

MUSIC

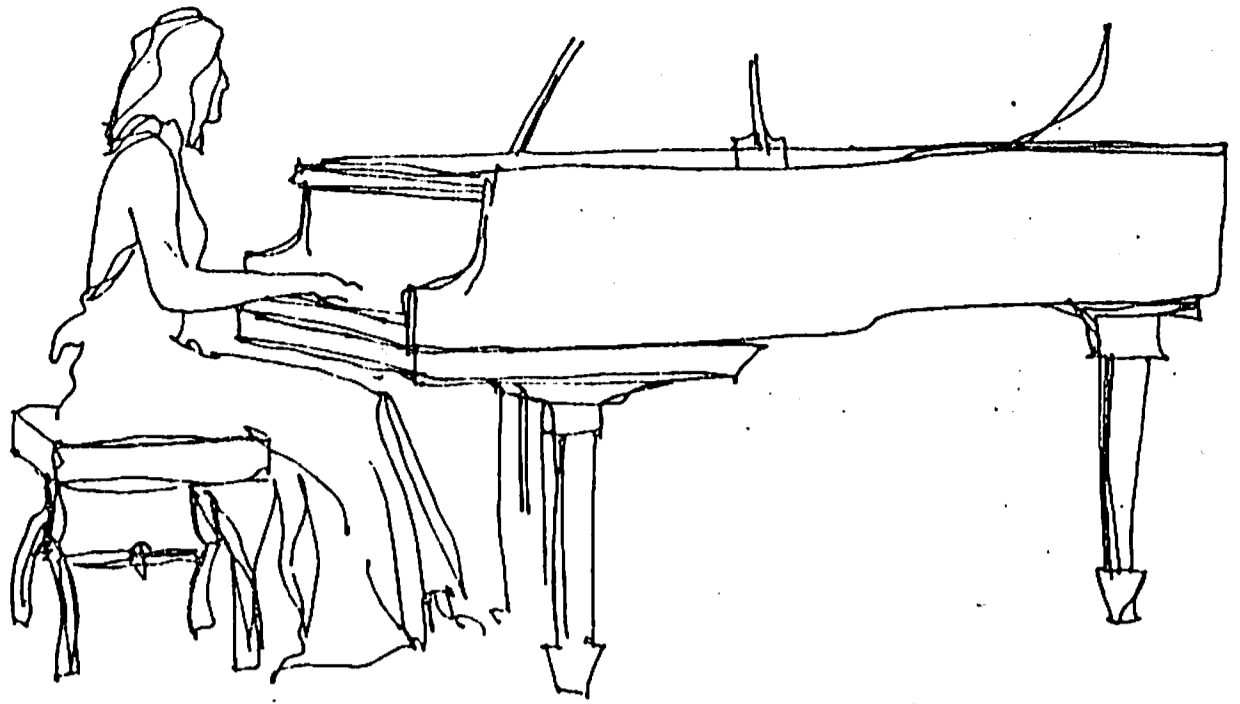
THE LITTLE LADY FROM SPAIN

WILLIAM F. RICKENBACKER

Alicia de Larrocha gave an evening of piano music at Carnegie Hall in New York City this winter. I was there, and I shall never be the same. I had drenched myself in her recordings already (NATIONAL REVIEW, Feb. 13, 1968) but there had always remained the nagging quiver of doubt: Were those resonances the special result of modern technique in the recording room, was that clarity brought about by the clever placing of the microphone against the sound box?

The recordings I reported upon earlier are honest. From twenty rows back in the audience I can report that the little lady from Spain is exactly the marvel she seemed to be in her recordings—and more. She has everything you could ask for in a pianist. Rhythm: it was the first time I had ever seen an audience react with what the anatomists call the gross postural muscles. Throughout the evening I studied the men and women in the seats around me as they waited for the pulsations of the music, hunching their shoulders and then relaxing them, jutting their heads ever so slightly forward in time with the major episodes, and (in myself, and in the man at my left) holding their breath during the codas.

ON HEARING HER recordings, I thought Alicia de Larrocha was a sovereign rhythmist, but I never understood what that meant until the other night at Carnegie Hall. She would raise that right paw of hers and *restrain it* above the keys time and time again until the audience could sense the impending crash of tone, intuit the climax visually as well as musically (for the left hand is



maintaining an insistent uproar). It is like watching a cat setting itself for the pounce. It quivers, then it shudders, its intensity builds and builds, and then it crashes forward and nothing can stand in its way. Just so the rhythm of this lady. That hand hesitates in mid-air and three thousand people hold their breath. The things that happen to your psyche when she "drops the other shoe" are indescribable. You have to be there.

I make it sound contrived. Actually the rhythmic tricks she pulls are elegant and infinitely variable. The excitement is always the excitement of magisterial power subordinated to magisterial intellect. Intellect? Cold word. Better to say musicality, but that's an abstract word. In practical terms I'll tell you what her playing means. It means that if you go to hear her and set your mind to analyzing every little technical solution she exhibits, you will shortly find yourself awakening from a delirium of musical joy and reminding yourself that you have other "more serious" concerns.

She robs you of your expertise. I have myself heard her produce flute-tones with her thumb and bell-tones with the fingers of her right hand alone. Her instantaneous transition from plangent to lyrical in terraced Iberian music is unexampled. She filled Carnegie Hall with her left hand alone, in a Scriabin encore. All the while she sat at the keyboard still and quiet, and hardly lifted her hands above the level of the keys. She is so short and so small that her elbow hardly reaches the top of the woodwork of a concert grand, even when she wears high heels. In order to get both hands into the upper reaches of the keyboard she has to turn her body to the audience and stretch her arms straight out. Her hand barely grasps an octave. And she delivered up

Gaspard de la Nuit like any good French girl twirling an omelette.

More: the unimpeachable Benedetto-Michelangeli had played *Gaspard* a couple of weeks earlier, and demonstrated his mastery of the instrument by enunciating the intricate score with coolness and aplomb. On top of coolness and aplomb the little lady from Spain added gusto, ferocity, dramaticism, freedom, and what I can only describe as being in the very best sense of the word, Statement. She stated the music. At the end of *Scarbo* she had the audience holding its breath for fear she would expire.

FOR SHEER DRAMATICS, for variety, for excitement, there is no pianist now before the public to match this miraculous lady. If you can fly a thousand miles to hear her, bless your stars that you were given the opportunity. If she gets to within a thousand miles of you and you do not go to hear her, then you must kick yourself. I lose my head every now and then, and almost always in a good cause: believe me this time when I say you have the chance of a lifetime. Hear her, buy her records, lie in wait for her, sing her praises. She makes the others sound like schoolmarm, she makes the piano sing like choirs of angels, she takes music nobody ever played before and makes it sound like music everybody mistakenly overlooked. Really: a falling major sixth, under her hand, becomes a major revelation of harmonic knowledge.

There are no words for this. Those who love music will take to her immediately. Those who understand something of keyboard playing will bow their heads. She is all by herself, away up in the farthest reaches of the artists' heaven, and the rest of us may simply give thanks to God that we were given the chance to hear her. □