



Alicia de Larrocha

STAR SPANIARDS

Alicia de Larrocha was the leading Spanish pianist of her time – but how many others came close? **Warwick Thompson** puts on his flamenco shoes and goes in search of the best interpreters of Iberian music

When the editor of *Pianist* suggested writing a piece about Spanish pianists, I immediately thought ‘how lovely – a chance to wax lyrical about the incomparable Alicia de Larrocha. And of course there’s also... erm... erm...’ Apologies, dear reader, in attempting to summon some other Spanish keyboard names, off the top of my head, at the level of de Larrocha, I have to confess that I struggled (aside from, of course, our dashing cover artist Javier Perianes). And before you clutch your pearls in absolute horror, and scream ‘Falla’ and ‘Albéniz’ at

me, my defense is that we had already decided not to focus on the great composer/pianists in this piece. They are covered in a separate article about their work as composers.

So, who are the other super-famous pianists? After chatting with much better-informed friends, I realised that I wasn’t the only one to have something of an embarrassing lacuna in my knowledge on this topic. Of course there have been, and are, thousands of successful Spanish pianists: a quick trip to Wikipedia soon jogged my memory. And as soon as their names come to be mentioned in this piece, I’m sure that plenty of recollections will be unlocked for you, too. But that

said, it does seem a curious fact that while Germany, America, Austria, England, Russia, Poland, and other countries have produced heaps of above-the-marquee names, Spain has not.

Why should this be? Is there something in the water? Is it to do with the national psyche? Are Spaniards all out strumming guitars and playing football instead of learning their Czerny?

For what it’s worth, my guess is that the climate has had a lot to do with it. It’s fascinating to note that the piano, as an instrument, did not really take off in Spain until the second half of the 19th century. Nor, for that matter, did it take root in Italy, the country of its birth.

After Bartolomeo Cristofori produced his earliest successful models in the first decade of the 18th century, it was in the cooler climate of Germany that the instrument was initially developed most successfully. The English began producing pianos in about 1760, and their instruments gained a firm foothold in the market. France joined the party in about 1777.

An Italian in Spain

Could it be that the excessive heat – coming in both dry and humid conditions in different parts of Spain – held back the development of the piano there? (And in Italy, as well?) Piano pieces were written, of course, and men and women learned to play them, but somehow the instrument does not seem to have fired the imagination of the Spaniards to the extent that it did elsewhere.

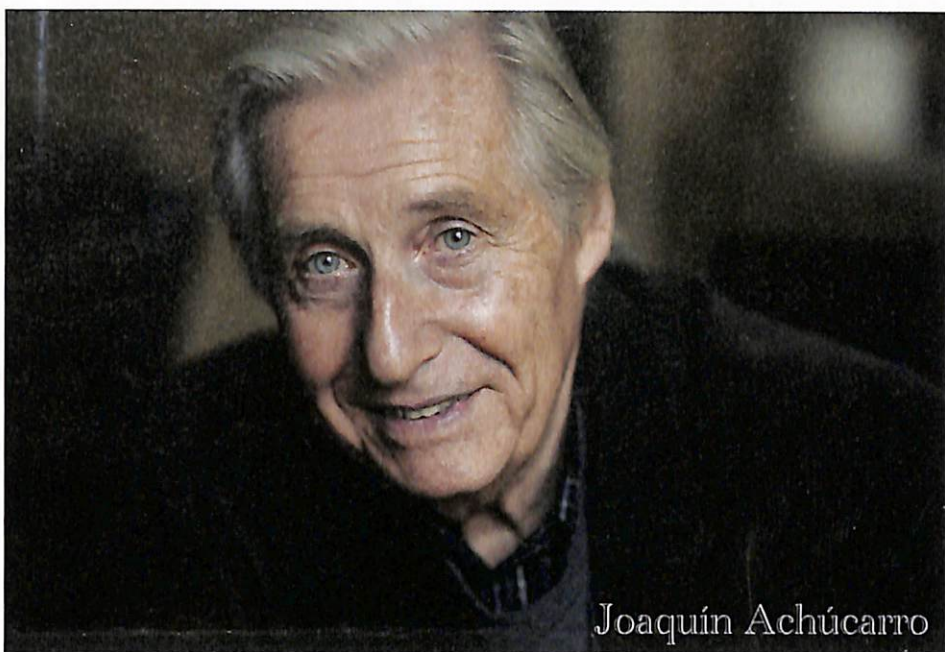
The most important figure in early Spanish keyboard music, curiously enough, was an Italian. Domenico Scarlatti (born in 1685, the same year as both Bach and Handel) was appointed teacher of Barbara Maria, the Infanta of Portugal, when she was just a child. After her marriage to the future Ferdinand VI of Spain, Scarlatti followed her first to Seville and then Madrid. He lived in Spain from 1719 until his death in 1757.

Maria Barbara was apparently a very accomplished keyboard player, and a fine musician. It is known that she owned 12 keyboard instruments, and that five of them were fortepianos, probably made by Cristofori or his pupil Giovanni Ferrini in Florence.

Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about my climate conjecture. The point of this



José Iturbi



Joaquín Achúcarro

little historical diversion is to point out that although Scarlatti had access to the best possible royal pianos, he chose to keep writing for the harpsichord: suggesting, possibly, that the instruments were simply not up to the job of the technical demands he liked to make (and I'll come to some of those in a moment). Was it because tuning them was so much more labour intensive and time-consuming than tuning harpsichords? Was the wooden piano frame, with its greater tension, unable to stand the climate? I haven't seen this idea explored elsewhere, so I offer it as a mere possibility.

Lagging behind

It's worth noting that no great native composers or performers appeared in the wake of Scarlatti in the later 18th century to develop a national school. As Linton E. Powell writes in his exhaustive *A History of Spanish Piano Music*, things only got worse afterwards too. 'In the early nineteenth century in Spain, Italian opera reigned supreme, and Spanish composers of piano music contributed only light salon music and fantasies on operatic themes, or continued the *style galant*'. So, all a bit of a musical hinterland, then.

Spain was losing ground to other nations: and perhaps by the time that the strength of the piano had developed sufficiently to cope with the climate, those lost years seem to have been too difficult to make up in a single generation. It wasn't until Albéniz (1860-1909), Granados (1867-1916) and Falla (1876-1946) appeared on the scene,

like blazing comets from the heavens, that Spanish pianism was ready to take on the world.

Star in the making

One of Granados's pupils was Frank Marshall, a Spaniard born to parents of English heritage. Marshall took over as head of the Academia Granados on the death of the older man, who drowned in the English Channel after a German U-boat attack in 1916. In 1920, the institution was renamed as the Marshall Academy, and it was here that Marshall's best-known pupil was to receive her training.

Alicia de Larrocha (1923-2009), frequently hailed as the greatest Spanish pianist of the 20th century, appeared in the wake of the blazing triumvirate mentioned above, and drew inspiration from their efforts. She was also regarded as an incomparable interpreter of their works and, although her repertoire covered all the usual concerto and recital warhorses, she was associated most particularly with the music of her compatriots throughout her life.

In an interview in 1978, she had this to say about them: 'To me, each of them is a different world. Granados was the only one that captured the real romantic flavour... his style was aristocratic, elegant and poetic. Falla really captured the spirit of Gypsy music. And Albéniz was more international than the others. His music is Spanish in flavour, but his style is completely impressionistic.'

'Aristocratic, elegant, poetic.' De Larrocha is talking about the

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compositions of these three men rather than their style of playing (although the two are surely related), but those words might sum up her own approach to performance, inherited from Marshall. Apparently, he did not allow her to play Spanish music until her mid-teens, insisting instead that she first ground herself in the music of earlier masters. 'Spanish music is very, very, very hard, and if you cannot play Bach and Mozart well, you cannot play Spanish music well,' she once said. 'It must have the right rhythm, just as Bach and Mozart must have the right rhythm.'

There's not a huge amount to say about de Larrocha's life, which was, on the whole, calm and well-grounded in family affection. Her obvious talent was recognised while she was still an infant, but she wasn't paraded as a prodigy. She was a young adult when her career took off after the war. Then she travelled widely, and recorded copiously. She was rewarded with honours during her life, and continued to perform until her old age.

Pedal makes perfect

One particular quality of her playing gives me a chance to pivot into the question of whether there exists such a thing as a specifically 'Spanish style' of playing. An adjectival phrase often applied to her performances is 'jewel-like'. She prized crystalline clarity and emotional control above all else, and was no doubt encouraged in her taste by her teacher. Both Granados and Marshall, in their roles as pedagogues, paid particular attention to the use of the pedal, and its effect on resulting sonorities; the latter



even published a book on the subject called *Estudio práctico sobre los pedales del piano* (A Practical Study of Piano Pedalling) in which he attempted to develop a more detailed system of notation of pedalling marks.

And it was not only Granados and Marshall who focused on this element of performance. Another important Spanish pianist of the golden Albéniz/Falla/Granados era was Ricardo Viñes (1875-1943), whose career – although international in scope – centred on Paris. His pupil Francis Poulenc had this to say about him: 'I admired him madly. He used to kick me in the shins with [Spanish style] button boots whenever I was clumsy at the pedals. No one could teach the art of using the pedals, an essential feature of modern piano music, better than Viñes. He somehow managed to extract clarity precisely from the ambiguity of the pedals.'

Is there a clue here to Spanish style? In the realm of composition, we tend to associate Spanish works with sultriness and sexiness; the languor of hot nights and the ecstasy of wild flamenco; with Moorish scales and gypsy melodies; and above all with the sound of the guitar. Much has been written, in fact, about Scarlatti's use of sounds derived from this instrument, from strummed chords, to internal pedal notes (when changing chords on a guitar fret, the finger which plays the common note between them is often held as anchor, thus creating a pedal note), even to recreating the guitarist's slap of the wood in punchy,

dissonant, staccato chords. But those are all stereotypical qualities of Spanish compositions. In the realm of performance, it is more often a quality of control and restraint that gives these works their force. Is that what 'Spanish style' is?

De Larrocha's obituary in *The Guardian* hints that it might be. 'Her playing was above all controlled, formal (checking the opposite tendency in the styles [of Albéniz and Granados], grounded as they were in folk music and improvisation), yet it is also warm, with a radiant jewel-like tone quality.'

So are clarity, transparency, careful pedalling true marks of Spanish performances? I'll leave it to others to continue the debate. Discussions of national style can all too easily descend into easy and unpleasant clichés – 'Russian style' as muscular pounding, 'Japanese style' as over-precision, and so on – but with sensitivity it can also be an illuminating discussion. In an era of bland globalization (what we might call the 'Starbucksification' of culture), aren't the qualities which mark us out as different the ones which become most valuable? Answers on a postcard, please.

Colourful personalities

Back to the overview of important pianists. Mention must be made of the colourful José Iturbi (1895-1980), as much for his Hollywood career as for his performances. A handsome and charismatic man, he appeared (as himself) in several film comedies, most notably *Anchors Aweigh* with Frank

Sinatra and Gene Kelly, and in a leading role in *Three Daring Daughters* with Jeanette MacDonald. Although he was noted for his flamboyance as a young performer, it's generally thought that his playing suffered after his film career, and became more routine; apparently his fans didn't want to hear 'difficult' works of late Beethoven or Schumann, but expected endless repeats of Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No 1, and this had a deleterious effect on his performances. He continued as a successful conductor, however.

A young pianist who made a noisy splash was Rafael Orozco (1946-1996), who won the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1966. Afterwards it was revealed that the jury had been violently split, and some members made their feelings all too public. One of those members was William Glock, who in his other role as head of Radio 3 and the Proms seemed to ensure that Orozco wasn't given as much exposure in the UK as he otherwise might have received. The few recordings he made before his death at the age of just 50 show him to have been a pianist of unforced poetry and strength.

Another pianist who has made an important mark on the international stage is Joaquín Achúcarro (born 1932), who has performed with just about every major orchestra under the sun. Very much of the de Larrocha mould, his performances show a restrained and Apollonian personality, very much at home in Brahms and Ravel; he performs Spanish music, but hasn't specialised in this area.

De Larrocha herself took on students, and one of them, Alba Ventura (born 1978), has also attracted plenty of attention, and is now herself head of the Marshall Academy. Check out her delightful disc *Études*, containing vivid performances of pieces by Czerny, Liszt, Chopin and others for a sense of her limpid and polished style.

Not quite Spanish

I can't resist mentioning Daniel Barenboim here, if only partly in fun. Barenboim holds citizenship of several countries, including Argentina, Israel, Palestine and – you've guessed it – Spain. Does this make him a Spanish pianist? Technically, of course, yes. But I'll leave

geo-political-musical heads wiser than mine to argue over the Spanish nature of his Argentinian musical heritage. One thing I would note though: I wouldn't place him in the 'restrained, crystalline, transparent' category of Spanish musicians, even if those are undoubtedly qualities he can summon up when he wants.

Researching this article, I came across plenty of other names who were completely new to me: the Carles and Sofia Piano Duo, for example, and Teresa Llacuna. Miguel Ituarte, and Claudio Martínez Mehner to name a few. And I couldn't help but be impressed by the biography of high-ranking administrator Paloma O'Shea, 1st Marchioness of O'Shea, founder and president of the Albéniz Foundation. None of these people have reached that Empyrean realm of recognition enjoyed by de Larrocha, but all are well worth investigating further; and in doing so, it might help us to understand why Spanish pianism in the 20th and 21st centuries hasn't always taken the highest place at the musical table, and whether it's time to rethink the seating plan. ■

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