

Lady of Spain

ALICIA DE LARROCHA talks to John Duarte, who reviews her new recording of Granados's Goyescas



I MENTIONED to one of my students, a Spanish lady in her middle-to-late thirties, that I was going to meet Alicia de Larrocha — one of her countrywomen — the following day; her reaction was to say, "She must be very old now". Unable at first to see daylight through this observation, I asked her how she arrived at that conclusion: "When I was a little girl she was already famous, so she *must* be quite old by now." Of course, at 54, Alicia de Larrocha is by no means "very old", except perhaps to a teenager, but the misjudgement is not unforgivable. Statistics on one side, her comparative youth is evident in her appearance, abundant energy and evident relish of life and music, a living expression of *mulum* in *parvo*, she stands about five-feet-plus-not-too-much-more and is of (dare one say) 'cuddly' build, with dark eyes that mirror her frequent laughter.

Back with the statistics, I mentioned my pupil's comment to her, together with the explanation that such an impression might easily stem from the 'recorded' fact that she gave her debut concert when she was only four years old, and thus had plenty of time to become famous by the time my pupil was old enough to understand such things. "I can't say that was a debut. It was just for a small audience, friends of my teacher and Turina, the composer. My official debut in a concert hall was in 1929 at an international 'fair' in Spain. In Barcelona there is a whole hill just for the area of the fair; it was a benefit concert for missions and things like that." I remarked that this meant that the Golden Jubilee of her first concert would come in only two years' time: "Yes, that's terrible! It was just a little experience for my teacher and for myself, to know my way of reaction, but it was not in order to make me give concerts: just an experience, like an examination."

Did she not already know then that she would be a concert pianist? "No, I never thought of it. Even now... I don't know, I just found myself involved in all those

things. I said OK, people are pushing me here and there and therefore, OK. Nobody, neither my teacher nor my family, ever said 'you are going to make a career' or 'you are going to travel a lot', never. We were only enjoying the music." I asked whether Decca would celebrate her coming Golden Jubilee as it did Segovia's some 20 years ago: "I don't think it knows. In the USA companies are always looking for such occasions, but Segovia's album was with American Decca, and that doesn't exist any more."

Coming to the subject of music itself, I suggested that Alicia de Larrocha's recordings to date indicated a particular love for romantic music: "Perhaps that was the way I started. Mozart and Bach, then Granados — and my teachers loved Schumann: the Romantics in general, but especially Schumann. I heard the whole of Schumann's songs from when I was 12. That was our daily music. I loved Schumann and Liszt." Had she contemplated recording the whole of Albéniz's music, having surmounted the immense obstacle of *Iberia*? "You can regard integral recordings as a document, perhaps, but for the composer I don't think it's very good to take out everything. In my opinion, when things have been in a corner their whole life, that means something. So, let them sleep quietly. I think something is against them. When composers are starting out there are lots of little things they do without intention of publishing them, just 'improvisations'. There are a lot of things that Granados produced like that, and he was very variable and very moody and passionate. Sometimes he went for a walk in the park and would say, 'Oh, I saw a beautiful girl', and would be at the piano, just improvising — and that was nothing. It was the same with a lot of composers." Did this include Albéniz? "Some things are better just to forget. Maybe I'm wrong."

Regarding earlier music, I mentioned that she had recorded nothing of Scarlatti,

though he was one of Granados's idols: "That's true, but not for any special reason. I have played some Scarlatti, the original texts, not versions by anyone. It was beautiful the way Granados played it. There's just one record, about 1906 or 1907; on one side there is a dance by Granados, the other side is Scarlatti." And Albéniz? "There is one record of Albéniz playing, on an Edison cylinder. It's very funny — you hear a lot of improvising. You hear a little of the *Cantos d'España* and some little tunes of *Iberia*."

Still on the subject of Albéniz, I commented on the extravagant dynamic markings in his scores: "That is very Spanish." What does this tell her when she's playing the music? "Well, you have to find a proportion. If there is *ppppp* and then *fffff*, you have to know what is the way from here to there. It is relative. If you are going from fortissimo to pianissimo it depends what you are doing before the fortissimo. You can feel it is fortissimo when you play with a natural and normal forte if you have played, before, with a real pianissimo; the contrast with the pianissimo is exactly the same. A lot of things are in the imagination: it is impossible to make *ppppp* when there is a heavy design, with voices, counterpoint and things like that. Many times it says '*ppppp cantabile e molto espressivo*' and very often '*pianissimo ma con passione e cantabile*'. It is the imagination that is important."

Alicia de Larrocha is one of the few eminent pianists who has recorded no Chopin except for the Concerto in F minor (Decca SXL 6528): "It is not a question of myself. Of course the companies do not think this is commercial — for me to play Chopin when there are so many great pianists to do it; it is a commercial point of view and I understand it." This led naturally to the broad question of what is recorded and of who decides it: "I am the kind of person who never says 'I want to do this' or 'I want to do that'. Anything

musical is music, and music is what is important to me. Only if they say 'you are to make a record', then I say that I am so busy with my tours that if they want me to record something I'm not playing, I can't. I say, 'If you want, I can record *this*, in my programme'. And if I propose something they have already recorded with some other artist, or they are going to record, that can be difficult. If I can prepare something and practise it, that is OK, but I don't like to go and record something like wet paint, it must be dry and then another coat, otherwise 'no'. I feel very miserable when I have to do something that is not really prepared technically and not 'inside' me." It seemed to me that this might be connected with her absence from the area of chamber music recording: "They are asking me to do the Schumann Quintet. They say, 'You can come any time and record it', but no. First I have to practise my part, and then, I don't just want to record it with somebody I don't know and have never played with. To make music needs understanding: human understanding. If I can play before with these people and just make music then, later on, we can record."

Throwing another tentative stick into the pool, I asked about modern music: "I'm not really aware of it enough to give an opinion. I find a monotony. All over the world it seems to be the same thing; I'm sure it's not, perhaps it's a personal reaction. I'm sure that one day they are going to find some personality or

something that will make a difference among countries." I pointed out that mathematics and throwing dice are international: "Of course, but I'm sure it's going to change a little. There is nothing typically 'Spanish' except recognisable elements from flamenco, from the South in Andalusia, and that is not atonal."

Like many other Spanish artists, Alicia de Larrocha shares the characteristic of having great affection for England; Segovia even married in Gibraltar, "so that he could be married under the British flag, on Spanish soil". Her daughter is here, studying English. Will she be a musician? "Well, she is a born musician, with real musicality and sensitivity, but she doesn't want to. She plays and improvises, she has music inside, but she doesn't want to be a professional at all. She hates it. She sees the life I lead and she says, 'How can you do that?'. I tour the whole year long and I have done this for 13 or 14 years now with not one month away from it. I'm going to slow down in a few years."

If I'm still around at the time, I'll believe this when I see it. It is a profession, but when it is what you really want to do, even though you were drawn into greatness rather than sought it, it is a vocation. What counts is the inner desire to make music, the determination that enables this diminutive lady to encompass those wide pianistic spans with her tiny hands. Long may she and we be spared from anything that might prevent this.

GRANADOS: *Goyescas*. Alicia de Larrocha (piano). Decca SXL 6785. £3.99.

THE GOYESCAS present the gramophile with one of the biggest problems of the repertoire. It began with the release of three versions, by Thomas Rajna (CRD 1001-2, *r+r*, 4/74), Mario Miranda (Saga 5343-44, *r+r*, 7/74) and Rena Kyriakou (Turnabout TV 34247S, *r+r*, 12/74): the only available, complete recordings of the set, and exceedingly difficult to decide amongst when faced with the nitty-gritty of what to buy. The dilemma is compounded by the constitution of the work itself in that it originally comprised six items, to which Granados later added *El Pelele*. Kyriakou rejected this last as a proper part of *Goyescas* and, in doing so, presented the least expensive alternative as a single, budget-price disc. Miranda accepted its inclusion and, eccentrically, played it first as well as filling the overspill of the second (also budget-price) disc with the mild incongruity of sonatas by Soler. Rajna, engaged in the total recording of Granados, had no more agonising problem than that of deciding where to place it, and solved it by interposing it between Books 1 and 2; his had, with every possible chip on the table, to be accounted the best of the three, though the most expensive with two full-price discs. Now comes Alicia de Larrocha, with both

books, *El Pelele* placed at the end — where, chronologically, it belongs, the sleeve-note giving no hint that it is other than an integral part of the set — and on one full-price disc.

This latest version is totally unsurprising. De Larrocha is the greatest living Spanish pianist and one of the greatest of any nationality; this is one of the supreme masterpieces of Spanish piano music within this century, by a composer for whom the interpreter has the most profound affection. From all this one might expect — and one does in fact get — a performance of the finest poetry and greatest refinement, approaching the miraculous. They say that it takes one to find one, and this recording supports any contention that it takes one (a Spaniard) to play one. She is the master of every facet of piano technique and she subjugates it to the emotions of the music which, in turn, she evidently feels with every fibre of her being; there is no other way of accounting for the subtlety of her rubatos and the placing of notes.

Superb performance, superb pianism, superb recording: these should add up to a compelling reason to add this to your shelves if you are open to this kind of musical experience. Should you want the whole Granados and nothing less, you must stick with Rajna (and may do so with no deep regret), but none of the currently offered versions will leave you short-changed.

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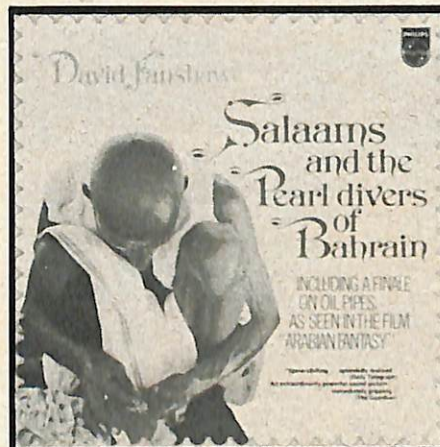
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