

# Pasatiempo

## THE GRAND LADY OF THE PIANO



*Alicia de Larrocha*



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*Alicia de Larrocha*  
the grand lady of the piano



Story by J. A. VAN SANT

When Alicia de Larrocha walks onto the platform of the St. Francis Auditorium at 4 p.m. Sunday afternoon, the world-renowned 71-year-old Spanish pianist will carry with her the great tradition of classical keyboard performance.

Names such as Teresa Carreno, Guiomar Novaes, Maria Tipo and Marta Argerich come to mind, to name just three generations of noted Latin women pianists who have graced musical culture in the Western world.

The Spanish-born pianist is representative of the central repertoire of European-based classical keyboard music.

During a performance career that began in the late 1920s, she has embraced all important classical piano repertoire. She has performed all the Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, Brahms

and Mozart works, and single handedly catapulted into international popularity Spanish keyboard music of her time.

She tours and still performs with virtually every notable conductor and orchestra in Europe and the Americas. In short, de Larrocha is a Grand Lady of the Piano and stands at the front rank of the most eminent performers of her day.

Not bad credentials.

De Larrocha is graced with a warm temperament and wit. About 10 years ago, during a solo recital at the St. Louis Conservatory of Music, she was playing the conservatory's Steinway concert grand, which was just about worn out. There were no funds for a replacement.

In the pianist's repertoire was a showy Ravel encore that much depended on a repeated

note in the top octave that had been sticky at rehearsal. That evening, the key's stickiness was worse than ever.

Following the encore in which the piano proved completely resistant to her bidding, de Larrocha approached the audience, made a gesture of futility and turned to the instrument furiously shaking her finger and sticking out her tongue. With that, she swept off the stage, not to reappear.

Her message was clear. She communicated just the right mood. The conservatory's plea for a new piano found quick support. After a master class for conservatory students the next morning, she left town a heroine.

In her present North American tour, de Larrocha plays three solo recitals, coming to Santa Fe from an appearance in Pasadena, Calif. Far from slowing down and now in her sixth



decade before the public, the redoubtable artist is playing a full schedule of Mozart and Beethoven concerti, including the mighty *Emperor* concerto in May with the Minnesota Orchestra in a farewell to that institution's retiring conductor, Edo de Waart.

De Larrocha remains a dynamo of energy and musicality at an age when many a lesser spirit is winding down.

De Larrocha has been a personal favorite for years, ever since her splendid London/Decca LP recordings of de Falla, Albeniz and Granados were issued in the 1960s.

Her series of first-rate records with London was more recently succeeded by a contract with BMG/RCA Red Seal resulting in a dozen compact discs (see sidebar discography), which, although made in her later years, are representative of the artist's finest qualities.

The pianist lives in her native Barcelona, although she keeps an apartment in New York for frequent American engagements. Her first tour outside Spain was in 1947. She made her British debut in 1953, followed by an American debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1955.

Awards and international honors for her early recordings of Granados and Albeniz paved the way for de Larrocha's return to American concert platforms in 1965, and she has rarely been absent since.

De Larrocha's association with Spanish pianists and composers of the 20th century has been fortuitous for all concerned. Her only teacher, beginning in childhood, was English pianist Frank Marshall, who had come to Spain prior to World War I and became the disciple of Enrique Granados, noted composer and piano virtuoso.

Granados' suite *Goyesca* is in homage to the "psychology" of his hero, the Spanish painter Goya, and takes the form of six elegant piano pieces. Granados himself premiered the work in Barcelona in 1911.

English critic Ernest Newman wrote of the composer's music, "One has the voluptuous sense of passing the fingers through masses of richly colored jewels ... it is piano music of the purist kind."

The success of *Goyescas* was world-wide, and Granados was invited to arrange the music with texts into a *pastiche* one-act opera, which premiered at the Metropolitan in New York in 1916.

Success in hand, Granados and his wife were to sail for Spain in March of that year when an invitation from President Woodrow Wilson to perform at the White House caused the Spanish pianist to change his travel plans. Tragedy resulted when the English vessel carrying Granados was torpedoed in the English channel and the composer and his wife were lost returning from his American triumphs.

Spain was grief-stricken, but Frank Marshall assumed leadership of the burgeoning piano academy in Barcelona, which Granados had founded shortly before. Marshall became, in effect, a leading

Spanish pianist and music educator for the balance of his life.

When Alicia de Larrocha became Marshall's student late in the 1920s, she entered this colorful tradition, succeeding him decades later as president of the Marshall Academy, a position she still holds. Grounded in sure technique, de Larrocha's musicianship is solid and highly literate, coming from a heritage of Spanish musicians and composers who were well-versed in the Western European tradition.

While Barcelona is not ranked with Vienna and Paris as a center of musical culture, the pianists and composers in the Spanish style gave it a distinction that de Larrocha wears proudly.

De Larrocha has never been bound by the constraints on women musicians that were familiar in classical repertory, especially in the decades before World War II.

From her early days as a young performer, through decades of international acclaim, de Larrocha has played the full piano repertory, to a receptive public.

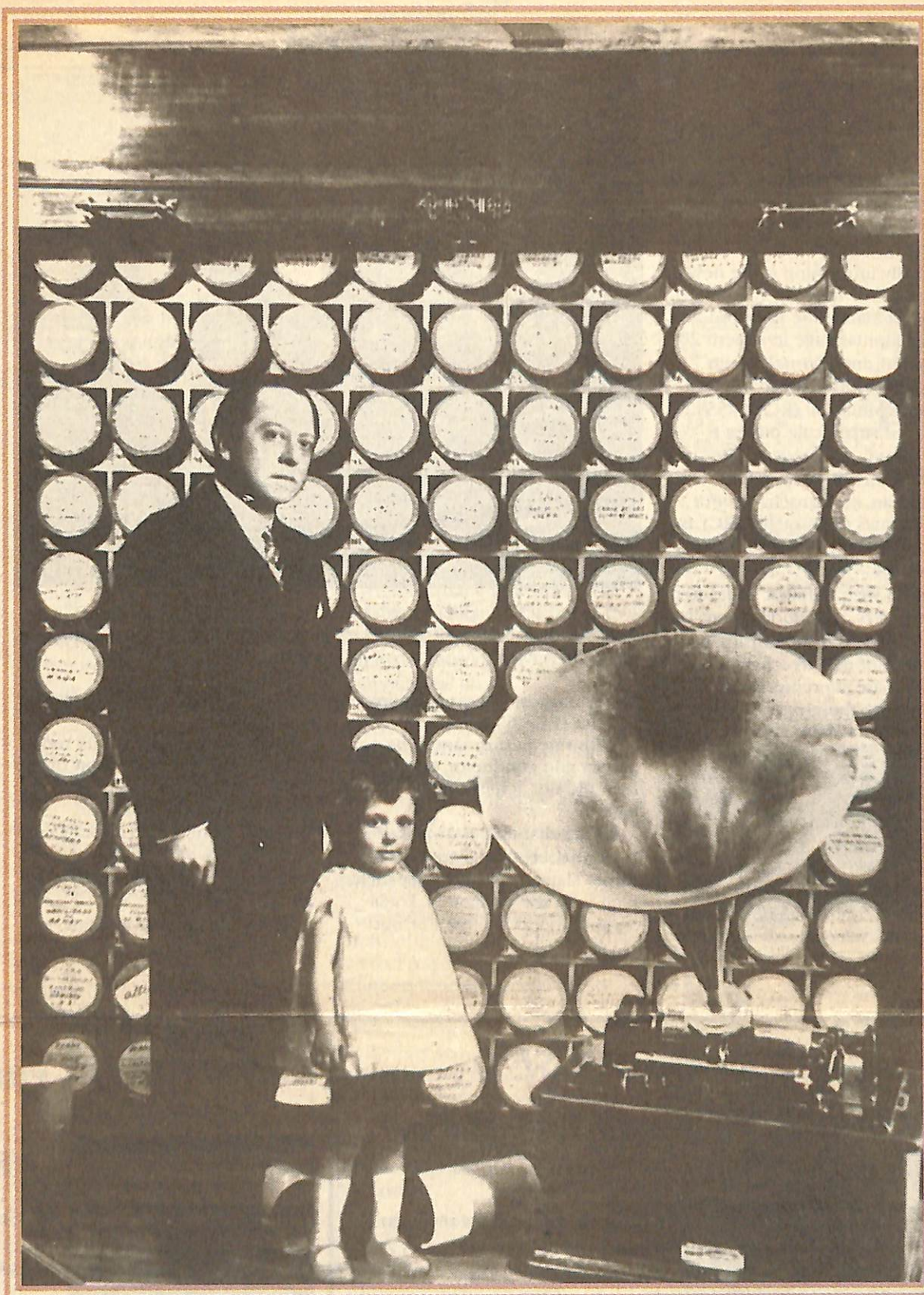
The late French violinist Ginette Neveu once recounted how de Larrocha was car-

ried through the streets of Vienna in the 1940s on the shoulders of her audience in appreciation of her performance of the Beethoven *Violin Concerto in D, Op. 61*, the first woman to perform that piece in public concert in Vienna.

De Larrocha's Santa Fe program, which is sponsored by the Santa Fe Concert Association, looks perfect for a Sunday afternoon. The centerpiece is Robert Schumann's *Carnaval Op. 9*, a spicy *guignol* of moods that demands complete technical mastery and keen artistic judgement.

To sustain the 22 episodes the composer fashioned into a dance cycle, a "humoristic masked romance," as he called it, and to make it into a cogent event requires high skill. First played by Franz Liszt, the *Carnaval* is a natural for de Larrocha.

Happily, the pianist includes in her program six pieces from *Twelve Spanish Dances of Granados*, and two short sonatas of the 18th-century Spanish master Padre Antonio Soler.



Opposite, Alicia de Larrocha cut a stylish figure at her piano in the '60s. Left, de Larrocha, at age 6, with her only teacher, English-Spanish master Frank Marshall

## DETAILS

**WHO/WHAT:**  
Alicia de Larrocha  
Santa Fe Concert Association

**WHEN:**  
4 p.m. Sunday

**WHERE:**  
St. Francis Auditorium

**INFO:**  
Tickets \$30 - \$65;  
Call 984-8759



For a discography, see page 26



*De Larrocha  
Discography*

Here's a selected discography to assist you in your musical enjoyment of Alicia de Larrocha's upcoming concert.

The mature art of de Larrocha's early fame, and for many listeners her signature work, comes from recordings of contemporary Spanish music. Interesting as her performances with orchestra can be, the solo piano CDs offer not only the best sound, they capture the essence of de Larrocha's art.

● Spanish Music: *Goyescas*, a piano suite of scenes from Goya, is Enrique Granados' most famous work. It also cost him his life.

Fortunately, his bittersweet romantic music lives on in a tradition passed from the composer to his protegee, English-Spanish pianist Frank Marshall, and into the hands of Marshall's celebrated pupil Alicia de Larrocha, as RCA's several discs of the repertoire attest.

First among them is the *Goyescas Suite* (RCA Granados, 60408-2-RC), some 50 minutes of pungent color, romantic pain and

delight. This haunting music, recorded in definitive performances by the *virtuosa*, is not to be missed.

RCA's recent recording, made in the pianist's late 60s, has all the charm and energy of her earlier London LPs of two decades ago.

Equally interesting is the new *Spanish Serenade* (RCA 613892), music of Manuel de Falla and Xavier Montsalvage in superb 20-bit sound, and *Spanish Songs and Dances*, the music of Frederic Mompou (RCA 625542), balanced small-scale pieces is well played, if a shade sedate.

● Mozart: A famous Mozartean, de Larrocha's set of four sonatas (RCA 604072RC), is an intoxicating 73 minutes of elegant music.

Played with minimal pedal, her piano offers a *legato* line vocalists would envy, and the sensitivity and taste of de Larrocha's musicianship are supreme. Far from dry Mozart, these performances are warm and touching, yet always in classical form.

De Larrocha's Mozart *Sonata* recordings should be on any desert island list (the pianist has recorded the complete *Mozart Sonatas* for RCA). Joined by Sir Colin Davis conducting the English Chamber Orchestra, de Larrocha's magical way with two



Two piano greats, Claudio Arrau, left, and Vladimir Horowitz, made a surprise visit to de Larrocha backstage at Avery Fisher Hall in New York following a Mostly Mozart Festival performance in the 1980s.

Mozart concerti is everywhere evident (RCA 60989-2).

With fine performances by pianist and conductor, one regrets RCA did not achieve more natural sound.

● Ravel: It comes as no surprise that Leonard Slatkin performs Maurice Ravel's jazzy music well with the brilliant St. Louis Symphony (RCA 60985-2), but

joined by de Larrocha, the result is smashing.

Ravel had quieter moods, too, as in the second movement of the G-minor concerto and in *Valses noble et sentimentales* and *Sonatine*, where de Larrocha captures the silk and mystery Ravel seams into his livelier *boulevardier* style.

● Schumann: The A-major

piano concerto is handsomely performed by de Larrocha and Davis (RCA 61279-2), in reasonably good sound.

The disc also offers Schumann's *Piano Quintet, Op. 44*, in which the Tokyo String Quartet ably joins de Larrocha.

● Historic: Any survey of de Larrocha's recordings must include her very first performance on disc made at a studio in Barcelona, June 3, 1932, when the pianist was 9 years old.

Included in the fascinating CD, *The Catalan Piano Tradition* (VAI/IPA 1001), are two little pieces by Chopin cunningly played by the child whose legs did not reach the pedals; even so, her artistry is apparent.

Also on the VAI disc are examples, if in sandpaper sound, of piano performances by de Larrocha's countrymen Albeniz and Granados, as well as her teacher Frank Marshall, who plays solos and accompanies the contralto Conchita Supervia in delightful Spanish songs.

A few selections by de Larrocha from 1960, accompanying soprano Conchita Badia, show her skills as collaborator. Piano aficionados will enjoy this CD.

J. E. Van Sant

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KNOW?

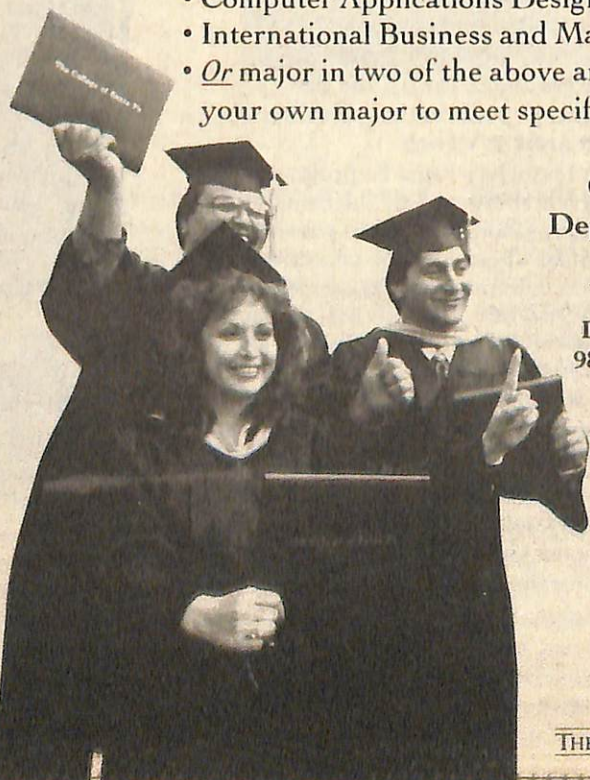
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