



to Alicia De Larrocha

Music Is

Spain's foremost pianist, Alicia de Larrocha, has been described as a master of refined coloration, rhythmic vivacity, and dazzling technique, "a pianist who can toss off the complex difficulties of the Albeniz *Iberia* and Granados *Goyescas* as if they were basic Czerny."

On stage she is natural and unnervous; off stage, friendly and uncomplicated, a person who smiles and quietly laughs a great deal. As I set up the tape recorder (we spoke in French), I asked why her name is *de Larrocha* and Manuel de Falla's is just Falla — at least according to music criticism *a la mode*.

"Falla or de Falla — it's about the same," she replied. "Many Spanish families have this *de* in their names, the origin being *marquesado*, aristocratic. I too, am Larrocha or de Larrocha."

Only 4'9" tall and weighing less than a hundred pounds, Alicia de Larrocha (who was born May 23, 1923 in Barcelona) says the amusing moments in her career usually have to do with her size: "Because I am so small, people often don't believe I am the pianist."

"Once I went to a hall to try the piano. A tall, elegant, attractive friend — in fact, *elle est formidable* — went with me. The man in charge said to us, 'Carpenters are working inside; only the pianist can go in.'

" ' *Entrez vous,* ' he said to my friend.

" ' But you, ' he said, turning to me, 'can't go in. ' "

Playing the Piano a Form of Play

Larrocha started piano lessons with her aunt at "two years of age, or something like that.

"Both my mother and my aunt had studied piano with Granados. Marriage ended my mother's career,

but my aunt, my mother's sister, taught at home where I used to hear her pupils. Playing the piano was a form of play, meaning more to me than playing with dolls. One day my aunt heard me and decided I should begin lessons.

"After awhile she spoke about me to Frank Marshall, a wonderful pianist and teacher, with whom she had continued her studies after Granados's death. At first, Marshall thought I was too young, but after I had played some small pieces for him — I've been told he tested my ear and so on — he agreed to let me study with him. I was a little over three years old."

"You played a concert when you were five?"

"I played some minuets by Bach and Mozart before an audience, but you couldn't call it a concert. I wasn't a child prodigy. I was a child who had ability for music, in the same way that other children have ability to draw or to do other things — that's all. Beginning very early, nevertheless, was an advantage."

"Do you remember how you learned to read notes?"

"I learned to read notes before I learned to read letters. There were notes in a row on a piece of paper. I played the piano, so I learned to read notes. The process was natural, normal, unconscious."

Marvelous Technician

Alicia de Larrocha apparently gets her extraordinary technique for the massive sonorities and spectacular trills and arpeggios she produces in such works as Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor* and Schumann's *Carnaval* from her fleshy, high arched hands and ample arms and shoulders. She can span a tenth because of an extra long fifth finger, a wide stretch between thumb and first finger, and years of stretching exercises.

DEAN ELDER is a private music teacher in New York City. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Idaho, then studied in Europe with Walter Frey, Alfred Cortot, and Walter Gieseking. He holds diplomas from the Conservatory of Zurich and the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris. He holds a master's degree from Columbia Teachers College.

the Expression of Humanity

An Interview with the Spanish Virtuosa — by Dean Elder

I told her I found her playing extremely ordered, controlled, and formal — in this respect like the playing of Dinu Lipatti — and orchestral in sonority and melodic approach.

She laughed. "Perhaps what you say is true; I don't know. I have never thought of myself as being equal to or like the others. My playing stems from my schooling, my professor. Each artist must have his *ambiance*, his atmosphere, his 'school,' his temperament. Being completely different is the most important thing."

Ideals and Interpretative Approach

"What are your ideals in piano playing?"

"For me playing the piano is music and it's the music that counts. I try to enter deeply into the music — at least to the extent I believe that's possible — always in my temperament, in my way of seeing things. You must submerge yourself in the music and then work. I recommend that my pupils analyze and work thoroughly *before* being in front of an audience. In front of an audience, you must forget the working or you will lose the spontaneity of the moment."

"What is your approach to the interpretation of various composers?"

"Each composer for me has his own atmosphere and character. Style combines the composer's epoch and his own *humanite*. In Bach, for example — even if he is the culmination of all the polyphony — I find *l'humanite* therein. By *l'humanite* I mean all the meaning of the notes, all that you can feel. I mean all the states of soul that exist in music — horror, tragedy, gaiety, and so on. Music, like all the arts is *l'art de l'humanite, l'expression de l'humanite*."

Great Pianists

"What pianists have you admired most?"

"I would like to commence by saying I admire all pianists, especially today when I see all these young people who play extraordinarily from the pianistic standpoint. But naturally there is always someone special. And for me, Artur Rubinstein has been my idol, my greatest pianistic love. He was a great friend of my professor; they were like brothers. I made Rubinstein's acquaintance when I was five years old, and that is something that lasts all your life."

"But apart from him — and he is completely apart — there are so many extraordinary pianists — Gieseking, Horowitz, Kempff — and I admire each one for different reasons and for their different personalities. Personality is very important. I don't like to hear someone say 'he is very good because he plays like so and so.' To play like someone else is impossible. If a pianist does that, you can do nothing for him."

"Rubinstein and Gieseking," I said, "both had huge hands and photographic memories. They did little repetition practice, Gieseking hardly any at all. On the other hand, other pianists — Richter, Serkin, Bachauer, Darre — admit to practicing much and extremely hard. And I've heard that you practice eight hours a day when preparing for concerts. What are some of the reasons one artist practices much more than another?"

"The amount you have to practice is individual," de Larrocha answered, "and depends, among other things, upon ability to assimilate: one person is far more rapid than another. And then there's the matter of *entrainement*, of being in training. When you have



played a long time — Rubinstein all his life, so terribly often — you arrive at the moment where everything has already been worked technically. Preparing is just a question of playing, of redoing the thing. The amount you have to practice is also relative. For example, if you have many different programs to play, you're naturally going to work, the amount depending upon the size of your repertoire and the number of concerts you have to play, as well as upon your ability to assimilate. Sometimes I play all day long and into the night, and other times I don't play at all for several days."

"Do you think it's possible to play different programs nearly every night without much practicing if you don't have a photographic memory?"

"Si, si. You can do that. Playing different programs nearly every night without much practicing becomes automatic with time. It's not only photographic memory, but also musical memory — the memory of the form, the construction, and many other things — that count."

Small Hands

"Do you agree that small hands often are fast and can take a great deal of practicing?"

"Yes, that's true. But small hands have the enormous difficulty of playing large stretches. Producing a big sonority is a technical problem, and you can circumvent it to a degree by musical imagination, pedal, phrasing — substituting, arranging."

"Do you believe in stretching exercises for pupils with small hands?"

"Yes, you must give stretching exercises to pupils with closed hands, with hands which haven't much space between the fingers. I do stretching exercises all the time; they're a mania with me."

"I play stretches, for example between the second

and fifth fingers, stretching my fingers apart with my other hand and so on — simply opening the hand. I do these exercises *machinalement*, mechanically, on the piano. And then I play chords with the biggest possible stretches, but never until the hand is tired. That's dangerous."

Technical Work

"How do you practice chords?"

"If it's a question of opening up the hand, I practice chords very slowly, staying on the chord to feel the stretch. This kind of practice is exclusively for opening up the hand. Pupils with fairly large hands may have difficulty in achieving solid, even chords but that problem has to do with sonority and is not my problem."

"Do you practice scales?"

"Not *per se*, I don't have time. In general, I practice the technique in the work I'm playing. If I have scales to play, I practice the scales; if I have trills or arpeggios, I practice the trills or arpeggios, and so on. What I practice depends on the difficulty I find in the music."

"What technical work do you give your pupils?"

"I have my pupils do exercises *sur le terrain*, exercises needed at the moment, for the difficulty that they have. Exercises are a kind of medicine which you have to give each pupil according to his needs."

"What I suggest to pupils depends on the sickness, or weakness of the pupil. For example, in Mozart, if the pupil lacks the clarity, or the evenness of the technique and rhythm, I have him work on that. You must show him why he has need of it, explaining the epoch, the style, the phrasing, and so on. You have to look for the path to achieve what the pupil needs: the mechanical means, the evenness, the articulation,





the legato — when it is necessary to play legato — the rhythm. You must practice with different rhythms to control the fingers, to secure the security which you have to have to make you free."

"Then you practice in rhythms?"

"Yes, when it is a question of *mecanisme*, a technical problem, I work very much with different rhythms, especially for controlling the fingers and accents."

"Speaking of scales in pieces, how would you have a pupil work on the ending scales of the Chopin Ballade in G Minor, for example?"

"In my opinion, these scales must be absolutely even as well as fast. You must achieve absolute evenness of weight in the fingers. Controlling the weight — the weight which you give each finger — is very, very important."

Memorizing

"What are the principal kinds of memory and how do you memorize?"

"First, there is natural memory. There are passages which you repeat, the difficulties of which you practice very much, that memorize themselves. Without your realizing it one day you know them by heart. But this kind of memory is dangerous.

"Second, there is the kind of memory which for me is almost the most important — musical form memorization. I analyze the work — the phrases, the intervals, the cadences, the form, and so on.

"Third, there is the memory of the fingers, which is also dangerous but which can help.

"Fourth, there is a kind of memory which helps me a lot and which I find interesting: the memory of the accents (so frequent and important in Spanish music) — a phrase where there is an accent, or a phrase where there isn't an accent. This memorization of the rhythmical accent which exists in every musical phrase is *une guide extraordinaire*.

"And fifth, there is a kind of memory which can help and which is also dangerous: the visual memory of the keyboard — what the hands and arms have to do, the distance to be here, to get there. Memory is complex. You must have all these kinds of memory, and of course the musical ear."

Tone and Melody

"What are your ideals in tone, your conception of beautiful tone?"

"I find that the sonority is the portrait of the personality of each pianist or musician. Each artist is like the shape of a face; he has his own sonority, a thing very, very personal. Then each period — the classic, romantic, impressionist — requires a different tone. Therefore it is necessary to have a large palette of tone for this, this, and that. Tone, too, is complex.

"And tone also depends on the climate. The schools of thought about tone in Paris, for instance, are very different from the schools in other cities. And this

should be so. Otherwise, music would be boring, if everyone did things the same.

"Tone also depends on the instrument on which you are playing, where you are, the acoustic, and who is listening to you. Your own tone changes all the time, from hall to hall.

"Furthermore, there is the musical conception of artists who view music from an orchestral viewpoint, and of other artists who view music in a smaller or more limited way. What one does with a melody, a phrase, whether one concerns oneself with the palette of the instrument, the polyphony, the diversity of the different voices — these things depend on the artist's musical conception and influence his tone. Absolutely; that is sure. In general, those who think orchestrally, who think big, will have a big, round, large sonority. I don't want to say big in volume, for the quantity is a round thing, a thing of balance."

"Is tone a primary consideration for you?"

"It's very, very important, but there are also other important things. For me, tone is a complement of the whole thing, all things taken together: the form and the tone always go together. For example, rubato is a change in tone as well as tempo. You can't think of the one without thinking of the other."

Melody

"What is your approach to melodic playing?"

"Melody alone rarely exists — sometimes for solo violin, for example. A piano melody depends always on what is beneath or with it. Sometimes one thinks that the melody is more important if one lets it sing alone, very separated from all the rest. But, for me, this is absolutely wrong because there is all the harmony, the entourage that serves this melody; it is there to aid the melody.

"I would even go so far as to say I believe that the melody alone doesn't want to say anything. The melody will be that which all the rest wants it to be. For example, in the Andante Spianato of the big Polonaise of Chopin, all the melody which we have in the right hand depends on the character that you give the left hand. Just the notes in the right hand say nothing by themselves. You can give this melody an intimate, a



dreamy, an agitated, or even a tragic character depending upon what you do with the left hand. The right hand always remains the same; how it sounds depends on the entourage. You can't do anything with just the melody." You have to have other things in order to give it character and atmosphere.

"What is your approach to phrasing?"

"Phrasing depends upon the composer and the work you are playing. Phrasing is the shape of a face, the features of a face. Whether or not you want the visage to have a rude or severe character depends upon how you phrase, how you accent, upon what complement of tone you give and so on. You must search each finality, each thing you want.

"If it is for this reason that I say that, in general, technique by itself will do nothing for you. You must see what technique you must apply in the moment and in the piece you are playing, in the style of the composer. Sometimes you must do one thing, sometimes other things."

"Would you say that in Mozart small detailed phrasing is very important, whereas in Chopin the big line is more important?"

"Si. Yes, really. But the small details must never disturb the big line because even in Mozart the musical line is always big. The small details must be there without your being aware of them, so natural that you are unaware of them. If a detail stands out, the phrasing is not natural; it is forced."

"Is it more natural to combine two or three phrases into a big line in the romantic composers than in the classic composers?"

"Yes, because in general the phrases in the works of the romantic composers are much longer and larger, the musical form is like *une verre d'esprit*, a glass full of feeling. There is fantasy in romantic works, whereas in the classics, the law of musical form is much more alive."

Spanish Music

"In Spanish music — in Granados and Albeniz, for example — there is much repetition in the phrases. What problems does this repetition of phrasing impose?"

"You take into account the music's folkloric origin. You take the *copies*, the couplets, as the guide to the music. And then, the music of Albeniz and Granados is romantic music — it is written in an absolutely free fashion except in *Iberia* and *Goyescas* which already start to have a form.

"The repetition of phrases does create difficulties in the interpretation: if you don't create variety, the music becomes a routine thing. It is difficult to give variety to all this, but you must look from one side to the other. There is the variation of the rhythm, the color, the state of soul. You must do many things because you have the liberty to do these things."

"What Spanish compositions would you recommend to young pianists as an introduction to Spanish music?"

"I would recommend Albeniz: *Cantos de Espana, Suite Espanola*; Granados: *Danzas Espanolas, Seis piezas sobre cantos populares Espanoles*; and Turina: *Cuentos de la antigua Espana*, and "*Sacromonte*" and *Zapateado*" from the *Danzas Gitanas, Op. 55*."

"I like the music of Federico Mompou very much," I said. "I've played and taught almost all of it and pupils like it too." (Madame de Larrocha immediately got up and brought me a color photograph of a group at luncheon which included herself and Mompou.)

"For him," she said, "the most important thing is tone. In general his melodies are popular. Mompou is an extraordinary pianist. He has a sonority, a personality that you can't imitate; you can't arrive at doing what he can do. The third *Song and Dance*, the one with the Sardana, is dedicated to my teacher, Frank Marshall. Let me see it." (She saw the written initials F.M. on the front of the music which I had brought.)

"Ah, that's the signature of Marshall. How did you get it?"

"No, it's the trademark signature of Federico Mompou."

"But it's Frank Marshall too," she said, laughing gaily. "It's exactly the signature of Frank Marshall."

"It's on most of Mompou's works published by the Union Musical Espanola," I added. "I like the *Songs and Dances* Nos. 5, 6, and 7 very much."

"Yes, they're very beautiful. Number 7 is of popular origin; only Number 5 is original, the themes that is. I'm going to record Numbers 5 and 6 on a disk of contemporary Spanish composers — Mompou, Montsalvatge, Nin-Culmell, Sgrinach, and Ernesto Halffter."

"The *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* could be played in concert," I said.

"*Oui, oui, oui, oui.* That is the most brilliant work pianistically he has composed. I was with him when he composed the eleventh variation. Mompou doesn't like to play very loud or fast; he detests when you play more than mezzo forte or Allegretto. He's worked on a concerto for years, but since it isn't finished, he used the theme in a ballet. Recently he composed an oratory, *Los improperios*, which is perhaps the most important work he has written and which has been recorded. But in general he doesn't like large forms; it is the miniature that he likes. I'll tell him you're writing an article on his music; he'll be pleased."

"I'll tell him . . . he'll be pleased." It was the kind of sweet, sunny, spontaneous remark that seems to characterize Alicia de Larrocha. ★



THE NONCONFORMIST

The Grandest Concert, continued

fit Concert came to a rousing end when Raymond Lewenthal returned to conduct a "celebrity" performance of Carl Reinecke's *Children's Symphony*. A "production number" replete with a host of "stars", it featured authors Joseph Machlis and Phillip Miller, Broadway lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, critic Alan Rich (where was Harold Schonberg?), composer Ned Rorem, Jack Roman (Baldwin's artist representative) and I.P.L.'s own Gregor Benko (playing a tea tray loaned by Sunny Carballeira, former pianist with Phil Spitalney's All-Girl Orchestra!). I tell you, it was quite a night.

Of course, no one out front had any idea of what went on backstage or ahead of curtain time: Novaes



Guests at the reception: harpsichord builder John Challis, I.P.L. president Gregor Benko, Mrs. Arthur Loesser, author Frank Cooper, and Mme. Novaes' daughter Annamaria Pinto.

having to be replaced at the last minute for the Chopin *Polonaise* by young pianist Michael May (her ancient Busoni edition would not fit with the *urtext* used by all the others); I.P.L.'s multi-talented William Santaella wrestling like a hero with the eight grand pianos, moving them in *every* direction to accommodate each artist's wishes; John Challis responding to an emergency call from Benko just prior to the big event by making a wooden base to hold the crystal bowl (in B) which kept threatening to fall over each time Mr. Miller whacked it in the *Children's Symphony*; Earl Wild's backstage equipment which included a bee-keeper's hat replete with veils (he planned to wear it when he played the *Flight of the Bumble-bee* for an encore — before he found out that encores were "out"); the distances covered by so many of the artists in getting to the concert — Johansen came from Wisconsin, Davis from Florida, Bolet from Indiana, Sanroma from Puerto Rico, Novaes from Brazil (flown courtesy of Varig, the Brazilian Airlines, because she was playing Brazil's national anthem); the cooperation of various record company officials and concert managers who helped make it possible for every one of the participating artists generously to contribute his services. *Etcetera!*

Most important, the concert raised enough funds to help the I.P.L. recover some of its losses and to operate in the black for a while. It won a number of new friends for the Library and proved beyond doubt that memorable evenings of music are still possible in our time — and that concerts (even under inclement conditions) are far from dead, if they are planned with ears and eyes for the extraordinary. *Fine*