

Alicia

50 YEAR COMPULSION

BY ROBERT JONES

MUSIC: The Queen of Pianists is a pint-sized power pack of energy and monomania. All she lives for is the piano. Music is her god, a piano the altar on which she offers up practically every waking thought and hour. It's a voracious deity, and all Alicia de Larrocha gets out of it is agony and frustration. And, every now and then, an instant of satisfaction.

That's the way it's been for 50 years, for Alicia de Larrocha, who plays everything she touches with unsurpassed style, brilliance, and purity, is celebrating her 50th year before the public by playing a solo all-Mozart recital on August 8 at Mostly Mozart, another solo recital at Avery Fisher Hall on October 9. "Celebration," though, seems the wrong word for a career that gives her a perpetual case of the glooms.

"Music is all so difficult, so much beyond me," declares de Larrocha, all of her 4-feet-9-inches drooping with sorrow. "I can never do it justice. People push me to play in public, but if I didn't owe so much to the people who built my career, I wouldn't do it at all. I would play only for myself, only work to probe deeper into the music itself. I never understand the people who hear me play and say it is magnificent when I myself know it is so bad I want to die. That is a thing that I do not comprehend."

She's not kidding. Neither does she seem to be pulling a prima donna's snow job. Friends, managers, colleagues all testify to de Larrocha's passion for perfection, to her obvious disappointment at never equalling the majestic performances she hears in her imagination. People love her for it, especially other pianists whom de Larrocha idolizes and who normally might be expected to hate a competitor as good as she is.

"I never listen to my own recordings," she says, "no, no, NO! They make me sick they are so horrible. But I listen to pianists—Horowitz, Rubinstein my great idol, Gilels, Richter, Vladimir Viardov who is such an extraordinary genius I knelt before him and kissed his hands—and I study them all and learn from them."

All that humble pie might be a bit too stomach-churning if it weren't for de Larrocha's genuine passion for music, also her overpowering compulsion to spread it around. I once stood backstage with Herbert Breslin, de Larrocha's manager, as she finished a recital. The ovation roared while she trotted to the wings, turned straight around and headed out for an encore. "Wonderful," beamed Breslin. Back out for another encore. "That's enough, Alicia," said Breslin.

"No, I have another wonderful piece they must hear," enthused the pianist, and out she went again. "That's all," snapped Breslin when she came back. "Oh, this beautiful piece I have to give them!" she exclaimed, dashing again to the piano. "When she finishes," Breslin ordered the electrician, "turn off the lights. It's the only way to stop her."

De Larrocha's compulsion became apparent when she was merely two. At home in Barcelona, Spain, she heard her aunt give a piano lesson, then climbed onto the bench and imitated what she'd heard. Impressed, her aunt took her to Frank Marshall, a great and famous teacher, who told her she was too young and sent her home. "I wouldn't play with dolls," she recalls, "so the piano became my toy. One day my aunt locked the piano and I cried and pounded my head on the floor until blood flowed. So my aunt took me back to Marshall and I screamed at him, 'I want to play the piano!' and the next day I started lessons."

At six, de Larrocha played her first public recital—Artur Schnabel came and was impressed—and at nine she was playing concerts with orchestras. "But I never thought about a career," she says. Recordings, European and American tours came along later but, despite glowing reviews, de Larrocha remained unknown and mostly unwanted. In 1965, Breslin, a piano buff, heard her recordings, signed her to a contract and dropped her, mature and fully developed, onto the music world. It sparked a musical conflagration that shows no signs of burning itself out.

Neither does the compulsion. De Larrocha's husband and two grown children live their lives in Spain, and they seem to understand this strange woman who devours, and is devoured by, music. A natural loner, de Larrocha lives the lonely life of an itinerant musician and enjoys it, never more than when she's at a piano with no other ears around but her own. "My life is best when I am practicing," she says, "when I am going *into* the music. Sometimes I even enjoy it, get goosebumps, electricity in the skin. And sometimes I want to stop. But I cannot." ●

