

# Remembering Alicia de Larrocha

## Thoughts On Her Artistry, Teaching And Musical Legacy

By Alberto Ràfols

*"There is never an end to listening."*

*"Go sit under a tree and just think about the music."*

*"Once a pianist, always a pianist."*

—Alicia de Larrocha

Why do I write about Alicia de Larrocha nearly six years after her death? In part, it stems from a growing admiration and appreciation for this remarkable artist, since I studied with her 44 years ago. While giving a presentation, "Alicia de Larrocha: Transcending her Catalan Musical Heritage," many in

the audience verbally recognized her memory to be alive and well, I still felt that further written documentation on my personal experience with this beloved artist over the years, as revealed in this article may contribute to a better understanding of her artistry, teaching and musical legacy.

Alicia de Larrocha (1923–2009) is acknowledged by music critics and audiences alike as one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. She has been recognized among the last of a generation of pianists whose musical ideals reflect a different era. A child prodigy, she began her piano studies in her native Barcelona, Spain, with Frank Marshall at the Academia Marshall (formerly Academia Granados) when she was only 4 years old. Her first public recital was at the tender age of 6, and her first performance with an orchestra took place in 1934 when she was age 11.

By the time of her death, Alicia had delighted the world through highly acclaimed performances of Spanish and non-Spanish piano repertoire. While early in her career she was known primarily for her incisive interpretations of the Spanish composers Albéniz and Granados, she was later recognized by peers and audiences for her superb renditions of works by Mozart and Robert Schumann, among many others.

Was her playing of non-Spanish piano repertoire based on principles she learned at the Academia Marshall? What were her views on repertoire, teaching and performing? Where from emanated the source of her unique technique, style, and interpretations? This article and the conclusions derived are based on my personal interactions with de Larrocha, first as her student and later as a life-long friend.

### **Alberto Ràfols**

has taught at the University of Illinois, University of Washington and University of Texas San Antonio. He holds a DMA degree from the University of Washington. Ràfols has performed throughout the United States, Canada, South America and Europe.



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## First Contact

I first met Alicia in 1967 at a master class in Normal, Illinois, when I was studying for my bachelor of music piano performance degree with Howard Karp at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She had just served as panel judge in the Van Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth, Texas, which coincided with the onset of her long concert career in the United States. At that master class I was honored and gratified by her praise of my performance of the first movement of Schumann's *Sonata in G Minor, Op. 22*.

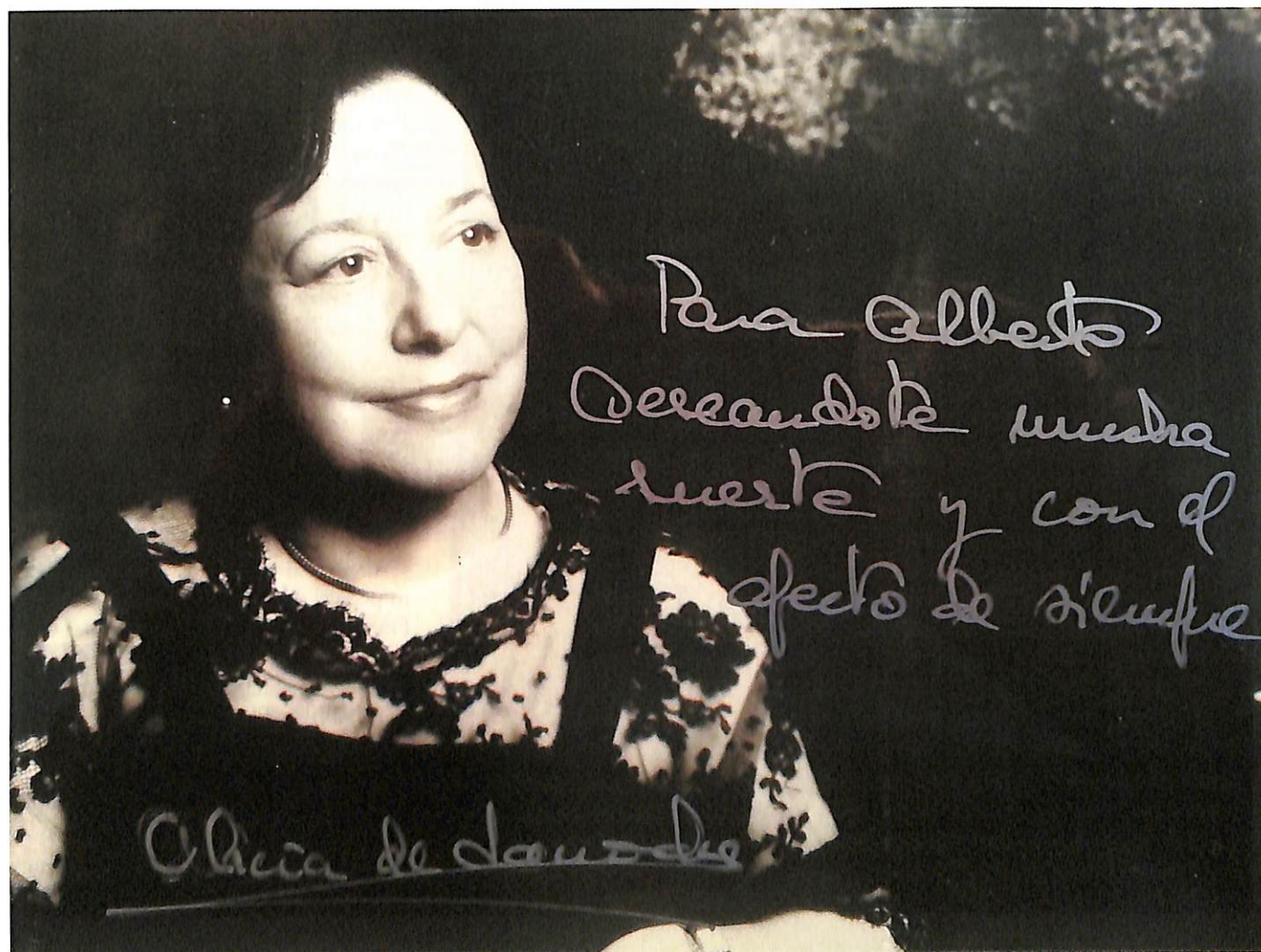
Three years after meeting Alicia, I was awarded a Fulbright Grant to study with her in Barcelona from 1970–1972. Those two years had a

strong impact on my musical training, performing career and personal life. It turned out that not only were we developing a strong teacher/student relationship, other personal ties bonded us closer—Alicia's mother, a beloved aunt of hers and my grandmother Paquita Insenser had studied with Enrique Granados at his Academia in the early 1900s. Later, one of my aunts would also take lessons with Alicia. Parenthetically, it should be noted that Frank Marshall, Alicia's only teacher, had been Granados's most prominent student and musical heir. After Marshall's death in 1959, Alicia became the director of the Marshall Academy and, thereafter, rightful heir of the Granados musical heritage.

From 1972, when I completed my studies with her, until close to her death in 2009, we kept in contact and remained good friends. Throughout this long friendship we met many times under different circumstances and in numerous locales including Barcelona, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle and Portland. I now remember these meetings with a sense of awe and, to some extent, as magical.

## The Musician And Performer

Alicia's artistry reflected her temperament, which was earthy, practical, spontaneous and joyful. "The music" and "conceptual clarity" came first; she hated gimmicks and extraneous pyrotechnics at the piano. She was



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consistent, original, disciplined, pragmatic and faithful to the music. Her technique was impeccable, and her playing lively. Her stage presence was solemn, dignified, professional, no-nonsense and always directed toward the music instead of her person.

As early as 1955, after her New York recital debut in Town Hall, *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg described her artistry as follows:

She had a way of idiomatically shaping a musical phrase that cannot be taught—a sudden dynamic shift, a note instinctively accented, a touch, a pedal, an application of rubato. Her rhythm was extraor-

dinarily flexible. Obviously this music is in the pianist's blood. She invested it with a degree of life and imagination that not many pianists before the public today could begin to duplicate.<sup>1</sup>

Alicia's performances were tightly controlled and rhythmically exact but with enough flexibility to suit the music and her particular style. Structural integrity was consistently a major concern. Her individual approach to rubato and exquisite tone control became legendary.

A consummate colorist, she stressed particular fingering and correct hand position as necessary ingredients to

produce a nuanced palette. Because of her relatively small hands, "clever fingering" also enabled her to successfully negotiate passages of wide stretch. An example that comes to mind is her unique treatment of the clumsy and difficult black key glissandi at the end of the first movement of Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (rehearsal numbers 24 and 25). Her solution was simply to disregard the glissandi and instead to use the fingers while rapidly alternating hands. This worked beautifully, avoided finger bruising and resulted in getting a large enough piano sound to be heard against the thick orchestral texture.

In addition to tight rhythms, she would also stress accents and syncopations, both of which are so important in Spanish music. I particularly remember her indications on necessary syncopations for "Evocacion" and "El Puerto," both from Albéniz's Suite *Iberia*. Regarding the first the gently syncopated emphasis would be on the third beat (that would be established from the first few bars) while the melody would "float" above. The more lively "El Puerto" would rely heavily on more incisive accents and syncopations on the 4/8 beat beginning with the first few measures. The difference between the three dances—Polo, Bulerias and Sequiriyas—used in "El Puerto" would be established mainly by the handling of the accents and syncopations.

Alicia also paid unusual attention to pedals, a trait she inherited from Frank Marshall. When in doubt, clarity and spared use of it was preferred. Maestro Marshall had published an unusual treatise on the usage of pedals; it was accompanied by examples/exercises taken from segments of well-known compositions. Alicia stressed the importance of careful pedaling in Albéniz's "Evocacion" and "El Puerto"—"only then the rhythms and syncopations would be clear."



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However, there is no doubt that a clear musical concept was always first and foremost for de Larrocha. Its realization was due in no small part to a flawless technique. Harold Schonberg vividly commented on her technique on a *New York Times* review of a Hunter College recital on January 15, 1965:

She has a technique that can honestly be classified as stupendous. This tiny Spanish woman is pianistically flawless with infallible fingers, brilliant sonorities, steady rhythm, everything. She plays with the strength of any of her male colleagues. She is a remarkable pianist and played with an ease and security that must have bugged the eyes of pianists in the audience. There was never any

doubt that a major pianist was at the keyboard.

Following her death, Allan Kozinn remembered her in his September 29, 2009, *New York Times* obituary as follows: "(She) excelled in music that demanded focus, compactness and subtle coloristic breadth; (she) cultivated a poetic interpretative style in which gracefulness was prized over technical flashiness or grand, temperamental gestures."

I believe Alicia's individuality and originality manifested most clearly, but not exclusively, through her effective balance of opposites. Her taut performances, always faithful to the score, were lively, fresh and creative, but never falling into the trap of strenuous artifice, exaggerated emotional mushiness or technical pyrotechnics. Her performances of the second move-

ments of Bach Italian Concerto and the Ravel Concerto in G illustrate well this successful negotiation. Here we find that the overall contemplative mood is maintained regardless of a necessary underlying tension. Another instance is her restrained emotional "pacing" through the five variations of Granados "Maiden and the Nightingale" (Suite *Goyescas*). Here she never allows the romanticism slide into melodrama.

## On Teaching

As a teacher she was not always easy to follow since she had a highly personalized and clear vision of the music. Although this unique vision worked perfectly for her, it did not necessarily work as well for others.

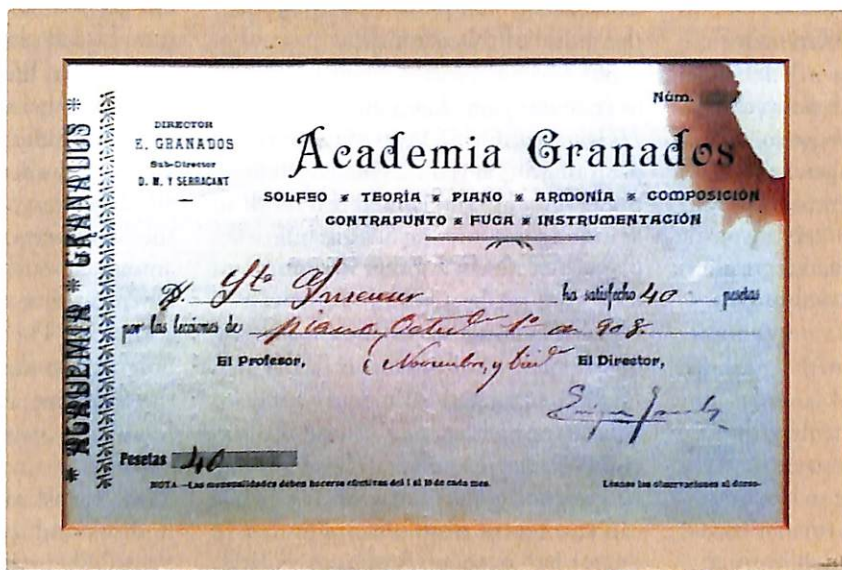
tinuous work on new repertory. When teaching, however, she was generous with her time, engaged, energetic and, above all, inspiring.

Alicia had very strong personal beliefs on technique. These were effectively captured in an interview by Alyse Mach published in *Great Contemporary Pianists Speak for Themselves*:

Technique is sound, interpretation, tone, musical line. It is phrasing, accent, melody, and musical conception. In general, technique in the mechanical sense will do nothing for you. You must see what technique you must apply at this moment in this particular piece you are playing. But it must always be natural, not forced (*de Larrocha*).<sup>2</sup>

The following personal anecdote illustrates Alicia's enthusiasm and spontaneity when teaching. Close to New Year's Eve of 1971, I heard from mutual friends that Alicia was in Barcelona to be with her family for the holidays. At that time I was studying with her and called to remind her of a letter of recom-

mendation she had promised. I had not seen Alicia for a few weeks since she had been touring extensively. She was surprised since she was supposed to be in town incognito—I replied "I have spies." Alicia then asked me to come to her house on New Year's Eve around 8:00 P.M. As instructed on that day, I took a taxi, rang her bell, and was greeted cheerfully. After giving me the promised letter, she asked me to play whatever I had been working on lately. I chose Brahms's *Handel*



She questioned the value of master classes and competitions. She was also suspicious of rigid established norms and believed that exercises should be "tailored" to the needs of each person. "Artists should trust their natural instincts above systems and methods," she often said.

Alicia was keenly aware of the substantial time and energy needed in teaching piano. She guarded and defended personal time because of her very active performing career and con-

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*Variations.* After more than an hour of “impromptu lesson” covering several variations, we were interrupted by her husband Juan Torra who reminded her about their New Year’s Eve celebration with the renowned soprano Victoria de los Angeles and her husband. She told Juan “We will just go through a couple more variations.” Sometime later her husband came back and we were again reminded of the late hour and the possibility of missing their celebration. Reluctantly the lesson came to an end! This has remained one of my most endearing New Year’s Eve celebrations.

Years later after a performance in Seattle, we were dining at the home of a mutual friend. Our friend was a well-known Catalan singer who warned me not to tell Alicia that we had been working on Granados’ *Canciones Amatorias*. Nevertheless when Alicia learned what we were preparing, she insisted we perform for her after dinner. The singer, who had been worrying over the meal, was not happy at first, but after a very inspiring coaching session, we all had a great time, and the evening ended on a happy note.

## Repertory

Although Alicia was firmly grounded in her Catalan and Spanish musical heritage, she did not like to be considered an expert on any particular music or composer. She continued learning and expanding her repertory consistently throughout her life.

Her vast Spanish piano repertory remains outstanding and unsurpassed, and her recordings of *Iberia* and *Goyescas* are superb: a must have for any lover of this music. Alicia believed that among the major Spanish composers Granados was the one who best captured the romantic flavor. His style was aristocratic, elegant and poetic.

It has been mentioned by some music critics that the twin pillars of Alicia’s repertory were Spanish music

and Mozart. I would like to add that Schumann was possibly a third pillar since there is much affinity between her poetic interpretation and the music of this composer. As we continue to investigate her music legacy we keep re-discovering pillars such as Ravel, Mompou and many others.

Alicia’s favorite non-Spanish romantic composer was Robert Schumann and many times she mentioned me and others her affinity for Schumann’s piano music too. She also acknowledged and understood Schumann’s conflicted personality and the tremendous role its duality played in his life and music. Not only was her temperament well-suited to his music but many critics and colleagues also believe that Alicia’s signature rubato is instinctually and perfectly aligned to the music of this composer.

She was not pleased when I once mentioned that Schumann’s *Humoresque* Op. 20 was a weak composition. She not only challenged my judgment but claimed this work as among her favorite Schumann piano pieces. On another occasion, following her beautiful performance of Schumann’s *Piano Concerto*, she questioned the effectiveness of the final outcome and claimed that the conductor had not understood the composition “He may be famous but he has conducted mostly operas. What can you expect from him?” This conductor had been a last minute replacement because of illness. I consider her recordings of the Schumann’s *Piano Concerto* Op. 54, *Fantasy* Op. 17, *Humoresque* Op. 20 and *Carnival of Vienna* Op. 26 among her outstanding recordings.

Alicia’s performances and numerous recordings of Mozart’s piano works have been consistently acclaimed. I believe her mastery of rhythm and keen attention to structure transfer successfully to these impeccable Mozart interpretations. Her recordings of Mozart’s Complete Piano Sonatas

and four Piano Concerti with Solti are considered by many admirers among the best performed.

Equally superb are her interpretations of Ravel’s piano concertos with the St. Louis Symphony and Leonard Slatkin. The slow movement of the *Piano Concerto* in G is among her best-recorded segments ever.

## The Person

Alicia was not only a fabulous pianist but also what Spaniards refer to as a “persona genial,” an ingenious/brilliant person. When entering her personal world I always felt I was entering a “magical realm” where I had to be on “alert status.” Her mind was sharp and quick to challenge pronouncements, not only on musical matters, but also on life, current events, culture, history, literature, food and wine.

She loved life and had an inquisitive mind coupled with an excellent sense of humor. Her generosity, unpredictability and mischievous nature were also legendary. On a one-to-one basis she was always grounded and only among close friends did she occasionally reveal her vulnerability as a person and artist. These rare moments were poignant to me and exemplified by the following anecdote. A common friend and Spanish diplomat gave her a reception after one of her concerts in Paris. He asked her what she wanted to drink and told her “*I have everything.*” She replied with a mischievous smile “*Do you have Cariñena?*” He admitted having this earthy, common wine and that is what she had.

Above all, Alicia was Catalan, which reflects on the relationship between her impeccable technique, artistic vision and the quintessential Catalan temperament. Some of the words that come to mind are balance, common sense, earthiness, pragmatism and good judgment, as well as spontaneity, unpredictability and passion. It is no coincidence that these contrasting characteristics are traditionally

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attributed to two significant Catalan traits: “seny” and “rauxa.” These two concepts coexist like heads and tails of a coin and are considered key to understanding the Catalan soul. In that sense the “core” of Alicia’s style and ethos always remained Catalan and the essence of her artistry is to be found firmly anchored in the values of her native land. A future biographical study could help determine whether these Catalan characteristics remained consistently throughout her life and artistry.

One of her well-known anecdotes refers to her courtship with future husband Juan Torra. She admitted she had been expecting the proposal but wanted to “make him suffer a bit” by telling him that if her answer was YES she would play Mendelssohn as an encore at her next recital—Mendelssohn it was!

Alicia’s spontaneity, curiosity and inquisitiveness were not confined to music. After a concert with a major symphony orchestra, she declined a post-concert reception and requested that the symphony CEO contact me so we could have dinner together. She confessed, “At this stage of my life, I am tired of receptions, have paid my dues and rather prefer to be with friends after my performances.”

Contrary to my recommendations to dine at a well-known Spanish restaurant, she chose instead a Catalan eatery that had been recommended by one of the symphony board members. After we arrived at the restaurant she inspected the menu carefully and asked the waiter questions about one of the entrees. When she was told this dish had tomatoes she immediately challenged the authenticity of the Catalan dish.

The waiter was confused and consulted with the chef. Not knowing who she was, the chef sent a Catalan cookbook to our table contradicting Alicia’s challenge. She took a long look at the recipe and said “Now it remains to be seen who wrote this book” and

turned abruptly to the cover. “This is not real Catalan food...this book was written by an American. I have never seen tomatoes in this dish.” Ultimately she was not displeased with the entrée and we had a lovely evening. I treasure this memory because even when challenging the waiter and chef, she maintained her sense of humor and graciousness. This mirrored her teaching—always challenging the student but never failing to be encouraging and gracious.

## Afterthoughts

During the last 25 years of her career Alicia reached the pinnacle of fame. Internationally in great demand as a recitalist and soloist, she was as equally beloved in New York, Chicago, Paris, London and Tokyo, as in her native Barcelona. Her interpretations of Spanish music were so far above all others that she represented a school in herself. At this juncture she finally had achieved an important goal: to be recognized as one of the world greatest pianists, rather than “the best interpreter of Spanish piano music.”

What made Alicia such an outstanding and unusual artist? What was the core of her success? I am certain that there are many answers to these questions but there are two elements that I believe stand out: Her superb *listening* ability and her clear *conceptual grasp* of a composition. Both elements are clearly related and permeate her teaching and her performing. As such her *listening* was “a never ending process” and she stressed that repeatedly in her teaching. After a piano lesson she once told me that I was practicing too hard and that instead I should “sit under a tree” and think about the music. It is significant that when teaching she rarely dwelled on technical issues.

De Larrocha was very conscious about her responsibility to music and to her role and place in the musical world. However, she was concerned that she would be unable to accom-

plish everything she wanted to do. She once said “One’s life is too short to do everything that needs to be done.” Her focused and intense career affected her personal life but she, always supported by her husband Juan, welcomed her life as a pianist as destiny. She kept a busy performing career until close to the end of her life. In 2003 she played a series of “farewell recitals” to commemorate her 80th birthday.

## Legacy

Both as teacher and performer Alicia was the heir of the distinguished musical tradition begun by Enrique Granados in Barcelona in the early 20th century. Historically, her place in her native Barcelona and in Spain is assured. Worldwide she is considered one of the foremost interpreters of the pianistic repertory ever. Her legacy is vast as it is estimated she played as many as 4,000 concerts worldwide through her long career. She performed more than 100 concerts a year in the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1965 and 2003, she gave 3 concert tours a year in the United States. Her awards are numerous and include 14 Grammy nominations, 4 Grammys, 3 Edison’s (Amsterdam), UNESCO, International Music Council (Paris), Grand Prix du Disque (Paris) and many others. ~

## Notes

1. Harold C. Schonberg, “Musical Review”, *The New York Times*, April 17 1955.

2. Alyse Mach, *Great Contemporary Pianists Speak for Themselves*, Dover, 1991, 53.

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For a comprehensive biography, concert information and discography, visit [www.aliciadelarrocha.com](http://www.aliciadelarrocha.com).