

A DAY WITH DE LARROCHA

by ROBERT JACOBSON

High above the port of nighttime Barcelona, amid colored umbrellas and glowing lanterns, the dark-haired lady throws back her head and aims the spout of the green sherry bottle from high above her broad mouth. Alicia de Larrocha is a *campeón* at what the Catalans call *porron*, as confident with the bottle as she is at the piano, which she has been playing since the age of three. After a savory meal of gazpacho, paella, and crema Catalana on the summit of Montjuich, Alicia and her husband, Juan Torra, set out on a midnight tour of their native city, where they've spent nearly all their lives. Almost at every turn, the pianist is reminded of some moment in her life and career, which had been spent in and around Barcelona until a half-dozen years ago when a persistent American agent literally forced her into international prominence.

Halfway down Montjuich, the Fuente Monumental is still exploding with water and colored lights, mesmerizing the pianist with its changing patterns and tones. "It's just like the piano sonorities of Albéniz," she notes with wide-eyed enthusiasm. Pointing off into the distance, she adds, "I played my first public concert over there at the Missions Palace." The fountain and handsome buildings were built for the 1929 World's Fair, when the five-year-old Alicia de Larrocha bowed in her native city.

Driving past the old university, she relates that her fellow Catalan Victoria de los Angeles was born here (Victoria Gomez Cima), the daughter of a caretaker at the school. Among the plans being formalized during my visit was a historic joint recital uniting two of Spain's greatest daughters at Hunter College in New York on November 13. Yes, they've known one another since their teens but have never appeared together in public! During her student days at the Liceo Conservatory and University, Mme. de los Angeles won a prize in a radio competition while Alicia was then studying and teaching at the Frank Marshall Academy. After the war, the young singer had a chance to make a test recording for His Master's Voice and needed someone to play

the piano for her. Urged by a mutual friend, the pianist accompanied the singer in two arias from *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*. That recording and winning the Geneva Competition catapulted the soprano into the world spotlight, while Alicia de Larrocha's career took a different direction. Now, more than a quarter of a century later, they are being united in a program of early Spanish songs, Falla, and Granados.

The figure of the Catalan Enrique Granados recurs like a *leitmotif* in this Barcelona tour. At the corner of Córcega and Enrique Granados streets, the petite pianist almost casually announces that here was her own birthplace. In the quietly deserted Barrio Gotico with its Romanesque Palacio Real Mayor (where Ferdinand and Isabella received Columbus) and Town Hall, she points out a heavy iron-grilled window: "It's just like Granados, you know, in his 'El coloquio en la reja,' with the girl inside and the boy declaring his love outside through the grill."

We drive through the Ramblas, Barcelona's perennially bustling thoroughfare, to the Manila Hotel, a favorite stopping place for musicians. Its owner, an art and music lover, heads the Friends of Enrique Granados and has created a museum on the lower level. On the lobby level a small bar in nineteenth-century, red-plush Parisian style pays tribute to the famed Catalan singers—Gay, Capsir, Hidalgo, Viñez, Barrientos, Supervia, Badia, Caballé, Aragall, and, of course, de los Angeles. Down a staircase is the Camarote Granados, a reproduction of a stateroom on the SS *Sussex*, the ship torpedoed by the Germans in the English Channel in 1916, killing the composer, who was returning from the premiere

of his *Goyescas* at the Metropolitan Opera. The walls are covered with signed photos of all the leading Spanish musicians, a portrait, letters, and handwritten scores of Granados, manuscripts of other Spanish composers, and printed title pages of works by Turina, Falla, Rodrigo, Albéniz, and Granados himself.

While the Camarote celebrates the glorious past, at No. 10 Callé del Saviatierra the past and the present uniquely join hands. Here at the Frank Marshall Academy an extraordinary piano tradition lives on through the efforts of Alicia de Larrocha and Juan Torra, directors of the privately run and self-sustaining academy—which was founded by the composer in 1909 and carried on after his death by his English pupil and de Larrocha's longtime teacher ("He was like my father") Frank Marshall. The great Spanish musical past is everywhere in the faded red-velvet, brocade-wallpaper charm of the studios and offices. There is the harpsichord where Falla wrote his Concerto, the book of *Los Caprichos* by Goya which inspired *Goyescas*, original manuscripts of Granados's works and valuable finger exercises, Lorca's "Epitafio a Isaac Albéniz" which he improvised at the grave of Albéniz in 1935 in the presence of Falla and Marshall, and the letter from Felipe Pedrell, the father of Spanish nationalism in music, telling the alien Marshall that it is his obligation to continue the work of Granados. And there is the dining room much as Marshall left it at his death in 1959—where Falla, Arthur Rubinstein, Sauer, and Cortot were feted among wood and silver.

Picking up one of Marshall's carved canes still standing in one corner, Mme. de Larrocha notes, "He was a



—Manuel Duarte, Barcelona, Spain

Alicia de Larrocha (left) and Victoria de los Angeles (right) photographed in the courtyard of the Casa del Arcediano, Barcelona—"a historic joint recital uniting two of Spain's greatest daughters."

real English gentleman, elegant, but Spanish in temperament. I still can see him," and she struts down the hallway in fine Chaplinesque style. As she energetically darts into every nook and cranny of the fascinating but well-worn rooms, she laughs girlishly. "Tradition is one thing—dirty is another."

Alicia de Larrocha has known this atmosphere encompassing the piano, classrooms, noted performers, and composers all her life. The first Marshall Academy at Rambla de Cataluña was not far from her house, and she went there at age three. "It was my home. I spent all my time there at the piano and playing games. I was never forced to play, so it was never work. My toy was my piano." Her aunt, who to this day at age seventy-eight still teaches at the academy, had pupils at home. One day after they had left, two-and-a-half-year-old Alicia climbed up on the piano bench and began to play what she had heard the others do. Her aunt took her to Marshall, but he cautioned that it was too early to begin teaching her. Still, the piano became her plaything, as she insisted on putting crayons and pencils inside it and playing with the keys. "Once my aunt locked it and I was so unhappy I cried. I put my head on the floor and banged it. I was in a real temper, and I did it so hard that blood began to flow out—and at this moment my aunt said, 'Well, we'll start.' So we went to Marshall, and I screamed at him, 'I want to play the piano!' and he told me to come the next day." At age five she made her recital debut, and at nine she was playing Mozart with the orchestra in Madrid, with Arbos conducting. At an early age, she took her place among Marshall's assistants, eventually combining teaching with a limited career.

Granados, Mme. de Larrocha asserts, taught his own style of piano at this school. "In fact, he was the first in Europe to create a school especially for the study of the pedal. He also concentrated heavily on the sonority of the piano—something fantastically new for his era. No one before him had paid attention to sonorities with such intelligence. Granados loved the music and style of Scarlatti, and he brought the technique of the harpsichord to the romantic, virtuoso piano repertory of the day. He also felt a great affinity for Schumann and was considered a leading interpreter of his music. In the second part of Granados's life, Schumann cast a spell over his music." Mme. de Larrocha stresses that Marshall did not let her study Spanish music until she was seventeen. "First it was Bach and Mozart and the wide range of the European piano repertoire. This is a necessary base for a pianist. You cannot begin playing Spanish music without it." Today at



Alicia, aged five, with her teacher, Frank Marshall.

the academy (with 100 pupils and seven instructors), the teaching is based on the Marshall plan, slightly renovated every few years.

In comparing the three masters of Spanish music—Granados, Albéniz, and Falla—Mme. de Larrocha calls the first the real romantic poet. "Everything he did was spontaneous, yet restrained—a reflection of his temperament," she said. "His music is patrician and elegant, reflecting the Spain of the aristocracy. He is like a picture that is part typically Spain and part the decoration of nineteenth-century romanticism." Albéniz she calls more colorful, full of spirit and power, brilliant in his palette. Falla was more under the spell of the gypsies, "and his music speaks of the tremendous strength of the Spanish gypsy, of *cante hondo*, the deep tragic sound, the ageless sorrow of Spain. For a pianist, this music needs a special technique that has to do with sound and rhythm and color. One of the clues lies in the fact that both Albéniz and Falla took the guitar as their instrumental model. And this style has something to do with the same qualities that our great flamenco dancers have—it is the sense of excitement held tightly under control. There is no hysteria or flamboyance. It is crucial to keep the emotional excitement in the context of complete control. With this comes the quality of seduction, a certain arrogance or haughtiness or Spanish pride. . . .

"I never thought about a career,"

Mme. de Larrocha says, shrugging her shoulders. "Music has been the one thing of my life, nothing else. I never thought of it as a profession. My teacher said to experience music in public, and so I did it—but not to show myself off. It was the best way to begin, and then I found myself with concert tours and was surprised, because I never did anything to get concerts." This began after the Civil War and then again after World War II, when she ventured out to the Canary Islands, Spanish Morocco, and Europe. She recalls the hardships of the Civil War: "We had no food in the last six months; it was a tragedy. My father went to the mountains to get greens to eat because we had no wood, no bread, no oil. On the other hand, many people who were ill when they had too much became healthy now that they couldn't eat."

In the early 1950s Alfred Wallenstein heard her in Europe and asked her to come to California for concerts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1954), after which she played a successful Town Hall debut under the sponsorship of some Barcelona friends (1955). For ten more years she continued to play in Europe, while teaching at home and making some recordings for American Decca. Then publicity agent Herbert Breslin began to write her in an effort to coax her back, eventually promising four New York Philharmonic concerts and a Hunter College recital. "I didn't think this was possible, we couldn't believe it. Records, you know, are dangerous, and that's all he knew of me." So she came back to America in 1965 and quickly obliterated the stigma of being just another "lady" pianist by becoming *the* woman pianist of the day (following the death of Dame Myra Hess in 1965) for the majority of the critics and public, loved and admired by her fellow musicians. This season in the United States, during a four-and-a-half-month period, she is playing with half a dozen major American orchestras, as well as with the Madrid and London symphonies on tour, and doing a dozen or more recitals. "I am too much in America," she says half-jokingly. "I want to make music, not the machine."

Ironically, while Alicia de Larrocha has played all over the world, she hadn't appeared in her hometown for the past seven years. "It is natural, because always the attraction is the foreigner," she says matter-of-factly, without rancor. When she returned for two concerts last April she was met by full houses and ecstatic receptions—one critic dubbed her "*una personalidad excepcional*." Playing the Chopin Second Concerto, she received an ovation even before the performance, a rare occurrence in Spain. "It is goose flesh

(Continued on page 82)

J. C. Superstar

Continued from page 67

an affluent community in Connecticut referred me to the rector of his church, an Episcopalian minister who had discussed *Jesus Christ Superstar* approvingly. When I reached the Reverend by telephone, he denied having mentioned it in his sermon but, when pressed, admitted he found signs of hope in the phenomenon. "It is asking the right questions at a level at which young adults and teen-agers can tie into the thing," he said. "It starts a line of questioning and thought that is valuable. We planned a special evening at which we played the record and had a good response."

Anything to get the kids into the church, apparently.

According to Ned Tanen, it offers a "humanistic approach" to Jesus, who is seen as "an enigmatic, flawed character." He thinks people at the concerts "take out of it what they see in it, individually and collectively."

One aspect of its appeal is certainly the novelty of the incongruous, like seeing a Japanese production of *Gone with the Wind*. And perhaps *JCSS*'s secularity works in its favor. Like the popular revivalist hymns, it makes Jesus a friend, domesticates him to the point that he is not a divinity at all but the man next door.

Stigwood thinks the work's appeal has little to do with an attack of religious fervor, but rests with the popularity of the music and the Christ story. He thinks people go simply to be entertained. Recently, a white Judas was mobbed after the show. I asked Stigwood about the racial implications of casting a black Judas—in the Broadway show and one of the concerts—against a white Christ. He insisted that there were none, or at least that race played no part in casting, which was determined solely on vocal and acting ability. (Curiously, in both the album and the show, the whites sound more black than the blacks.)

The truth seems to be that in *Jesus Christ Superstar* there is something for everyone, but that the everyone, until now, has existed largely in Middle America. Whether the phenomenon can be transferred intact to Broadway and repeat its success with a more sophisticated audience will depend on the degree to which Tom O'Horgan not only duplicates the appeal of the music but gives it a visual dimension that invests

the staged version with a life of its own.

Whatever else it may be, the Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* makes no attempt to clarify the character or define the plight of Christ. He remains "enigmatic," reacting rather than acting, and his reported achievements seem problematic at best.

This singularly shadowy Jesus does not seem to have found disfavor with church groups, however, a number of which have given productions of the opera. According to Stigwood, most of these were done with church money and not for profit, in which case Stigwood & Company simply turned the other way. But when some nuns in Sydney rented a 5,000-seat auditorium in a blatantly profit-making venture, Stigwood decided it was time to step in. After a comical and somewhat complicated trial, the producers won their case.

The Broadway show ends with Christ's "triangulation" (he is nailed to a huge gold triangle rather than a cross), the culmination of a figurative pattern from which Christian symbolism has been all but excluded.

Perhaps religious leaders, anxious to bring youth back into the fold, will rationalize this as a symbol of the Trinity and the audience applause that greets it as a sign of the Resurrection. After all, as Robert Stigwood pointed out, with all of the music that Jesus has inspired, it took him 2,000 years to get a record in the top ten. So why shouldn't the church get a piece of its own action?



A Day with de Larrocha

Continued from page 69

for me to talk about it," is her only comment.

Although her recording career has produced some extraordinary documents (via Decca, Columbia and Hispavox, Epic, and now London), she is rarely happy with the results. "It's my problem, my nightmare. Recordings are the results of one moment, and, of course, I am always changing my mind and mood. When I listen, it is a different time from when I made it. I want to repeat and redo always, because every day I am different. Sometimes what I thought bad later sounds good, and vice versa. I know what I want and what I am doing, but there are things like the acoustics of the hall and the piano tone which surprise me when I listen back!" Her choice of piano, one to suit her small body and arms, is another problem, although she prefers the Steinway 55 in New York and the Hamburg Steinway for recordings. "The ones I like for a big tone are hard in action. So sometimes for big pieces with difficult technique I sacrifice tone to get an easier action."

As for the few master classes she has held in this country, she declares, "I hate them! In one class it is impossible to learn how to play. The first thing is to know the student and all his possibilities—and he must know his teacher too. If not, it is *inutile*. A two-week course, that is another thing. Otherwise call it a lecture of anecdotes, questions and answers, examples on the piano. But I cannot explain what I do." Whenever in London or New York for a few days the pianist generally turns up at a recital or concert. "I go because I like to hear all points of view," she states, summing up succinctly her attitude toward the keyboard and her profession.

Alicia de Larrocha's calm and lack of artistic "theatrics" are legendary. She admits that the only thing that really makes her nervous is being home with Juan and the children (Alicia, twelve, and Juan, fourteen) "when I have to practice and do *everything*. On tour I relax with my job and enjoy life with friends . . . eating, sleeping, and playing. It is a job: I am a woman going to do my thing. And, thank God, I'm a pianist, because I can eat and stay out late before a concert—I couldn't do this if I were a singer." On the night before she was to play in New York's "Mostly Mozart Festival" last August she was with friends until late, drinking wine and devouring a dish redolent with garlic. Backstage after the concert she flashed that childlike smile and winked. "You see, Mozart *likes* garlic."

Help Your Post Office to Give You
the Best Possible Service—
Mail Early in the Day!!