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BEETHOVEN
PIANO CONCERTOS

ALICIA DE LARROCHA
RSO Berlin
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HANDEL'S ALCINA — ARLEEN AUGER INTERVIEWED
QUARTERLY RETROSPECT WITH ROBERT LAYTON
JOHN BORWICK INVESTIGATES DAT



ALICIA DE LARROCHA A LIFE OF MUSIC

It wasn't difficult to find Alicia de Larrocha's room at the Westbury Hotel; the sound of Albéniz's *Iberia*—audible as soon as I stepped out of the lift—would have been enough to guide me there. Madame de Larrocha greets me warmly, and then explains, with apparent embarrassment, that she is having to relearn the Albéniz for a forthcoming recording. "Do you know, it's only recently struck me how difficult *Iberia* is—I just didn't seem to realize that before. I learned it when I was very young, and of course it was hard, but I've had it under my fingers for so long that I've tended to forget how tricky a lot of it is. Coming back to it after a gap of several years has been a little frightening!"

Spanish composers—Albéniz, Granados, Falla—have always formed a significant part of her repertoire. I am interested to know how she feels about the music of her great compatriots. English musicians tend to be fairly patriotic about their own composers (when they aren't positively antipathetic, that is), and frequently speak of associations with landscapes or aspects of the English character or cultural history—all of which are commonly felt to be somehow intrinsic in the music. Does Spanish music provoke a similar response in her? "No, not really. What I feel is more like a strong familiarity. It's like what I feel when I get home and see all my own things around me. I don't feel anything special about it. When I was young I was surrounded by Spanish music. My mother and my aunt were both

students of Granados, and they played his music all the time. My family were on very friendly terms with Granados and his family and we were often at each other's houses for meals and chats. And we saw quite a lot of Albéniz too, so it just seemed natural that I should play their pieces. The music that I and my friends really had to work at was the 'other' music: Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Schumann—the Central European repertoire. If anything, I have stronger feelings about these composers because I had to work so hard to understand them."

This brings us conveniently round to her Beethoven piano concerto cycle, released this month and reviewed on page 705. It's partly the memory of her first encounter with Beethoven that has prompted her to take the unusual step of using the Reinecke cadenza for the Fourth Concerto. "When I started to learn the Fourth Concerto it was during the Spanish Revolution. There was only one music shop in Barcelona at that time, and when I went to get the cadenzas they pointed to a pile of music in a corner, covered with dust, and said, 'that's all we have'. It turned out to be the Reinecke and so, since there was no chance of getting anything else, I took it and learned it and played it in my concert. Then when the Revolution was over, I got the Beethoven—and played only that. Many pianists and conductors have told me they are astonished that I want to record Reinecke's cadenza—what's wrong with the Beethoven? Still, I wanted to do it, and I'm not

the first—Backhaus also used it in his recording. I think he felt there was something a little incongruous about the original cadenza—the first movement is so relaxed and poetic, and the cadenza is dramatic and fiery—but that's Beethoven!"

De Larrocha denies any special identification with Beethoven, or with any other composer for that matter. "I'm a very variable, very moody person. The whole repertoire is my field—the only thing is, it depends on my mood! One day I think a piece is so beautiful, and the next day I've forgotten it—it's no longer what I want to say. And when I play something I get completely involved in it: I forget what I played before, or what I have to play next." Nevertheless, on more than one occasion she compares herself temperamentally to Beethoven, though never without a self-deprecatory chuckle as, for instance, when I ask her if there are any new areas of the piano repertoire that she feels she would like to explore. "Oh many, many things, but it's too late! I do sometimes get depressed when I realize that it's probably too late to start going off in new directions. Still, I'm in a different mood now, so I try to keep my spirit strong and high—like Beethoven—and it's 'to Hell with depression!' But then, just when I'm feeling high, I start to get depressed again. I'm a very strange animal!"

She changes the subject. What do I think of the new technology—digital recordings, Compact Discs and the like? I answer briefly, and she takes up the subject with enthusiasm. "It's

all quite amazing, but I still think that the very first records are the best. You can hear the real truth about what is happening. Nowadays recordings are becoming more perfect, more beautiful, but they can be so *artificial*. You lose the sense of the artist's personality." I point out that a number of contemporary musicians—Alfred Brendel for instance, or Frans Brüggen of the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century—are expressing a preference for live recordings. "Oh yes, but that wouldn't do for me—I make too many mistakes! And people care much more about accuracy these days; they're used to it because they hear recordings like that all the time. But I must say that the recordings I have of my live performances mean much more to me on the whole than the studio ones."

One other aspect of contemporary music-making bothers her. Young musicians, she feels, are often forced into intensive 'careers'—the word itself upsets her, she says. "Nowadays everyone talks *careers* all the time. When I was a student I didn't know what this word meant. My teacher, Frank Marshall, was a very helpful and stimulating man, but he never talked about concerts or competitions or tours or any of that nonsense!" So just how did she find herself with—dare one say it—a musical career? "I don't know; it just happened. Little by little more people asked me to play in concerts, and I was simply glad to be asked. And so I ended up with—no, not a career—a life of music!" STEPHEN JOHNSON.