

They're mad about Alicia

Alicia de Larrocha is 4 feet 9 inches tall.
Inch for inch, there has probably never been a better pianist.

By Donal Henahan

Success is the most potent of wonder drugs and the most unpredictable in its side effects. Consider the case of the Spanish pianist, Alicia de Larrocha, who in the last 10 years has found herself propelled by her own talent and by fate's whimsy into a success bracket so lofty that she now is judged by standards applied only to a handful of artists in her field. But, far from getting high on success, the 53-year-old Catalonian musician finds it all puzzling, even a little frightening. A small, neat person, outwardly prim and serene, she reveals herself on longer acquaintance to be a turbulent woman given to wide swings in mood, going from girlish gaiety at one meeting to brooding introspection at the next. And, in the latter mood, Miss de Larrocha can turn almost melancholy in contemplating the music world's current Alicia craze. The more critics and concertgoers exhaust themselves in praise of her, the more she worries and questions their sanity.

"It happens all the time that I play how I think is terrible and they say it is magnificent. Sometimes I want to die it is so bad, and everyone loves it. It is something mysterious, what makes one pianist popular and not another."

So she can say, anyway, on a day when her Iberian blood is moving sluggishly, or perhaps when she is momentarily borne under by the paramilitary disciplines and unnatural social life that must be endured by an itinerant virtuosa in the 20th century.

Or when she has an especially important concert or recital to face. No doubt Miss de Larrocha is already darkly contemplating her solo appearances on Aug. 3 and 5 at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival. She plays a total of six performances this summer at the festival, which has engaged her for every one of its 10 seasons to date. No other soloist in the event's history has been so favored.

The critics have tried to explain the clamor to her for a decade at least. Her playing has only deepened and become more subtle since Harold Schonberg catalogued her excellence in 1966: "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 played with an ease and security that must have bugged

the eyes of the pianists in the audience." The music was Granados and Albéniz, whose "Goyescas" and "Iberia" not only represent Spanish music at its atmospheric best but sum up the entire post-Romantic tradition of piano virtuosity. Few pianists alive seriously challenge Miss de Larrocha's supremacy in this fiercely difficult music, either as technician or as Iberian poet. Furthermore, the de Larrocha style—unclouded by too much pedal, phenomenally crisp and accurate, rhythmically impregnable, melodically pliant and seemingly spontaneous—adjusts beautifully to an extraordinarily wide range of repertory. In the last 10 years, her New York recitals have encompassed all styles, from the harpsichord composers such as Couperin and Bach to the ripest of post-Romantics such as Rachmaninoff and Granados.

But if Miss de Larrocha is disoriented by her current status in the piano world, little wonder. Her rise, which did not really begin until she was middle-aged, has been vertiginously steep, dating from 1965 when Herbert Breslin, a New York public-relations man, heard one of her European (Hispanovox) recordings and was staggered. He wondered where this phenomenon had been hiding and why, and immediately wrote her a letter asking if he could represent her in America. Miss de Larrocha, who had been giving a few concerts, mostly in Spain, and teaching in her own school, hesitated a long while but gave in. Mr. Breslin found himself in the artist management business, with one client.

Not that Alicia de Larrocha had been exactly unknown in this country: Collectors of piano recordings knew of a remarkable Decca album on which she played the complete "Goyescas" of Granados as few of them had ever heard that maniacally difficult music played before. But who believes recordings? Furthermore, Miss de Larrocha had made one United States tour in 1955, picking up some excellent reviews as well as the usual "yes but" criticism. She was regarded by some as a Spanish music specialist, no more.

Since returning in 1965, however, Miss de Larrocha has gone from one incredible success to another, while touching almost every corner of the piano repertory. She plays 50 concerts and recitals a season in this country, and about an equal number abroad, where her reputation also has soared. Her recordings automatically appear on best-selling charts almost as soon as they are released.

She is, then, a runaway success, and while the question of her ultimate standing in the pianists' pantheon is yet to be settled, one thing already seems certain: Inch for inch, there has probably never been a better pianist anywhere, any time.

For, as the titan herself admits, Miss de Larrocha is only 4 feet 9 inches tall.

Her size, or lack of it, dominates much of Miss de Larrocha's thinking and, in her deepest funks, she even can blame it for her popularity with audiences. Any performer's success, she explains, depends on "something else besides art," and if an artist does not have this extra something, no amount of talent will make up for that. "You must be exotic, somehow—or have some handicap. In my case, I feel sure it was because I was so tiny, so . . . so awful. I was a little like a circus." She smiles at this, but it is a thin smile, without coyness or hint of raillery. Yet before one sits a woman who is decidedly attractive to any outside eye, so charming even when trying to document her lack of charm that her wry self-deprecation is impossible to take seriously.

She, however, takes it seriously indeed. She hates her small hands and the stubby fingers, each of which ends bluntly on a cushion of callus. All her piano-playing life they have been a problem, but now constant work at stretching exercises is required to keep them in shape. "I can stretch a ninth, plus," she says with a mocking smile. (It is extremely rare to find a concert pianist who cannot easily stretch a 10th—that is, from middle C to E in the octave above—and a Rubinstein or Van Cliburn hand can cover a 12th, or 12 white keys, up to the G above that E.) "I am not a Rubinstein or a Rachmaninoff. To keep up my technique, I am always doing Chopin études, always stretching, stretching. The hands are my obsession." However, her astounding accuracy, velocity and clarity in chord registration simply seem to defy physiological explanation, and confirm what good teachers have long known (and many mortified students have suspected), that the secret of musical technique lies primarily in the ear and the memory, not the fingers.

The function of the ear in building technique is so obvious a fact of performing life that it is often overlooked while emphasis is placed on purely mechanical devices. Some teachers keep the air filled with pianistic argot: arm weighting, shoulder participation, free fall, throw and stroke, finger pressure, knuckle stroke and so on. But Walter Gieseking, in a foreword to the piano method of his teacher Karl Leimer, probably puts the matter in the best perspective when he says, "Critical self-hearing is, in my opinion, by far the most important factor in all of music study. . . . Only trained ears are capable of noticing the fine inexactitudes and unevennesses, the eliminating of which is necessary to a perfect technique." The fingers, in

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Observations



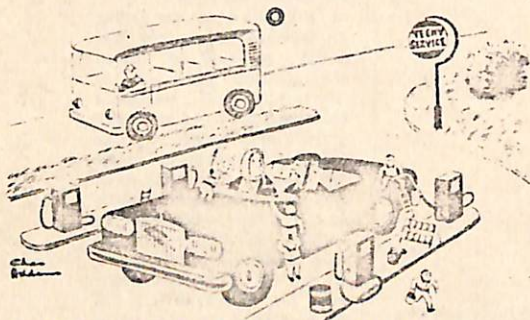
Awakening? We're heartened by a recent Roper poll, showing that three out of four Americans now rate development of a sound national energy policy as one of the two greatest needs from Congress. It's right up there with tax reform, which is great news for those who believe the legislators will eventually heed the people. Because recognizing that a problem exists is just a step ahead of finding a solution.

Paper Tiger. Forty years ago, the *Federal Register*, which lists all the federal regulations, contained 2,619 pages. Last year it had 60,221, including this regulatory goodie on ladders from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration: "The angle (a) between the loaded and unloaded rails and the horizontal is to be calculated from the trigonometric equation:

$$\text{Sine } a = \frac{\text{Difference in deflection}}{\text{Ladder width}}$$

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other words, follow the ear. Technique of the de Larrocha sort would be unthinkable, moreover, if it were not also guided by virtuosic memory, a somewhat mysterious force that teachers recognize in at least four varieties: the muscular, the photographic, the analytical and the aural. Working together, these memory systems transmit the proper (or improper) messages to the fingers and the rest of the pianist's body far enough in advance so that conscious thought need not be brought to bear at the instant of striking the key. The better these memory data banks function, the smoother and more accurate the playing.

So runs the "technique is in the head, not the fingers" theory, and while pianists with fast fingers and slow heads might resist the idea, some such reasoning must be advanced to explain how a pianist so inadequately equipped physically as Miss de Larrocha can perform such technical prodigies. Crafty redistribution of fingering and stealthy pedaling certainly are a help, but do not begin to explain enough.

A further technical complication is Miss de Larrocha's height, which forces her to make a Procrustean choice between sitting too high at the keyboard, by ordinary standards, and sitting too low. To achieve the desired power and variety in her tone, she chooses a high position from which she proceeds to ignore most of the dicta about tone, touch and weight distribution set forth in such scientific studies as Ortmann's "The Physiological Mechanics of Piano Technique," as well as in more practical treatises. The pedagogues of an older, more rigid school of pianism such as Clementi, Dusek or C.P.E. Bach probably would have apoplexy if they could see but not hear a de Larrocha recital. Because of her high sitting position, she is able, when necessary, to hunch her shoulders and get more arm and body weight into the keys. (Meanwhile, failed pianists in the audience hear their childhood teachers warning them: "You'll never be a pianist if you hunch your shoulders like that.") Because she cranks her bench up so high, however, Miss de Larrocha seems barely able to reach the pedals, and at times appears to be not so much sitting on the bench as leaning against it.

Interestingly enough, Miss de Larrocha's raised-seat position was championed by Liszt and his students in the 19th century at a time when heavy tone and power were the big selling points for a concert pianist. A woman, Sophie Mentner, was one of the last important proponents of the higher position, and she was thus able to achieve what many at that time thought the highest praise for any woman pianist: She played, it was often reported, "like a man." Miss de Larrocha, on the other hand, simply plays like a great musician, as capable of achieving silky tone and cobweb delicacy as crashing power. The high position does not seem to hinder her in producing a beautiful, unforced tone, as it logically ought to do.

Her Lilliputian view gives her some

individual insights into her craft, making her aware of small points to which other pianists never have to give a thought. "It is especially difficult for me when a piano has a deep action" [that is, when the key must be depressed a couple of millimeters further than usual before the note sounds]. "With my small stretch, just that little difference can be important. Also, every piano has narrower or wider keys. European pianos have slightly thinner black keys. In this country, they are thicker, so it is harder to put my fingers in between them. For me, that can make a difference. Sometimes you simply get a bad piano or one with an uneven scale, so I must change fingerings to produce the tone I want. I will often put the thumb on the black key, which I was taught was wrong, to make a strong tone."

Understandably, Miss de Larrocha has developed an obsession about pianos. "She's a piano freak," says a colleague. "She can go on for hours about the minuscule differences between one instrument and another." In fact, she sounds like the surfer in eternal search of the perfect wave: "It's so important to feel comfortable with the action, the tone, so that the

'She hates her small hands and the stubby fingers. All her piano-playing life they have been a problem.'

mechanics fit your ideas. To find this piano, it's just about a miracle. I would like always to play the same piano, to take it everywhere on tour, the way the virtuosi used to do. But only a billionaire could do that now. Even Rubinstein doesn't take his own piano along these days."

Miss de Larrocha has learned to compromise somewhat in the course of her incessant touring to cities and towns, large and small, and her shuttling between high-school auditoriums and mammoth opera houses. "On the day of the recital or concert, I go to try the piano and if it is especially bad, I will occasionally shift my program. I can't play those repeated notes in Falla's 'Nights in the Gardens of Spain' if the keys stick and won't come up properly." She once or twice has canceled a program because the piano was hopeless: "I think maybe it was in Tacoma or Seattle. Somewhere."

She finds that the touring life has its ups and downs, but that increasingly it is a psychic and physical strain. "I don't mind the plane and I often sleep right through the takeoff and the landing. One time a terrified man sitting beside me called the stewardess because this poor lady beside him was unconscious." But success has meant seriously disrupting her family life, and that she finds more and more distressing.

The family consists of her husband, to whom she has been married for 26 years, and two children. Juan Francesco, who is 19, plays the guitar "but is too lazy." His sister Alicia is 17, "a pianist who can play anything and improvises beautifully. But she is terrified of my kind of life, and how it affects everything I'm doing, my moods, everything. I'm always asking her what she plans to do but she just says, 'I will see, I will see.'"

Miss de Larrocha's husband, Juan Torra, a pianist who formerly ran the family's school for pianists back home in Barcelona while she was off on tour, is now ill and for the last four years has remained at home, unable to work. "His liver," Miss de Larrocha explains with a sad shake of the head. All this anxiety about being away so much from Barcelona is clearly a drain, and helps account for Miss de Larrocha's frustration over what to the casual observer might seem a wonderfully exciting and glamorous life. "Sometimes I want to stop. But I can't stop now. I have too many commitments, to my family and to them . . ."

By "them," she means the people who have conspired to help her to international renown: the publicity people, the recording officials, the managers, the impresarios. She feels deeply in their debt and yet cannot help chafing under the yoke of gold they have fastened around her neck. "I would like to be able to take some time off, two or three years. At least, I would like to be able to play when and where I want to. But it is impossible. My wish—my only real wish now—is to go into the music more and more. I am so upset, because to do that you need a lot of time. I have always been slow about that—not the notes, that is easy, but to go inside the music, and understand it. My life is best now when I am practicing and looking for something, not playing concerts, but examining, learning."

Well, there are certain other times, good times, even for a woman who thinks of public performance as a form of torture that would have seemed severe in the Inquisition. "Sometimes even now I very much enjoy playing. Then I get, what is it—yes, goose bumps. Electricity in the skin, and it is a beautiful thing then. But, no, most of the time I go to play where I must always say to myself, 'This is

very important, I must be very good.' It is terrible, you see, when commercial pressure gets too much. Then you make a mistake and it puts you in a terrible position. I enjoy playing when I go where there is no publicity and nobody knows me. The more publicity I get the more I close up, and that is very bad because it works against my personality." Miss de Larrocha frowned and added, unnecessarily, "I hate to give interviews."

It was different when she was the artist as a young girl. "As a teen-ager, I had a lot of facility and learned very fast. Great velocity. I could learn anything in one day. But, little by little, it goes

way. It makes me sick. When I have to be open with someone I pull back."

This desire to draw back into a private, inviolable world puts her under a particular strain during performances. Some pianists bound onstage in apparent glee and court the audience with all the charm, real or counterfeited, in their repertory. Miss de Larrocha enters quickly, smiles at no one in particular, seats herself and goes to work at once. She likes to have the house lights low so that, if possible, she does not see the audience. "When I see a man in the first row shifting around, or if when I play a wrong note he covers his face with his hands—that is terri-

a few other grand-scale things. This seems to have been dictated by temperament rather than pianistic considerations, however: While her memorable successes in New York in recent seasons have included such fearsome heavyweights as Schubert's posthumous B-flat Sonata, the Busoni transcription of Bach's Chaconne, Schumann's Fantasy in C and Liszt's Sonata, she has up to now seemed less at home in the soul-baring, heaven-storming Romantic repertory.

It certainly would not be possible, however, to deduce Miss de Larrocha's sex simply by looking over her repertory. There was a time when many listeners, and women among

ry by successfully grappling with the mightiest works of the piano literature. Among today's pianists, Miss Bachauer tames the "Emperor" as consistently as any man, Martha Argerich outplays just about everyone in the Prokofiev Third Concerto, and a slip of a woman named Ruth Laredo regularly thunders through the most outrageously difficult Rachmaninoff and Scriabin.

So it is possible nowadays, in refutation of the Victorian cliché, for a girl to compete with men and still be popular. And popular Miss de Larrocha is. Even in her darkest moods, she must admit that to herself. She receives a fee of \$5,000 to \$6,000 per engagement, according to her manager, Herbert Breslin, although the figure may be lower for a series of closely spaced performances where no traveling is necessary. On the piano superstar scale, her fee is hardly one of the grand ones: A Rubinstein might command \$15,000, or a Horowitz, coming out of semiretirement, \$25,000. But at some 100 performances a year, she is obviously doing all right.

But Miss de Larrocha also must be realizing these days, with increasing clarity, that she is doing more than playing the piano for high fees. She also is playing now for a stake in musical history. When her star began to rise, she was often compared with the great women pianists of the past: Carreño, Mentner, Clara Schumann, Annette Es-sipoff, Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler. From more recent generations, such names as Myra Hess, Bachauer or Guiomar Novaes might be mentioned in the same breath. But now, the comfortable old barrier between women and men pianists seems to be collapsing, in some part thanks to her. When she sits down at the piano nowadays, she is in as much danger of being compared to Rubinstein or Horowitz as to Hess or Carreño.

Perhaps, too, with her background of Spanish conservatism, she cannot quite shake a twinge of guilt at challenging men on their own turf. In any event, she takes great pains to disavow competitive urges as a betrayal of art. "I do not feel any competition with any other pianist," she says with a light laugh. "I love every other one and they love me—because they feel me no competition. I simply love everyone who is making music. The young girls now are always competing with



Alicia de Larrocha today: "Far from getting high on success, she finds it frightening."

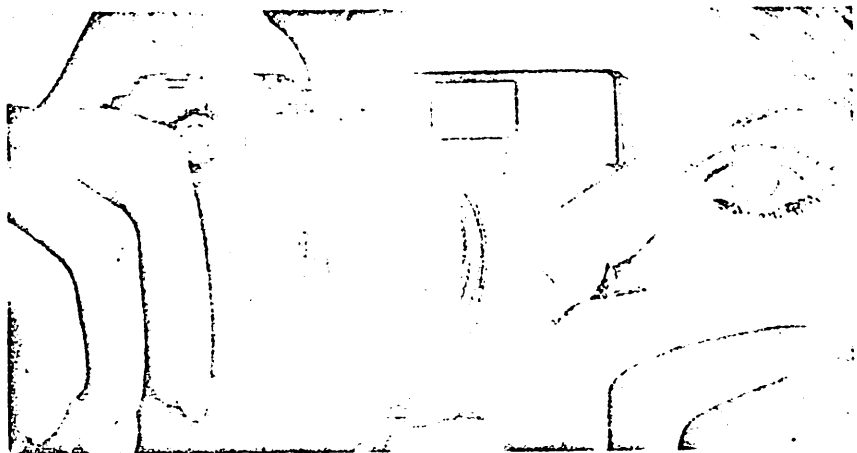
The beautiful things about youth are the way one is not self-conscious, and the confidence, the optimism. I miss that now. It is something we lose. I do keep my love for music. That keeps me going. But the enthusiasm slips away. If you are one of those like Rubinstein, with that serene temperament . . . But I grow more and more severe with myself. More and more I see the difference between what I am and what people say I am." Miss de Larrocha's self-flagellation comes to a pause for thought but does not stop. "My temperament is that I am not able to make a show in any part of my life. I am often very rude to people. They expect me to be one way, so I act the other

ble. Or when they come with the score and sit there in the front row, stony-faced, that is to die. I really think the audience comes to see this strange thing, not to enjoy music. I feel they are saying, 'What is this? Who does she think she is? What is all the noise about? She's just another pianist, after all.'"

Some observers of her career do, it is true, wonder if Miss de Larrocha is going to prove herself in what might be called the Serkin-Schnabel repertory. She does not play much Brahms of the heavier sort (the two concertos, the sonatas), and her dips into Beethoven tend to be comparatively infrequent, although she does play the Fourth Concerto, the Op. 110 Sonata and

them, could have made a list for you of "women's pieces." The Schumann Piano Concerto, for instance, was on such a list. So were such pieces as the lesser of Schubert's two sonatas in A, all of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words," most of Chopin, a Saint-Saëns concerto or two (almost anything French, in fact), the Mozart sonatas and concertos (except for the late concertos), some short pieces by Brahms, the first two or three Beethoven concertos (but not the "Emperor," of course), and so on.

This prejudice persisted even though women such as Teresa Carreño and, more recently, Gina Bachauer had come along periodically and ignored the artificial bounda-



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the boys for speed, brilliance. They get together and show how they can do octaves, trills, thirds and so on. But I was always a private student and I never competed with other pianists in that way." Obviously, competing with herself was enough. That secret contest drove Alicia de Larrocha to become one of the supreme technicians in piano history.

She was not without help in that contest, of course. Miss de Larrocha's only piano teacher was the late Frank Marshall, the Spaniard of part English parentage who founded the Academia Marshall in Barcelona, which she now directs. She made her debut at 5, like all good little virtuosos, and was playing with a Madrid orchestra at 11. When she was 13, however, her childish idyll came apart violently with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Marshall, who had been born in Catalonia but kept an English passport, had to get out of the country. "They [the Loyalists] wanted to kill him because he was well known abroad. Others they wanted to kill because they were rich, or because of religion. I was, at age 13, on my own."

Marshall returned after the Franco forces won out in 1939, however, and Alicia's studies with him resumed. Like many upper-class Spaniards who lived through the Franco years, Miss de Larrocha is reticent about discussing politics but her sympathies were clearly not on the side of her teacher's enemies. Through her association with Marshall, who died 15 years ago, she came to a clairvoyant understanding of the music of Granados, Falla and Albéniz, the trinity of Spanish music. "I never heard Granados or Albéniz play, of course, but Marshall was good friends with them and every other great pianist — Emil Sauer, Anton Rubinstein, everyone."

Miss de Larrocha waves off any suggestion that her sex was a problem to overcome in building a career. "I never had a problem as a woman in Spain," she says, "except that music was regarded as a hobby there, an entertainment, and not anything serious to do."

The piano, in fact, was not the instrument that interested Alicia most as a young girl. "I wanted to be a singer, an opera singer, alieder singer. I thought the only way to make music was to sing—no hammers, no strings, no wood, no iron, but directly

from you. I still think the same but I am happy to be a pianist now because the musical life of a singer is usually very short. I enjoyed singing so much but I got polyps on my vocal cords from practicing so much solfeggio [scales and ear training exercises] when I was 11 or 12. When I was engaged to be married, I was so hoarse that I had to carry a notebook around my neck so I could answer questions. My fiancé — my husband now—liked that."

Miss de Larrocha, like many serious and moody people, has few close friends. Holding up one hand, she says, "I could count them on my fingers. Real friendship doesn't exist very much. The real ones are part of myself, and part of music, too. But when I get problems, I close myself up, don't confide in anyone. I am an up and down person. When I sometimes feel happy, I say to myself, 'Look out, you will go down pretty soon!' I have two personalities inside me, two opposites, fighting all the time. I am always afraid to think much about myself because I know what's inside there."

In view of her reluctance to confide in anyone, it is not surprising that Miss de Larrocha is one of the concert world's loners. She travels without companion, secretary or entourage from city to city, from continent to continent, riding the jet stream of her late-acquired fame. Possibly as a result, she clings to the piano as to a life preserver or security blanket. She practices incessantly, at every opportunity. As one prepares to knock at her hotel room, he is likely to hear muffled Chopin études being run off, or sotto voce figurations from a Mozart concerto. Because, in a hotel, not everyone wants to hear the piano played all day long, even by Alicia de Larrocha, she practices with a mute on the strings. While in New York, she also may spend a good deal of her day in the Steinway basement on West 57th Street, trying out the concert pianos there. When she finds herself in north Germany, she likes to drop in on the Steinway factory at Hamburg to keep in touch with its instruments. At home in Barcelona, she has "a prewar Bechstein that is almost ideal" for her, almost the perfect wave she is eternally doomed to search the world for. If she could find it, Alicia de Larrocha might prove—even to herself—that she is not such a terrible pianist after all. ■