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Alicia de Larrocha



# The Private World Of Alicia de Larrocha

BY CAROL MONTPARKER

Onstage Alicia de Larrocha has an aristocratic demeanor along with understated elegance, but in person she is self-effacing and modest and even seems surprised and uneasy with her success. Only reluctantly does she grant an interview, but at her New York apartment she willingly shared her thoughts on a wide range of subjects.

De Larrocha has performed in the United States since 1955, when Alfred Wallenstein first brought her to Los Angeles; she has returned every season for the past 30 years. At the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center this summer, where she has been the first lady for 21 years, she played the great Mozart Piano Concerto, #27 in B<sup>b</sup>, K. 595, with the refinement and beauty that audiences look forward to hearing from her. When she entered the stage, just visible above the music stands, the audience greeted her with a storm of applause. At the piano she is calm, concentrated, and a youthful presence. Her Mozart had everything from beautifully shaped phrases and lustrous melodic lines to difficult passages that she performed with seeming nonchalance, but with no detail sacrificed. The only puzzlement was that her face and body hardly reflected the joy that is apparent in her playing.

Despite her external reserve the music had the requisite gladness, drama, and congeniality. De Larrocha's approach is modest and direct, with no guile, affectation, or razzle-dazzle. Afterward she was visibly tired, but smiled sweetly and acknowledged her adoring audience. As she embraced a bouquet of roses, she had all the elegance of a Goya *doña*.

With homes in Barcelona, Switzerland, and New York, de Larrocha mused on the logistical problems connected with her nomadic life on concert tours. Her expressions of delight in being a grandmother gave me a sense that she may be getting ready to yield her frenetic concert life in favor of domestic tranquility near her daughter and three-year-old granddaughter in Barcelona. The glamour and commercialism of life as a concert artist holds no appeal for the Spanish pianist. "I never in my life thought about, nor expected to be in this concert life that takes me continually from one place to the other. I was born into a musical family with music around all the time. That was my life, but I never sought to have all this. What I really enjoy is being by myself, practicing, analyzing, listening. That is my life; that is music. The rest of it is not music. This life of touring is business. And there are mo-

ments when I am disgusted by the way that art and music are turned into a way for everyone to make money."

De Larrocha addressed the problems facing young artists. "There are so many great young pianists, more than ever before in history. I always wonder which ones are truly devoted to music and which are simply going after the musical life; there is a big difference. Many young artists are given opportunities before they are truly musically mature. Then what? Then there's nothing. Above all there has to be the music, before anything else. Then, yes, they have to make a living, and I really feel sorry for this new generation, because neither music, painting, theater, sculpture, nor poetry are careers; they are arts. Did Michelangelo make a career? Did Rodin? No, they produced art, and then if someone came along and wanted to buy it, O.K. Now the focus is all wrong, and there are many factors working against young musicians. First, the anxiety-filled life we live, with everything fast, ambitious, and materialistic. Second, they have to deal with managements who are just there to make money and build concert halls that are bigger and bigger so they can make more money; and it's all completely against the music, the pianist, and the sound. You practically have to bang the piano so that people in the upper balcony can hear it. In Japan there is a hall that seats more than 4,000 people. From now on I am going to refuse to play Mozart, Baroque music, and Schubert in such halls. It's nonsense. Either you have to play Mozart as if it were Tchaikovsky or people will complain that it's dull or inaudible."

Many artists describe the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam as their favorite hall; de Larrocha replied, "For me that hall has an excess of reverberation, making it perfect for singers and orchestras, but not for solo piano. I like the *Musikverein* in Vienna, Symphony Hall in Boston, Alice Tully in New York, and several others. The ideal size hall for a solo recital is 800 to 900; and for piano with orchestra, no more than 1,500."

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Although de Larrocha appears calm and serene during concerts, she admits that as time goes on, her concert performances become increasingly taxing. "Picture a lemon that has already been squeezed for all its juice, and then someone still wants to squeeze to get more; that lemon is me. This year I have more concerts than ever because of concerns that I will retire." We discussed the fact that Rubinstein played well into his 80s, "but that was Rubinstein; he had tremendous temperament, an extraordinary brain, energy, and a strong character."

De Larrocha knew Rubinstein well and told the story of their first meeting. "I was very young, five years old, and he gave me a beautiful bracelet. Then the Revolution erupted in Spain, and I did not see him for about eight or nine years. We met again backstage at his concert in Geneva, and his first comment was, 'Where is that bracelet?' Rubinstein inquired about many people in Barcelona and remembered every name. What an extraordinary memory."

When Rubinstein and the public first heard de Larrocha play at a very young age, there was no formal debut, but just a natural evolving of her musical life. Nevertheless, *Musical America* saw fit to honor the 50th anniversary of her debut by naming de Larrocha Musician of the Year in 1979.

"In my earliest years, I was always playing the piano, but playing it as if it were my toy. At two years old I was making sounds and playing with the piano, when my aunt, who was a student of Granados and a teacher in his school, said, 'You are ruining the piano,' and locked the instrument. I was desperate to play and tried to pry the piano open. Finally my aunt, who really was wonderful, agreed to teach me.

"She was a gentle teacher and began by saying, 'You see this note with a little hat on it? That is *Do* (C),' and worked with me until she spoke to Frank Marshall, director of the Granados Academy. Marshall thought I was too young to start formal training, but little by little, with the help of a very young teacher, I started to play pieces by Joaquin Turina, who came to our school to give a lecture on teaching children. Turina used my teacher and me as examples; this was my first public appearance. There were other occasions to perform but never a formal debut. Although I was never ambitious I was immersed in music. Fortunately my wonderful family and teacher never exploited my talent and intuition. It wasn't until Alfred Wallenstein came to Barcelona and invited me to study with him in Los Angeles in 1955 that I began my performing career."

Perhaps de Larrocha retains a purely intuitive and natural approach along with a naïveté and innocence because from childhood her focus was never showmanship. There are recordings of de Larrocha's playing from the age of seven that exhibit a natural

and intelligent musicality; she learned early on how to compensate for her unusually small hands, which are supple and perfectly designed for the piano.

Often identified as the greatest interpreter of Spanish music, de Larrocha has been equally admired for a vast array of Romantic piano literature, including beautiful Chopin and Schumann recordings, as well as Ravel and Fauré. She has an enormous discography of Mozart that features the complete Mozart piano sonatas for BMG/RCA and is currently recording the complete Mozart concertos. De Larrocha has won four Grammy Awards; two for separate recordings of Albeniz's *Iberia*, another for the two Ravel concertos, and most recently for her recording of Granados' *Goyescas*, which also won the Grand Prix du Disque. Although concert managers and the public most often request Mozart and the Spanish repertoire, de Larrocha has recorded several C.D.s of Romantic literature, including Chopin, that have not been released, to the immense disappointment of her admirers.

De Larrocha brings to Spanish music the drama, love, and spirit that can only be conveyed by someone who has experienced the Spanish culture from its deep mystical beauty and passionate color to its anxiety, unrest, and violence. Living in Barcelona from 1936 to 1939 during the Spanish Revolution, when so many of her compatriots fled, de Larrocha recounted, "I stayed by myself and worked. My teacher, Frank Marshall, was English and had to leave the country because the Communist militia would have killed anyone with prominence or influence. I had to live a quiet and inconspicuous existence. Many of my family members and friends were killed, and I have many painful memories of those years. I truly understand the misery of the people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, because civil war is worse than an international war."

De Larrocha averred that playing Spanish music well demands the same artistry as playing any kind of music well: good musicianship and an understanding of the culture surrounding the music. "There are many Spanish musicians who do not play Spanish music well. It is important to know the character of the people, and from the people, you will understand the music." When asked to define certain characteristics of the Spanish people, however, de Larrocha replied, "One cannot say 'Spanish' and assume it is all the same, because the people and the music of each province are different. It could mean the South as in Andalusia, Catalan in the North, Asturia from the Northwest, or Castille, Valencia, or Aragon. None of these is the same as the gypsy music depicted by Manuel de Falla, but all of it is magnificent music with a very rich folklore." This is music of epic power and beauty when performed by de Larrocha, and the Spanish government has honored her many times

with the Medallo d'oro for artistic merit from Barcelona, a gold medal from the Spanish National Assembly, bestowed upon her by King Juan Carlos.

When I mentioned my intention to transcribe Falla's *Siete Canciones Populares Espanolas* for solo piano, de Larrocha exclaimed, "Oh, but it has already been transcribed." Going to her large cabinet, which has an almost complete library of piano music, most of which she has in triplicate in New York, Barcelona, and Switzerland, de Larrocha produced the solo transcription by Ernesto Halffter. De Larrocha feels that the original version for voice and piano is the most beautiful. Her recording of the songs with Victoria de Los Angeles is exceptional.



The compositions of Granados, Albeniz, and Federico Mompou are all close to de Larrocha's heart. Mompou dedicated several works to de Larrocha.

"Mompou was exactly like his music. He used to speak very little, but when he said something, it was exactly to the point; and he had a wonderful sense of humor. His wit was like sparkling drops. He would listen and listen, and then he might inject an occasional word, but always it was a sharp observation. He was a man of exceptional culture and unbelievable sensitivity, and a wonderful friend.

"When composing, Mompou did not think in terms of large structure or form but focused on sonority. Born into a family that had a bell foundry, Mompou was preoccupied with resonance and har-

monics, and sought to create certain sounds he could hear in his head. Mompou wasn't prolific, because he never wrote to sell but only when he felt the urge." Rejecting the term composer, Mompou said, "My only desire is to write works in which nothing is missing and nothing is superfluous."

De Larrocha's exquisite C.D. of his *Cançons i danses* (RCA Victor Red Seal 09026-62554-2) is an escape into Mompou's intimate world of sound and color by an artist who not only knew him and loved him, but knows how to sequester herself within a genre.

She still finds time to learn new music and recently performed a work dedicated to her by a contemporary Spanish composer, Leonardo Balada, although it took eight years for her to get to the project.

De Larrocha is the third President of the Academy in Barcelona, formerly called the Granados Academy, and now named for her teacher, Frank Marshall, a close friend of Rubinstein. "When I was very young Rubinstein came to our school to listen and sometimes play. In later years Rubinstein and Frank Marshall sometimes came together for dinner at my home. Artur was my main source of inspiration; Wilhelm Kempf and Emil von Sauer came to our school and were also influential in my musical development. Rubinstein loved Spain and wanted to die there, but that's not the way his life ended. I was with him three months before he died, and it's sad how his true story has been embellished by the press and publishers to sell more books.

"When Granados and his wife died, a legal guardian unfortunately advised their children not to allow the Granados name to be used unless there were financial gains, so Frank Marshall, who adored and revered his teacher, was forced to change the name of the school that Granados founded and where his spirit still reigned. Frank Marshall never for a moment would have exploited Granados' name."

De Larrocha admitted that none of her recordings fully satisfies or represents her. "I have never heard a single record about which I could say 'O.K., this is it.' I am a variable person, always up and down; what I am thinking now might change three minutes later. I am a typical Gemini with two people inside of me who are always fighting. This sometimes creates difficulties because when I decide how to express something, it may change within a short time."

At the end of our meeting de Larrocha remembered her wonderful husband, who was a pianist. "He gave order to my life. Without pressuring me, he organized my programs, itineraries, schedules, and all my affairs. After 14 years without him, I am still lost." Whenever de Larrocha chooses to retire, she will have the blessing of the music world for a lifetime of generous and wonderful music making. □