

Alicia De Larrocha

by Anita King

Dark-haired, energetic Alicia De Larrocha stepped briskly into the office, an air of electricity about her as she spoke rapidly in effortless French. Her small hands--nails trimmed neatly--embellished the air with quick gestures. "I am sorry to be late, but there are so many things to do," she said, switching to English. One is immediately aware that this is no ordinary person; nor is she an ordinary pianist. Recognized throughout the world as one of the leading keyboard artists, Miss De Larrocha has dazzled audiences both here and abroad with her pianistic skill.

At the age of four, in her native Barcelona, Spain, Alicia's outstanding ability was brought to the attention of the eminent pedagogue, Frank Marshall, successor of Granados' piano school. Under the tutelage of Marshall, himself a pupil and intimate friend of the great Spanish composer, Alicia progressed with such rapidity that she was allowed to perform in public for the first time at the tender age of five. Miss De Larrocha smiles at the reminiscence. "It was actually just a small part in the recital. Music was a normal part of my childhood, which I consider average. I was always an active child and I didn't particularly like to practice either. I would much rather have been playing."

Having had the mantle of the "Granados Tradition" passed on to her, Miss De Larrocha has become a Director of the Marshall Academy in Barcelona, which was founded by her former teacher.

Since 1940, Miss De Larrocha has concertized extensively on the Iberian peninsula and has been sought after by the leading Spanish orchestras and conductors. In 1943 she was awarded the coveted gold medal of the Marshall Academy, which is given only on exceptional occasions in the tradition of keeping alive a pure Spanish piano school.

1947 saw her fame spread across the Atlantic, and in 1955 she made her U.S. debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. Her New York debut at Town Hall came in April of that same year in which she received unanimous acclaim.

Though she plays the full spectrum of the piano repertoire, Miss De Larrocha is best known to U.S. audiences for her interpretation of Spanish composers, particularly Isaac Albeniz and Enrique Granados. Her great sensitivity and exceptional skill, combined with hard Spanish intensity, enables her to project the vast variety of moods so characteristic of Spanish music. "I began to specialize more in Spanish music when I began touring abroad," says Miss De Larrocha, "because the impresarios requested it. Audiences all over the world seem to enjoy the Spanish idiom, but tastes vary from country to country. In Scandinavia, for example, audiences prefer the music of Manuel De Falla to that of Granados. De Falla's music has more dash and fire, and is more characteristically Spanish, whereas Granados holds less appeal because his music is more romantic. U.S. audiences are more flexible and are receptive to most types of Spanish music.

When not "on the road", Alicia De Larrocha makes her home in Barcelona, where she lives with her husband, Juan, and their two children. "I am always busy thinking of the next concert," she says jokingly. "But seriously, there are always things for a woman to do. I have my home and my family. My husband is also a pianist and teacher. Our two children are in school at the moment." They are proud to have such a celebrated mother, "but they are very sad every time I must leave on tour. When they were small, it was difficult for them and even now, although they have grown older, it is still the same," says Alicia, who wouldn't mind if they chose music as a career. "However, school, which takes up the majority of their time, is most important now. We'll wait and see what happens."

continued on page 16



Alicia De Larrocha

The Marshall Academy, where she also teaches, consumes much of her time. "Over 100 students are enrolled at the school, which is private. The usual music courses are taught: music history, theory, ensemble, etc. "We specialize in piano and chamber music. A course in guitar was recently added and we hope it will be a success. We have quite a number of American students who come to study."

Alicia believes in starting a child with piano lessons while he is still young. "I don't think four is too young an age. Music comes naturally to most children. However, a lot depends on the teacher. The teaching approach should be geared to the level of the child and not to that of an adult. Of course, there are always those children who have exceptional talent. When I spot them I try to give them as much encouragement as possible."

For her own enjoyment, Miss De Larrocha likes playing the harpsichord, although the piano remains her favorite instrument. "One can make so many sound combinations on the harpsichord and good articulation is a must. However there is very little resistance in the touch of the instrument. On the piano the artist is in control and creates his own sound."

As a pianist who inherited the Granados tradition, Miss De Larrocha thinks that many of today's young pianists repress the tendency to fully express their romantic feelings. "During the age of romanticism," she comments,

"feelings and subjective attitudes of the artist were more fully revealed. It is virtually impossible for this to happen today. I think romanticism is present in the young contemporary pianists but they are afraid to show it. In every artist--perhaps in every sensitive man--romanticism lives as something innate. The artist reflects the time in which he lives. Our present society does not permit expression of this ideal."

Recording dates also fill a good portion of Miss De Larrocha's time and she has several albums to her credit. In 1960 she received what is probably the most sought after award of her art, the Grand Prix du Disque, for her incomparable recording of "Iberia" by Albeniz. Her latest Epic release is a collection of sonatas by the 16th century Spanish composer, Padre Antonio Soler. "I do enjoy making recordings," says Miss De Larrocha, "but doing 'live' concerts is my first love."

And it is obvious, too, from her past performances, that audiences are enthusiastic about Alicia De Larrocha. Besides a concert at Carnegie Hall on December 9th, her current American tour will take in more than 40 U.S. minutive Spanish lady (she is only 4' 9"). But this is hardly a deterrent. "I thrive on it," says Alicia. "I love new places and meeting new people."

Let us hope this trend continues, for as long as it does, the musical world will be further enriched by the piano artistry of the gifted Alicia De Larrocha.