

# THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

A PULLOUT SECTION



Alicia de Larrocha: never content with the past

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When Alicia de Larrocha was 2½ they took her favorite toy away, and she banged her head on the floor in a tantrum until she got it back.

The toy was the family grand piano.

It was the beginning of her career, not as an enfant terrible, but as a child prodigy who would have her first recital at 5, play for Artur Schnabel before she lost her baby teeth, and become one of the most celebrated concert pianists in the world.

She sits in a New York hotel room on tour and talks about her beginnings in Barcelona as a pianist at 2½:

"They [her family] locked the piano. That made me furious, and that was the reason I was banging my head until they opened the piano. . . ."

She remembers similar incidents later. "When I was a child in Spain [there were] traditions, you know, family traditions. On Holy Friday at Easter it was forbidden to make any profane sound or noise. It was forbidden to play the piano, you know, only religious music. So Thursday and Friday I couldn't play the piano.

"So I felt miserable until Saturday morning, and that was the happiest day of my life. We were waiting until the last minute, 10 in the morning, and the bells of the churches and everything went out [ringing], and we used to make noises with drums, with everything. So I remember that as the happiest moment of my life, because that was the moment the piano was open, and I could go and play."

Asked what the piano meant to her at such an early age, she answers with an intensity equaled only by her performances:

## Alicia de Larrocha

### What I'm playing is what I love

"I had just been born with music inside, and it was my life. It was breathing and drinking and eating - to survive you know, a necessity. . . . Perhaps when I realized I couldn't play [when the piano was locked], then I realized that music was important to me. . . . It was such a natural thing, such an important part of my life that I never could really analyze. . . ."

She is sitting on the edge of a hotel room armchair so that her tiny feet, in their rust leather boots, will touch the floor. That is a problem tall people don't have to cope with, and Alicia de Larrocha copes with it constantly at 4 ft. 9 in. She is a diminutive woman with a giant passion for the piano. An interviewer has the feeling that de Larrocha considers talking about herself a necessary but extravagant waste of time, when

she could be off with her Bechstein polishing up a glissando or two.

Nevertheless, she is polite, with a candor sharp as a jalapeño pepper as she talks about herself and her moods. She is small but fierce. She has bright eyes, brown as chestnut, a cap of black hair, and olive skin. She wears a green turtleneck sweater, pearl earrings, and oatmeal tweed skirt. Her face is of the kind that peers from some Goya paintings - a very Spanish, enigmatic, pensive face.

She has been called a "titan" at the keyboard, but her hands do not suggest it. They are not like the hands of Vladimir Horowitz, for instance, which are so massive and muscled that they stretch effortlessly across octaves. Alicia de Larrocha's hands are minute. They remind you of a child's hands, but they are as firm, supple, and strong as the legs of a professional athlete.

"I am not a Rubinstein or a Rachmaninoff. To keep up my technique, I am always doing Chopin etudes, always stretching, stretching. The hands are my obsession," she told Donal Henahan of the New York Times. When asked about that, she smiles cryptically, but shows me what she does constantly when not at the piano. She splays the fingers out as wide as possible, until the tendons stand up, and then stretches them a bit further. "This is something I need. I automatically al-

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#### Part III

This week the pullout section is being published in three parts. Part I ran on Tuesday, Part II yesterday.



## Alicia de Larrocha

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ways do things like this when they [my hands] are on a table or a chair.”

De Larrocha has been praised by critics for the clarity and brilliance of her playing. Does she feel, then, that she has made the size of her hands an asset?

“I don’t know. I try always to reach musically what I want. If technically it is difficult, I try to arrange things to find a way, to get what I wish. And not always I’ve succeeded, but I try.”

Don’t bore her with questions about whether she likes paella or carnations or Lorca’s plays or sports, or what makes her happy in life besides the piano.

“No sports, I never have time. My sport is piano playing. . . . I am a very moody person, so I don’t have any favorite things. It depends what day, what moment. One day I love this; another day I hate it. . . . It’s always changing. So I am very different, and in music I don’t have any favorite composer. What I’m playing is . . . what I love, but I never say it is better. Never, never, never.”

She does admit, though, that she enjoys biographies of musi-

cians, most recently one of Romanian pianist Clara Haskil. “Our lives are very different, but musically it interested me enormously.”

Is anyone writing a book on her?

The brown eyes flash. “No, I don’t want it, no!”

Is she very private, then?

“Oh yes, and [a biography] is something I don’t like at all. Perhaps the day I will be gone . . .,” she trails off.

She is sitting in a cream-colored hotel suite with a purple rug on the floor and furniture covered in a black-and-white print. There is no piano in the room. Her husband, pianist Juan Torra, sits across the room. He is finally able to travel with her after five years of an illness that prevented him from leaving home. They have the sort of overlapping dialogue, full of shorthand phrases, that comes from 38 years of being together. He calls her, in the Castilian style, “Alethea.” He is considerably taller than she, a slender, smiling man with gray hair and dark eyes. He wears a gray suit, blue shirt, gray tie with a swirl pattern.

They met at her first recital, when she was 6. She was playing for school students at an international exhibition, and he, still in grade school himself, was watching intently because he

was already studying the piano, too. They met the second time when a mutual friend who was a cellist at the Barcelona Opera House introduced them. “And then you asked me,” she says, looking across the room at him, “to introduce you to my teacher.” She turns back, “Because he was a pianist, he wanted to study with my teacher. And that was the beginning. And then we started to play the piano [together], concerts.

He breaks in, “And after seven years. . . .”

She interrupts, smiling, “Almost nine, almost nine. . . .”

He: “Nine, yes?” He looks surprised.

She (firmly): “Almost nine, a long time, we got married.”

The Torras have two grown children, a daughter, Alicia, who is a pianist, and son Juan Francesco, a guitarist. Before his illness Mr. Torra ran the family’s school for pianists. In fact, teaching piano has been a family tradition. It was Miss de Larrocha’s aunt who was giving piano lessons when Alicia first started to crawl up on the piano bench and imitate the students. When the head-banging incident happened over the locked piano her aunt realized how serious she was and took her to the renowned teacher Frank Marshall, who had taken

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## Alicia de Larrocha

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over the Enrique Granados Academy after the composer's passing.

When Alicia was taken to Frank Marshall she reportedly screamed at him, "I want to play the piano!" And he told her to come the next day. Her debut followed at 5; at 9 she was performing a Mozart concerto with the orchestra in Madrid.

This year she celebrates her golden anniversary as one of the most successful concert pianists in the world.

The New York Times's Harold Schoenberg wrote at the beginning of her phenomenal climb to success more than 10 years ago: "She has technique that can honestly be classified as stupendous. This tiny Spanish woman is pianistically flaw-

less, with infallible fingers, brilliant sonorities, steady rhythm, everything. . . ."

If you read that off to Alicia de Larrocha at this moment she would probably snort. She is never content with anything she has played in the past because her concepts constantly change.

She glances at her husband as she explains: "In the 38 years we have known each other I think my husband never knows how [it] is going to happen, what is going to be my reaction. Nobody who is around me, even myself - I do not know. It is possible to play a Mozart concerto one way one night, another way the next night. In five minutes I can play another way."

Then recording must be a nightmare for this woman who now has two London records on the classical charts, her new

"Mostly Mozart" and the older Granados "Goyescas," representative of the Spanish music she has become perhaps the world's greatest authority on. How then does she feel about recording:

"That's what makes me crazy, because I have to decide. There is a limit of time, and always I want to have to change things, because when I am through and I listen, I know everything in a different way. So I want to compare it, to do it another way, [but] then there is the moment they say, 'The time is over.' . . . And then, of course, I can't listen to my records because I am already thinking in a different way."

"That's very creative," I hazard. "That's a disaster," de Larrocha says.

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This indomitable woman refuses to regard sex as a barrier or a characteristic of playing in a world, until recently, dominated by male pianists. "In my opinion, temperament is more important than anything. Somebody has a strong temperament, and another has a different [one]. I am quite brusque and brisk in my temperament, and so it comes out".

She admits she's happier rehearsing or practicing than actually performing. "I'm happiest when I'm very involved, very interested, because I am always looking for more, more, more, more. Sometimes I close the piano. I bang it, and I say, 'I can't do this.' And that makes me very unhappy, very furious, but then in five minutes I change my mind. When Juan hears BAM!, he gets scared, and he goes out in the street. And then five minutes later I am playing again."

When asked if she has a special feeling when she's done what she wants with the music, she says, "Yes, but that doesn't always mean it's the best moment or the best way. But when I feel really happy is when I feel, the skin on my arms, my back, is like a chicken. When you're emotional, we say chicken skin — we say I have at this moment chicken skin."

You can have a quick case of chicken skin listening to her interpretation of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, the third movement particularly. It sounds like silken thunder. How does this woman, whose size should limit her physical strength, produce such a powerful sound?

She does it, as she does with her hands, by turning a liability into an asset. She sits slightly higher than normal at the piano so that her body lends added downward force to her arms. "My arm is so short, I need more leverage . . . [strength] coming from my body, not only from my arm."

Her 50th year as a pianist is marked by a grueling tour which has already included playing the Schumann Piano Concerto with the New York Philharmonic, as well as the Mostly Mozart Festival last summer. Nov. 28 and 29 she joined the Guarneri Quartet for her first American performance of chamber music in the Schumann Piano Quintet. That will be followed later this year by a series of concerts with André Previn, in which she will play the entire Beethoven cycle of piano concertos in early March in Pittsburgh, late March in New York at Lincoln Center. In addition, she will appear with Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony, and Mstislav Rostropovich and the National Symphony, as well as touring South America and Israel. ■