

# Alicia de Larrocha

*"I never think about the future. Never. Perhaps we Spaniards are strange people, but we like to live for the day and not kill ourselves worrying about tomorrow."*

by Allan Kozinn

**T**here's something magical about an Alicia de Larrocha recital, something that everyone who has heard her play has experienced, but which critics and commentators are always at a loss to describe. It's not a question of dazzling showmanship, certainly: when the house lights dim, she walks briskly to the piano, pausing only for the briefest acknowledgement of her audience's anticipatory enthusiasm. And when she begins to play, it's as if we are eavesdropping on her, alone in a studio, privately rhapsodizing through the keyboard. There is not a trace of eccentricity in her stage manner, no pandering to what some artists consider the public's need to be entertained, and no displays of technique for technique's sake.

Nevertheless, her performances — whether in standard repertoire Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn and Schumann, or in the works of the Iberic masters with which she established her reputation in this country — give listeners the impression that she has technique to burn. In Mozart, Bach and Scarlatti, on the other hand, her readings are as elegant, detailed, and communicative as one could hope for. Yet, her approach is

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not what might be called an intellectual one. More scholarly Bach can be had from Rosalyn Tureck or Glenn Gould, and more heady Mozart and Schubert from Alfred Brendel or Rudolf Serkin. Rather, audiences come to hear this diminutive (4'9") Spanish pianist again and again because they know that anything she plays is guaranteed a searching, sensitive exploration, with technical perfection matched by unflinching taste. Not surprisingly, her peers regard her as highly as critics and audiences do, and her name is invariably mentioned when young pianists cite special influences.

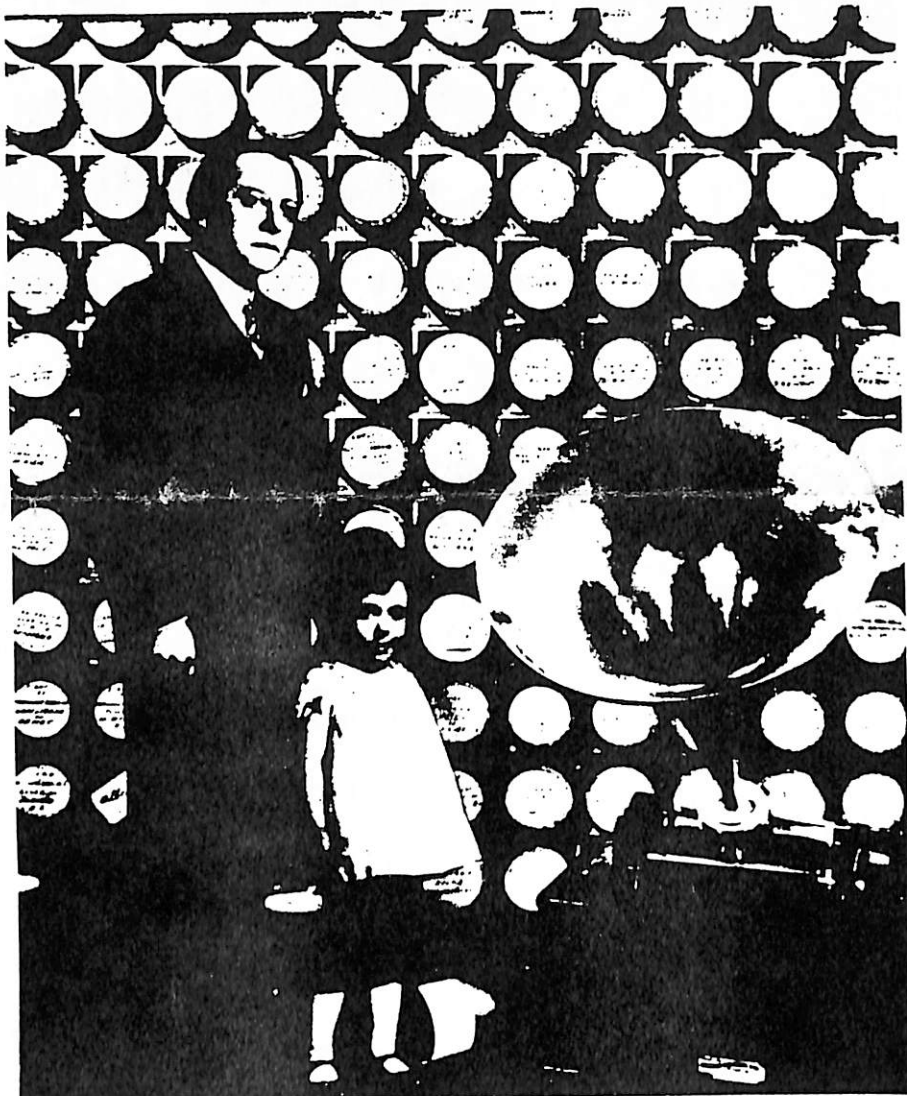
What is surprising, given the frequency with which she packs American concert halls these days, is that only 15 years ago, Alicia de Larrocha had little more than a pianistic cult following on these shores. Her early recordings, for Epic and American Decca (both long out of the classical record business) had wide circulation, and a few of her fans fondly recall attending her American orchestral debut, with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in 1954, and her New York debut recital, at Town Hall, in 1955. It was not until 1965, though, that she began playing regularly in New York. This season, she has already given a joint recital with her countrywoman Victoria de Los Angeles, and ap-

peared as soloist with the Y Chamber Symphony. She gives a solo recital at Avery Fisher Hall on April 27, and is bound to be back this summer for Mostly Mozart, where she has long been an annual favorite.

Writing about a group of Granados works after the 1955 Town Hall debut concert, New York Times critic Harold C. Schonberg said that "she had a way of idiomatically shaping a musical phrase that cannot be taught — a sudden dynamic shift, a note instinctively accented, a touch of the pedal, an application of rubato. Her rhythm is extremely flexible. Obviously this music was in the pianist's blood. She invested it with a degree of life and imagination that not many pianists before the public today could begin to duplicate."

Spanish music is, indeed, in her blood. As a child in Barcelona, she was immersed in a Spanish/Catalan musical tradition of which she is the only representative in today's concert world. That tradition can be traced back to pianist Juan Bautista Pujol (1835-1898), who taught a generation of pianists that included composer Enrique Granados. Alicia's mother and aunt had been Granados students, and her own talents surfaced when she was quite young. At two years old, she began climbing to the keyboard and imitating the playing of

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*The child pianist with teacher Frank Marshall. Courtesy of Desmar Records*

her aunt's students. Her aunt took her to Frank Marshall, another Granados student and founder of the Marshall Academy (itself an extension of the Granados Academy).

"When Marshall first heard me," she recalls, "I was not yet three years old, so of course, he said I was too young. But I was a very stubborn child, and I insisted until he changed his mind. Back then, I didn't like to practice much — no child does. I liked to play and improvise. But my aunt had a very clever way of helping me to practice and get my work done. When she saw that I was a little tired or didn't want to work, she would say, 'okay, I understand; you'd better go play with your dolls and things,' and she would lock the piano. That made me want

desperately to go back and practice.

"But nobody forced me to do anything — neither my aunt, nor my teacher. Everything I was given to do was adapted to my possibilities. And you can imagine, if you think my hands are small now, how small they were when I was three years old! But Frank Marshall was a great teacher. He felt that the best way to develop my musical spirit and my technique was for me to play Bach and Mozart before anything else. He did not feel I was ready for the Spanish repertoire, for instance, until I was 17."

By then, she had already made the beginning of a concert career, although a limited one. When she was five, for instance, she gave her first public recital, before a small audience at the

1929 World's Fair, in Barcelona. Last season, she marked the 50th anniversary of that debut with a round of solo recitals, chamber music (with the Guarneri Quartet), performances of all five Beethoven Piano Concerti (with Previn and the Pittsburgh Symphony) and the release of a few so-called Golden Jubilee LPs. She is, however, a temperamental artist given to changes of mood and perspective from day to day, particularly when it comes to the publicity trappings of a career. So, amidst all the fuss of her Jubilee celebration the pianist, when asked about her early debut, said, "oh, I don't consider that a concert. It was just an experiment, to see what I would be able to do in front of an audience." She played selections from the Anna Magdalena Bach notebook, and a few Mozart minuets.

The concert she considers her *real* debut took place four years later when, at age nine, she played a pair of Mozart Concerti with a Madrid orchestra conducted by Enrique Arbos. That same year, she was taken by Frank Marshall to a recording studio to see Spanish mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia record. As legend has it, Supervia turned to the young pianist at the end of the session and told her it was her turn to make a recording. Those first recorded performances — a Chopin Waltz (Op. 34, No. 2) and Nocturne (Op. 32, No. 1) have recently been released here on a disc called "The Catalan Piano Tradition" (Desmar/International Piano Archives, IPA 109), which also includes transfers of historical cylinder and 78 RPM recordings by Frank Marshall, Enrique Granados, Isaac Albeniz, and Joaquin Malats.

There was, naturally, a long hiatus between that first session and the start of a regular recording career. But these days, de Larrocha seems to be one of the most prolific recording pianists around — an image that is in part illusory, since a considerable amount of recently released material on the Musical Heritage and Vox/Turnabout labels were originally recorded for Spain's Hispavox label, and actually date back some time. She has, for the last ten years, had an exclusive recording arrangement with London, for which she has remade quite a bit of her old Hispavox repertoire (the Granados *Goyescas*, and works of Manuel de Falla, for instance) and chalked up a

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long list of new material. She won Grammy Awards for Best Classical Performance two years in a row, for her recordings of the Albeniz *Iberia*, *Cantos de Espana* and *Navarra* (1974) and the Ravel Piano Concerti (1975). Her recordings have also won the Grand Prix du Disque, the Paderewski Medal, and the Edison Award. Yet, she has said that she is not particularly fond of the recording process.

"I can never say that I like or don't like something," she explains, "It depends on my feeling at the moment. Sometimes I like to make records, and sometimes I hate it. I can say that I prefer solo to orchestral recording. When I record solo works, I can experiment and do what I want. But recording with an orchestra is more difficult. The time is very restricted."

It is said, in fact, that in the studio, de Larrocha is such an indefatigable perfectionist, that she will obsessively record a work 20 times in a row if that's what it takes, and even then, she is not always satisfied with the results.

"Sometimes, I'll listen to the tapes right after the session, and I'll say, 'oh, that's not bad.' But then I may hear them later, and say, 'that is awful, I cannot accept it — I cannot live; I feel terribly upset.' And I may hear the same recording again, two years later, and decide that it wasn't so bad after all. So, I never know."

"As for the sound of the piano on disc, sorry, but I don't really like it. It's very nice for the amateur, who enjoys his music at home. But for me, it sounds completely artificial. Record producers like the piano to always have a big, round, beautiful sound — but the instrument does not sound that way. I do listen to recordings by other pianists, however, because I am always interested in what they are doing, even if I know that the recording is not 100% true. Unless it's a recording of a live concert, there is always something of the laboratory in the interpretation. So, I never listen to a recording more than once. Once I've heard it, I already know what's going to happen, so there's no point in playing it again."

Although she will insist, with characteristic modesty, that her repertoire is a small one, it is, in fact, larger and more varied than that of many of her colleagues. Her extensive discography gives only a hint of her scope: there's Grieg and Mendelssohn; quite a bit of Bach and Mozart, including three "Mostly Mozart" discs and a fourth on the way; Rachmaninoff and Khachaturian; Schumann and Liszt; Chopin and Ravel; and, this past summer, her first Beethoven Concerto disc (the Emperor). In the coming years, we will have new recordings of concerti by

Bach (in F), Haydn (in D) and Mozart (K. 414), and a disc pairing the Schumann *Carnaval* with the Schubert Sonata in A.

As someone close to the pianist puts it, "there are two kinds of pieces Alicia plays. Those she plays extremely well, and those she plays better than anyone else." The works she plays better than anyone else are those of her countrymen — not only the familiar Granados, Albeniz and Falla, but the less well-known Federico Mompou, Carlos Surinach, Bassols Montsalvatge, and Joaquin Turina.

"Spanish music," she explains, "is inspired melodically and rhythmically by a long tradition of popular and folk music. The harmonic aspect is, of course, more sophisticated, so that in the end, we have the perfume of the folk tradition, presented in an artistic way. By *popular* inspiration, I mean the use of national idioms — as you see in the Polonaises and Mazurkas of Chopin, the Hungarian Rhapsodies of Liszt, and in a lot of Russian music. Each region of Spain, furthermore, has its own folklore. The most popular and best known is from Andalusia, in the South. But there are beautiful folk songs from other regions as well — from Castile, the Basque provinces, and from my own region, Catalonia."

"It was Felipe Pedrell, a composer and a musicologist, who suggested to Albeniz, Granados and the other composers that they stop writing their post-Romantic mazurkas, nocturnes and barcaroles, and to take advantage of our rich folklore. In my opinion, Granados was the only one of the great Spanish composers who captured the real Romantic flavor. His style was aristocratic, elegant and poetic — completely different from Albeniz and Falla. To me, each of them is a different world. Falla was the one who really captured the spirit of the Gypsy music — in *cante jondo*; and Albeniz was the most international. Even though his music is Spanish in flavor, his style is completely Impressionistic, especially in his last period, the time of *Iberia*. By then, he was completely French in terms of sonority, but always seen in a Spanish light."

"After Granados and Albeniz, we have a generation that includes such composers as Mompou, Surinach, Oscar Espla and Joaquin Rodrigo, which we can say is a post-Classical generation. They have kept the traditional system of composition, but they look forward in a different way from the generation of Albeniz. This group is, in a way, a bridge between the traditional school of composition and the avant-garde. Now, we have a very active group of avant-garde composers, whose music, I'm sorry to say, I never

play. I am interested in it, and I do listen to it. But it is not the kind of thing I play — even technically, it's another world. It's an entirely different idiom."

Since the death of Frank Marshall, in 1959, Alicia de Larrocha and her husband, pianist Juan Torra, have been directors of the Marshall Academy. These days, she says, she doesn't teach much, and her major project in connection with the Academy seems to be an on-again/off-again attempt to put together an authoritative edition of the complete piano music of Granados. "It's very hard work," she says, "because it entails a revision of nearly all of Granados' music. He always composed in a hurry, and he always corrected his manuscripts without making corrections in the printed editions. I don't know if we will finish and publish the edition of his complete, corrected works — perhaps we will. Meanwhile, we use his corrections, in handwritten form, in teaching Granados at the Marshall Academy."

Her touring and recording schedule currently is keeping her so busy that the Granados project has been at least temporarily shelved. She says, in fact, that her schedule barely leaves her the time she feels she needs to practice — although she points out that not all her work takes place at the piano.

"Because my hands are so small, I am always stretching them. Not just when I practice, but everywhere — it's automatic. I try to develop strength and flexibility between the thumb and pinky," she says, opening her hand so that her thumb and pinky stretch in opposite directions, forming a perfectly straight line. "You see, the point is not to have long fingers, but to have flexibility."

"The truth is," she adds, "I practice as long as possible when I can get to a piano. But I never work in a routine way. It depends on my feelings at the moment. If I am learning a new work and I feel like playing it, I'll go to the piano. But, of course, if I want to discover the work's construction, I'll take it away from the keyboard and study it. But that doesn't mean I do the same thing every day or with every new work. I'm not that kind of person."

With the pianistic world at her feet, what lies in the future for the diminutive pianist?

"Oh, I never think about the future," she insists. "Never. Perhaps we Spaniards are strange people, but we like to live for the day and not kill ourselves worrying about tomorrow. When I was a young girl studying the piano, I never thought about what I might be doing with my music in ten or twenty years. I just worked, learned, and enjoyed it. I never thought about the future then, and I don't, even now."