Alicia de Larrocha

Queen Of The Spanish Classical Tradition

By Allan Kozinn

BOTH AMONG MUSIC CRITICS and among her musical peers, the Spanish pianist Alicia de Larrocha is thought of as the epitome of the term "musician's musician." In concert and on record, the music she plays flows in a straightforward way, with none of the pyrotechnical flash, stage eccentricity, or egotistical display that one sees so often. Not that her performances are bland. Nor is one evening's performance necessarily the same as the next; her sensitivity to different circumstances does not allow for carbon copy readings. So it should come as no surprise that many younger pianists—Garrick Ohlsson, for one—consider her an important influence and an authority to be consulted when possible. Music critics, meanwhile, have been wondering aloud for years how this tiny woman (she stands 4'9"), with her comparatively small hands, can not only negotiate repertoire that few others can, but produce such a large sound.

Considering her success as a hall-packing concert artist, the popularity of her many LPs, and the fact that 1979 marks the fiftieth anniversary of her concert debut (she was five), it seems strange that de Larrocha did not begin to tour North America regularly until 1965. But Alicia de Larrocha has never been interested in a concert career as an end in itself. Her concern, rather, has been with the art of playing the piano, something she started doing when she was two-and-a-half years old. Both her aunt and her mother had been students of the Spanish composer and pianist Enrique Granados, and young Alicia was surrounded with music from the start. Her talent was first noticed when she began climbing to the piano and imitating the playing of her aunt's students. She was taken to Frank Marshall, another Granados student and the founder of the Marshall Academy, in Barcelona, of which de Larrocha is now director. At first, Marshall insisted that the child was too young to begin piano study. But when her aunt began locking the piano to keep her away from it, the pianist-to-be protested by literally banging her head against the floor. At that point, both her aunt and Marshall gave in and allowed her to learn the instrument.

By the time she was five years old, she had made something of a solo debut, playing a few simple Bach and Mozart pieces at the 1929 World's Fair in Barcelona. When she was nine, she made her orchestral debut, playing a Mozart concerto with an orchestra in Madrid. All the while, she continued her studies with Frank Marshall, and she became one of his assistants while still in her teens.

Before long, de Larrocha was giving recitals accompanying singers (such as her countrywoman, Victoria de Los Angeles), and making recordings. But it was not until 1954 that she performed in the U.S. Her debut was with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, under the direction of Alfred Wallenstein. The next year, she gave a recital at Town Hall in New York, but she did not return to the States until 1965, when Herbert Breslin, a New York-based agent, fell in love with her recordings and persuaded her to play here again.

Since then, de Larrocha has become a frequent visitor to the American concert stage, touring the country two or three times a season. She has also become a prolific recording artist, and two of her LPs—Albeniz's *Iberia* and a disc featuring the Ravel Piano Concertos and the Faure *Fantasie For Piano And Orchestra*—won Grammy Awards for Best Classical Performance in 1974 and 1975, respectively. Her large catalog of recordings has also won her such international awards as the Grand Prix du Disque, the Paderewski Memorial Medal, and the Edison Award.

Offstage, de Larrocha is a rather shy and very private person. She avoids giving interviews, because she doesn't particularly like talking about herself, and she dislikes giving general advice on technical matters. "Each case," she points out frequently, "is individual." The picture of the humble artist, she won't even admit that she has a repertoire that, by most people's standards, is huge. When asked how she maintains such a large list of concert works, she brushed the question aside with the comment, "No, no, I have a very small repertoire, so forget about that." Of course, a glance at the programs she gave in New York alone—keeping in mind that she gave other programs elsewhere—between April and August, 1978, is enough to give the reader an idea of the extent of her repertoire, as is her discography [see p. 64]. The list includes a Bach French Suite, three Mozart Sonatas, two Mozart Concertos, A Chopin Concerto, all four books of Albeniz's complex and virtuosic *Iberia*, and a program of music by Federico Mompou, performed on the occasion of that composers 85th birthday, to say nothing of encores, with which de Larrocha is usually very generous, even after a strenuous program. And this coming season, she is performing, again in New York, all five Beethoven Concertos, topped by a solo recital and an appearance with the Guarneri Quartet.

* * * *

CAN YOU TELL US something about the distinctive qualities and feelings in Spanish music that set it apart from the German-French-Italian repertoire that is better known to American audiences?

In my opinion, every style and every period of music has its own particular feeling. Spanish music, like any other music inspired by folk music, has a "popular" feeling. By popular, I mean the use of national idioms—the Polonaises and Mazurkas of Chopin, the Hungarian Rhapsodies of Liszt, and a lot of Russian music, for example. All music that comes

Continued on page 59

ALICIA DE LARROCHA

Continued from page 14

from folk music can best be understood once you understand the folk music base. Naturally, it's not *purely* popular music. It's only the perfume of the folk tradition, presented in a sophisticated, artistic way.

So would you say that the Spanish composers have drawn their melodic inspiration from folk songs?

Yes, melodic and rhythmic. It is the harmonic aspect that is more sophisticated. Also, each region of Spain has its own folklore. The most popular and best known is from Andalusia, in the South. But there are beautiful folk songs from the other regions as well—from Castile, Catalonia, and the Basque provinces.

Much of the Spanish music you are associated with comes from the same region you do—Catalonia.

Well, Granados and Albeniz were from Catalonia, but only by coincidence. Their parents came from other regions, and the composers were born in Catalonia. But Manuel de Falla and Joaquin Turina were from the south.

Catalan, the language of Catalonia, seems to show very strong French influences, as does the music of Federico Mompou, another Catalan composer whose music you play. Are there any strong cultural ties between Catalonia and France that might account for the similarity in both musical and linguistic feeling?

Well, I think the French feeling in Mompou's music comes from his studies in Paris. It's very reminiscent of late Ravel: The harmonies and the atmosphere are very French, but the music itself is absolutely Catalan. Now, historically speaking, the Kingdom of Catalonia was actually part of France, before 1492. In southern France, they speak more Catalan than French.

Who is responsible for the integration of traditional Spanish folk elements with the harmonic structure of classical music?

It was Felipe Pedrell [composer and musicologist, 1841-1922] who suggested to Albeniz, Granados, and the other composers that they use the Spanish folk idiom in their music. At that time, those composers were writing mazurkas, barcaroles, nocturnes, those kinds of things, in a post-Romantic style. Finally, Pedrell said to them, "This is a pity. We have such a rich folklore; why not use it?"

Is it true that you consider Granados the best of the Spanish school?

No, I never say that anything is "the best." I don't believe that there is a best of anything in this life. I would say, though, that Granados was one of the great Spanish composers, and that, in my opinion, he was the only one that captured the real Romantic flavor. His style was aristocratic, elegant and poetic—completely different from Falla and Albeniz. To me, each of them is a different world. Falla was the one who really captured the spirit of the Gypsy music. And Albeniz, I think, was more international than the others. Even though his music is Spanish in flavor, his style is completely Impressionistic, especially in his last period, the period of *Iberia*. By then, he was completely French in terms of sonority, but seen in a Spanish light. His music was also very personal, which is something I can't explain.

It seems as though many of the Spanish composers have drawn on the sound of the guitar.

Yes, and that's funny, because it has gone full circle: The composers were inspired by the guitar, they wrote their music for the piano, and now many of those piano works are transcribed for guitar! Granados, especially, tried to evoke the guitar, and in his Dances, sometimes you can *hear* the guitar, but only for the moment, as an impression. Of course, the piano has a much larger range, as well as the sonorities of the pedal. So in a way, these works are the best of both worlds, with the spirit of the guitar and the sound of the piano.

You were planning, at one point, to edit a complete edition of Granados's works. What has become of that project?

Well, it's very hard work, because it entails a revision of nearly all of Granados's output. He always composed in a hurry, and he always corrected his manuscripts without making corrections in the printed editions. So, he made changes in nearly everything he did, and although we haven't published these changes, we use them, in handwritten form, at our school [the Marshall Academy].

Do you intend to finish and publish the edition?

I don't know. Perhaps.

What about the composers in the generation after Granados and Albeniz?

There is a generation that includes such composers as Federico Mompou, Carlos Surinach, Joaquin Rodrigo, and Osclar Espla, which we can say is a post-classical generation. They have kept the traditional system of composition, but they look forward in a different way from the generation of Albeniz. This group of composers is a bridge between the traditional school and the avant-garde. Now, there is a very big group of avant-garde composers, whose music, I'm sorry to say, I never play. I am interested, and I do listen to it. But it is not the kind of thing I play. Even technically, it's another world. It's a completely different idiom.

Aside from the Spanish school of composition, there is also a very definite Catalan piano school. What are some of the distinguishing points of the Catalan piano style?

The Catalan piano school goes back to Juan Bautista Pujol [1835-1898], who

Continued on page 60

INTRODUCING THE

BODE VOCODER

SIXTEEN CHANNEL MODEL No.7702

FEATURES

- FULL ACCESS TO ANALYZER OUTPUTS & SYNTHESIZER INPUTS FOR CROSS-PATCHING.
- PATCH SELECT CONTROL ACTIVATING PRESELECTED CROSS PATCHES.
- SAMPLE/HOLD TO SUSTAIN ENTERED TONE COLORS.
- VOCODER/BYPASS CONTROL.
- FAST 6 MILLISECOND RESPONSE TO PROCESS PERCUSSIVE SOUNDS.
- HIGH FREQUENCY EXTENDER CHANNEL FOR SUPERIOR INTELLIGIBILITY.

FOR DETAILS CONTACT

BODE SOUND CO.
1344 ABINGTON PL.
NO. TONAWANDA, N. Y. 14120
716-692-1670

Earl Wild's Accompanist

Get Organized!

Preserve your back issues of Contemporary Keyboard in these attractive files. Each file holds 18 issues, looks like leather and comes with easily applied gold numbers, for dates and volume numbers for quick reference. The file, in rich blue and black is sent postpaid, carefully packed, for $4.29 each; $3.71 each for 3 or more (postage included).

The Highsmith Company, Inc.
Box 25-CK
Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538

Yes! Please send me ____ file cases at $4.29 each ($3.71 each for 3 or more).

Name ____________

Address ____________

City ____________

State ________ Zip ________

ALICIA DE LARROCHA

Continued from page 59

taught Granados and nearly every great Catalan pianist. In the Granados-Marshall school, special attention is given to the pedal. Many people think our primary rule is to avoid using the pedal too much, but that's not really true. It all depends on what you are playing. Our pedal method is simply that a player should know when to use it. It depends on the music. It also depends on the acoustics of the concert hall and the instrument being used. In other words, it depends on the way you use your ear. And of course, the pedal is only one way to take advantage of the piano's sonorities.

Is there anything different about finger technique in the Catalan school?

No, fingering is very personal. I believe every pianist must find his or her own fingerings. Because everyone has different hands, the way one person fingers a piece might not be right for someone else. It's a bit like medicine: The doctor cannot prescribe the same medicines for everybody. Every pianist has a special difficulty and a special facility. If playing octaves, for example, comes easily to someone, then they don't have to learn them or practice them; it's natural. For someone else, playing double notes may be easy. But it's very important to know what the most powerful and the weakest points in your technique are.

Are there any specific velocity drills you give your students?

There is no velocity. There are no speeds on the piano like there are on a highway. Everything is relative. Everything is in proportion to other things.

But if a student came to you and said that they wished they could play fast passages even more quickly, what would you tell them to do?

I would tell them that speed is a question of proportion to the way they were playing before. If you begin playing slowly, and you start to play just a little faster, the impression people listening to you will have is that you are playing very fast. It's the same with dynamics. You can give the impression of playing fortissimo, even if you are not playing that loud. If you always play mezzo-forte, you really have to bang the piano to create a fortissimo. But if you start by playing pianissimo, by the time you reach a point that's not quite forte, it will already sound as if you are playing fortissimo. You see? It's all proportions. Returning to the question of velocity, another thing that affects the audience's perception of speed is tone. The bigger the tone—and I mean *bigger,* not louder—the slower your playing will sound. When the tone has more body, it lasts longer, it keeps ringing. But when the tone is thin and the notes finish immediately, you have the feeling you are playing very fast.

What about stretching exercises?

I can only tell you the same thing: it depends whose hand we're talking about. Do you mean for me, or in general?

For you.

Because my hands are small, I am always stretching them. And it's not just something I do at the piano or when I'm practicing, but everywhere. It's automatic, instinctive. I try to develop strength and flexibility, between the thumb and pinky. [*She opens her hand so that the thumb and pinky extend in the opposite directions, forming a perfectly straight line.*] You see, the point is not to have long fingers, but to have flexibility.

When you begin a new work, do you start working at the piano, or do you study the score away from the keyboard first?

Well, I never do things in a routine way. It depends upon my feeling at the moment. If I want to learn something and I feel like playing it, I'll go to the keyboard. But of course, if I want to discover the construction and the meaning of the work, I'll take the music and study it. But that doesn't mean I do the same thing every day. Because I'm not that kind of person.

So you probably don't devote a specific amount of time to practicing.

No, no, oh no.

But is there an average you try for?

The truth is, I practice as long as possible. And because of circumstances—traveling, for example—I never know how much time I will have to practice. So if I can get to a piano, then time becomes important. I just don't look at the clock when I'm playing.

How do you warm up?

I always begin by stretching my hands, but there are no particular pieces I warm up with. Sometimes I start with Chopin *Etudes,* other times I start out with double notes, chords, etc., and then I do whatever comes into my mind. Also, if I am working on new material, I spend a lot of time working out the fingering. And sometimes that takes me years and years.

Did you enjoy practicing as a child?

Not really. I liked to play and to improvise. But no child likes to practice; he'd be a monster! However, my aunt was very clever, and she helped me practice in a very natural way. When she saw that I was tired, or that I didn't feel like practicing, she would say, "I understand. You'd better go play with your dolls and things," and she would lock the piano. Then I was desperate, and I wanted to go back. But she never forced me, and neither did my teacher, Frank Marshall.

What were your early studies like?

There were no exercises or methods. Everything was adapted to my possibilities. And you can imagine, if my hand is this size now, how small it must have been when I was three years old! One of the important things was that my teacher

Continued on page 64

Continued from page 60

never made me do more than I was able to do. So, when I was very young, I played pieces from the Anna Magdalena Bach notebooks and some Mozart Andantes. As I progressed, I was given music that my teacher felt would develop my musical spirit.

What were the first Spanish works you played?

They were Granados's childrens' pieces, which are written in a Romantic way, more like Schumann than Spanish music. He wrote those pieces when he opened his piano school, because he needed pieces for his students.

When you were, say, in your teens, and you had been playing and giving concerts for several years, did you have any thoughts about your future as a pianist? Did you want a concert career?

I never thought about the future. I never did, and I still don't. I like to live for the day.

Many of your students must have thoughts about their careers.

I never hear anything about that. Perhaps we Spaniards are very strange people, but we enjoy the day we are living, without killing ourselves thinking about the future. Who knows what will happen?

Fair enough. Let's talk about recordings. You made quite a lot of records, but it's said that you don't really like recording. Is that true?

I can never say I like or I don't like; it depends on the day and the moment. Generally speaking, I do enjoy recording solo works sometimes, because I can experiment and do what I want. Recording with an orchestra is more difficult, because the time is more restricted.

Do you often change your mind about your interpretation after you've recorded a work?

Yes, that's my problem in everything —in my life! What I like now, I may hate tomorrow. Sometimes, I'll record a work, listen to the tapes and say, "Oh, that's not bad." Then, I hear the tapes again later, and I feel awful. Other times, I go into the studio, try to play something, and end up saying, "I cannot accept this, it's terrible, I cannot live, I feel terribly upset." But when I hear the record two years later, it sounds just fine! So, I never know.

When you record a lengthy work like the Liszt Sonata In B Minor, *do you go into the studio and play it through a few times complete?*

Oh yes, I always do it that way. I don't like to record in pieces. If I have to record a short section, it will be only after I've played the work through three, four, five, or six times. But when you record in short segments, you lose the line.

What is your feeling about the sound of the piano on records?

I'm sorry, but I don't like it. It's artificial. It's very nice for the amateur, for people who want to enjoy music at home. But for me, it does not sound real. When the piano has a very dry sound, people say, "Oh, that sounds too hard." But when they correct that by making it a big, beautiful, round sound, it may sound beautiful, but it's artificial. The instruments just don't sound that way.

Do you listen much to recordings of other pianists?

Yes, I do. But I listen to recordings once only. I don't like to repeat records, because, well, you already know what's going to happen. But I am interested, even when I know that what I am hearing may not be one hundred percent true. You see, even if the interpretation is a good one, there is *always* something from the laboratory. If it's a recording of a live concert, that's different. But yes, I do listen, because I am always interested in what other pianists are doing. □

ALICIA DE LARROCHA: A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ravel: *Gaspard de la nuit*, "Alborado del gracioso" from *Miroirs*, *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Columbia, M-30115.

Mendelssohn: *Capriccios In F# Minor, Variations serieuses;* Grieg: "Nocturne" from *Lyric Pieces, Sonata In E Minor*, Op. 7, London, CS-6676.

Spanish Piano Music Of The Twentieth Century (featuring works by E. Halffter, Surinach, Nin-Culmell, Mompou, and Montsalvatge), London, CS-6677.

Chopin: *Concerto No. 2 In F. Minor*, Op. 21; de Falla: *Nights In The Gardens Of Spain* (Comissiona, Suisse Romande Orchestra), London, CS-6733.

Bach: *Concerto In F For Solo Clavier* ("Italian"), *English Suite No. 2 In A Minor, French Suite No. 6 In E, Fantasia In C Minor*, London, CS-6748.

Piano Music Of Schumann: Kreisleriana, Romance No. 2, Op. 28, *Novellettes, No. 8*, Op. 21, *Allegro*, Op. 8, London, CS-6749.

Franck: *Symphonic Variations;* Khachaturian: *Concerto In Db* (Fruhbeck de Burgos, London Philharmonic Orchestra), London, CS-6818.

Mostly Mozart, Vol I. Mozart: *Fantasia In C Minor*, K. 475, *Rondo For Piano In D*, K. 485, *Sonata No. 11 In A*, K. 331; Bach: *Partita No. 2* ("Chaconne"), London, CS-6866.

Ravel: *Concerto In G, Concerto For The Left Hand* (Foster, London Symphony Orchestra); Faure: *Fantasies For Piano And Orchestra* (Fruhbeck de Burgos, London Symphony Orchestra), London, CS-6878.

Piano Music Of de Falla: Spanish Pieces, Nos. 1–4, Fantasia Baetica, Three-Cornered Hat, Dances, Suite from *El Amor Brujo* (includes "Ritual Fire Dance"), London, CS-6881.

Chopin: *Preludes, Nos. 1–24*, Op. 28, *Berceuse*, Op. 57, London, CS-6952.

Spanish Encores (works by I. Albeniz, M. Albeniz, Granados, Soler, Turina), London, CS-6953.

Rachmaninoff: *Concerto No. 3 In D Minor* (Previn, London Symphony Orchestra), London, CS-6977.

Liszt: *Sonata In B Minor;* Schumann: *Fantasia In C*, Op. 17, London, CS-6989.

Concertos From Spain. Surinach: *Concertos For Pianoforte And Orchestra;* Montsalvatge: *Concerto Breve* (Fruhbeck de Burgos, Royal Philharmonic), CS-6990.

Mostly Mozart, Vol. 2. Mozart: *Fantasia In D Minor*, K. 397, *Sonata No. 9 In D*, K. 311, *Sonata No. 10 In C*, K. 330; Haydn: *Andante Convariazoni In F Minor*, London, CS-7008.

Granados: *Goyescas*, London, CS-7009.