coached you from an early age when you were growing up in Spain. How would you describe his qualities as a teacher?*

He was very flexible. He understood the most current trends and ideas in music and had a musical vision he adapted to each pupil. He never said, "Do it this way because I say so." His approach was to offer advice, but

suggest that a student follow it only if the musical result was right and convincing. This way he developed the personality of each pianist. Anything is possible if the end result is musical.

*How do you memorize?*

The way my teacher taught me: hands alone first, then mentally, with analysis. He always stressed memorizing the left hand first.

*Do you practice technique or exercises now?*

I don't have the time. Perhaps I should — it might help me. Now I work on the technique that's involved in the music; there is enough there.

*How do you achieve your beautiful tone? Do you have any secrets?*

It comes from the Granados and Marshall school with its emphasis on sonority and tone. Tone quality results from a combination of the physical, the aural, and the use of artistic pedaling.

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*At this point in our conversation I showed Madame de Larrocha several volumes of exercise books published by Granados and Marshall during their lifetimes, and read from the introduction to Marshall's Estudio Práctico sobre los Pedales del Piano (Practical Study on the Pedals of the Piano): "In the art of pulsation and in the use of the pedals is found the secret to the art of the piano." [translated]. Madame de Larrocha showed obvious pleasure in hearing this, and as she fondly handled the books, further explained that the exercises are elementary in training the musician who later, as a virtuoso, can apply the same concepts to concert literature.*

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*Which pianists do you most admire?*

So many, but Artur Schnabel has always been my idol.

*What advice would you offer to aspiring concert pianists? Go the contest route?*

I have negative feelings on contests and am against a concert career because it kills the music and destroys the art. It becomes a business — commercialism — that holds musicians captive. It then becomes very difficult to maintain a love for music and to perform fresh each time as though you were experiencing a first love. There are so many problems to overcome in a concert career: lack of preparation time, a person's varying physical and emotional condition, the inconvenience of travel, poor pianos. . .

*Then how do you cope with all this and yet produce beautiful music?*

I pray to God and wait for the miracle. If the acoustics in the hall are good and the sonority of the piano responds, then one gradually becomes inspired. If not — well?

*Then your advice to students?*

Keep studying and improving all your life. In truth, you will never know enough. ■