

long since established as an internationally celebrated artist, Ashkenazy seems to be phonographically revisiting the site of his initial triumph. In recent months we have been given new versions of the Second Ballade and the F minor Piano Concerto, and with this latest release comes the piece that was perhaps the most successful of all the onetime Wunderkind's efforts, the Scherzo No. 4, in E major, Op. 54. We are thus given an opportunity to measure the mature performer of today against his own most precocious attainments.

What was so particularly remarkable about the first Ashkenazy recording of the Scherzo was its complete purity of contour and its laudable freedom from fussy rhetoric. With his limpid beauty of tone, and seemingly superhuman ease, the pianist reduced the treacherous demands of the composition—its fearsome double octaves and technically formidable filigree—to insignificance. Here, at last, was an E major *Scherzo* played as just that: a deft, joyously whimsical musical joke. There had been splendid performances before, and there have been many since—but nobody has approached Op. 54 from quite the same point of view as did the teen-age Ashkenazy. Nor does the present Ashkenazy: he is far too wordily-wise to attempt to recapture the pristine innocence of a decade ago. Nevertheless, he has very successfully merged many of that bygone performance's basic qualities with the focus and experienced judgment of a true master. The new reading, while just as rapid and rhythmically controlled as its predecessor, is far more pointed and analytical. Without upsetting the over-all shape of the work in any way (the usual shortcoming of most readings), Ashkenazy accentuates important leading tones and prolongs—ever so slightly—the ends of fundamental paragraph groups. The ensuing result is so limpid, and so compelling, that it almost supersedes the initial reading in my affections. May the remaining three Scherzos follow from this artist's hands, posthaste!

Ashkenazy also does commendably well with the late-period Chopin Nocturne, Op. 62, No. 1. Here, however, it might be reasonable to expect a bit more detached an interpretation, one combining the pianist's ravishing cantilena with steadier forward impetus. But about the two impressionistic compositions rounding out the disc, I have no reservations whatsoever. Debussy's *L'Isle joyeuse* emerges with complete élan and remarkable poetic strength. And it would be hard even to imagine a finer performance of the near-impossible *Gaspard de la Nuit*. The tigerish confidence of Ashkenazy's "Scarbo," the dreamy richness of "Le Gibet's" bell tones, the complete clarity and detailed composure everywhere—these and other almost unfathomable felicities document a transcendental order of virtuosic attainment. The program, in short, is a breath-taking one, and it is beautifully recorded. H.G.

DEBUSSY: *L'Isle joyeuse*—See Chopin: *Scherzo No. 4, in E, Op. 54.*

DEBUSSY: *Préludes, Bk. I: No. 10, La Cathédrale engloutie* (orch. Stokowski)—See Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition.*

DVORAK: *Quartet for Strings, No. 3, in E flat, Op. 51; Bagatelles for Two Violins, Cello, and Harmonium, Op. 47*

Miroslav Kampelsheimer, harmonium (in the *Bagatelles*); Vlach String Quartet.  
• ARTIA ALP 706. LP. \$4.98.  
• • ARTIA ALPS 706. SD. \$5.98.

The popular E flat Quartet receives one of its finest recorded performances here: creamy, robust, broadly paced and supremely poised, the Vlach aggregation are gutty, vibrant, and completely convincing. I particularly like the prominence of the viola part, which gives majestic darkness to the total sonic fabric. Furthermore, the coupling here is of the absolutely delightful—and very rarely heard—little *Bagatelles*. If you are at all susceptible to Bohemiana, make a bee-line for your nearest record dealer!

Gorgeous reproduction. H.G.

DVORAK: *Symphony No. 7, in D minor, Op. 70*

New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, cond.  
• COLUMBIA ML 6228. LP. \$4.79.  
• • COLUMBIA MS 6828. SD. \$5.79.

The unimpressive quality of both performance and recording in this new version of one of Dvořák's greatest works had me baffled until I noticed that the sessions took place just over three years ago, in January 1963. I'm sorry to have to be so negative, but the chief usefulness of this record is as a yardstick for the enormous improvements since that date in the acoustics of Philharmonic Hall and the even more striking development of Bernstein as a musician. In point of sound, the Symphony is sabotaged here by the almost impenetrable fog of resonance that stifles all but its basic outlines. One of the glories of Dvořák's orchestral style is his exquisite woodwind writing, but all this degenerates here into a vague burble in the distance. (I have a suspicion that the mono version, which I haven't heard, may be better than the stereo in this respect: it sometimes happens with recordings of this kind.)

The performance, insofar as it can be heard, is eloquent but sluggish. The tempos are all on the slow side, and they are dragged out still further at moments of particular intensity. The Bernstein who has been giving such magnificent performances this season is scarcely recognizable in this mannered interpretation.

The recent London recording, with Kertesz conducting the London Symphony, has far clearer, if slightly harsh, recorded sound, but Kertesz's interpretation is somewhat anonymous, and Szell's Epic disc is crisp but heartless. Both Kertesz and Szell tamper, in differing degrees, with Dvořák's entirely satisfactory

orchestration. I have not been able to make a detailed comparison of the interpretations of Monteux (RCA Victor) and Karel Sejna (Artia), but as far as my memory serves me both are preferable to the three already discussed, though the Sejna is available only in a rather archaic mono recording. There is still room for a really good modern version. B.J.

GRANADOS: *Piano Music*

*Allegro de concierto, in C sharp; Danza lenta; Piezas sobre cantos populares españoles; Valses poéticos.*

Alicia de Larrocha, piano.  
• EPIC LC 3910. LP. \$4.79.  
• • EPIC BC 1310. SD. \$5.79.

Granados' piano music—with its vivid flair, its pungent romanticism, coloristic variety, and rich expressivity—is "high octane" writing par excellence. Mme. de Larrocha, splendid artist that she is, performs the examples here with tiger in her temperament, getting maximum mileage from the composer's pages. The entire pianistic lexicon seems at her disposal, for she combines an innate rhythmic awareness with an impeccable *ostinato* crispness, while maintaining all the nuance and line in the world. Best of all, this artist can phrase in a cantabile style; there is here an extravagant romanticism, even license, and at the same time no straying from the bounds of cogency. If the combination is fathomable, Mme. de Larrocha might be said to merge the brilliance and dash of Artur Schnabel with the broad introversion remembered from the work of the lamented Dame Myra Hess. She is patently a peer of either of those celebrated musicians, as she so amply proved during her recent U.S. appearances.

Unfortunately, there is a fly in the ointment: how could the producer of this disc have permitted so atrocious a piano to be used? It has the clattery quality of an out-of-tune box in a roadside honky-tonk. To call it a disservice to the artist's magnificent playing is vast understatement. How Mme. de Larrocha gets from this instrument as much tonal beauty as she does must rate as a miracle. H.G.

HAYDN: *Quartets for Strings, Op. 33 (complete)*

*No. 1, in B minor; No. 2, in E flat; No. 3, in C; No. 4, in B flat; No. 5, in G; No. 6, in D.*

Weller Quartet.  
• LONDON CM 9448/49. Two LP. \$9.58.  
• • LONDON CS 6448/49. Two SD. \$11.58.

A don at my Oxford College used to shave regularly to the accompaniment of Haydn Quartets (not only the *Razor Quartet*, I may add) and would occasionally play them in the evening for more aesthetic reasons to a group of

# MEPHISTO'S MUSINGS



**I**T HAS BEEN a long time since the Spanish pianist Alicia de Larrocha made a personal appearance in the United States, so when she returned to New York in December for her appearances with the Philharmonic and her subsequent Hunter College recital (very successful events, by the way), we lost no time in appropriating a small hunk of her schedule for ourselves. We met her for cocktails in the bar of the Hotel Wellington on the very day of her arrival, an inhospitably cold day which did not prevent her from saying that she was very happy to be back in the United States, which is probably more than we would have allowed under similar circumstances.

She is a very small woman—five feet two would be our guess—and an attractive one, in a neat, unglamorous way; despite her quiet authority, there is just a touch of the Giulietta Masina quality about her. She speaks only a little English, but fluent French, so that our interview had a distinct trans-Pyrenean flavor. We asked her first about current musical life in Spain, which we confess to knowing little about—do most of the medium-sized cities, for example, have active musical seasons and their own ensembles?

"Oh, yes," she told us, "though this

is quite recent, mostly in the last five years. For many years there was not much outside the major centers, but it has mushroomed in the past few years, mainly because of the interest and participation of the government, which subsidizes music and music education, through the offices of the ministers of Information and Tourism. In fact, it's gotten to be a little too much—the quality is remaining fairly good, but the audiences have not yet grown into all this. I think that in a few years they will catch up—they are growing rapidly, and the record industry has become much bigger.

"Then there are the festivals. Practically every small village has its summer festival. You might be most interested in the festivals devoted completely to contemporary music—the biggest is at Barcelona. They draw fewer fans, but very enthusiastic."

She told us then about her activities as a teacher at home—she runs a school founded by *her* teacher, Frank Marshall—and about her forthcoming itinerary, which will take her afield to Puerto Rico, to Switzerland, to Africa (starting in the South and working northward), to Japan, to the British Isles. And she will make some new recordings, including a disc of early Spanish music, featuring some Soler. This led us to ask her about the subject of repertoire. We observed that a Spanish pianist is rather automatically assumed to be a specialist in Spanish music—and indeed it is Mme. De Larrocha's discs of the Albéniz *Iberia* that have perhaps gone farthest in keeping her reputation high over here during her long absence. "I very much do *not* want to be a Spanish specialist," she answered. "Oh, I love it very much—the Albéniz and Granados, and Monsalvatge, too—wonderful music for the piano. I will always play it. But I very much want to be considered a mainstream pianist, a performer of the great nineteenth-century repertoire for my instrument."

We wondered about contemporary music, especially of the Spanish variety: did she consider it an important part of her repertoire? "No, not really. I think it is interesting. I like music that explores possibilities, and in Spain we have some important and talented composers—Cristóbal Halffter, Luis de Pablo. Their work interests me, but much contemporary music does not appeal to me as a pianist, because I feel it goes against the nature of the instrument."

This phrase, "the nature of the instrument," brought to mind the experiments in changing the nature of the piano that have won some attention in France—specifically, the extension of the keyboard around on either side of the player. Had Mme. De Larrocha any truck with such goings on? "For me," she said with a smile, "there is difficulty enough reaching the keyboard as it is."

## Noah Greenberg

We do not ordinarily devote this column to obituary material, and are not glad to do so now, but it seemed to us that the recent death of Noah Greenberg in New York City (at the age of only forty-six) called for a pause and a salute. His career is of special interest to longtime HIGH FIDELITY readers, and in fact it would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the recording industry played the role of an essential catalyst to his career and that of the New York Pro Musica, the now flourishing group founded by Greenberg and Bernard Krainis. In fact, it was Esoteric Records who first approached Greenberg in 1952 with the idea of recording some Renaissance music. At that time, Greenberg was working for the I.L.G.W.U. and directing small choral groups; he immediately set about organizing the original New York Pro Musica Antiqua to meet with Esoteric's request. (The most prominent members of that first ensemble were Russell Oberlin and Charles Bressler.) The first

*Continued on page 164*



*Alicia de Larrocha: mainstream pianist.*

# THREE LATIN IN MANHATTAN

BY ABRAM CHASINS



Michelangeli: fastidious, mesmerizing.

THREE LATIN pianists dominated Manhattan's January musical scene. The designation is geographical rather than musical, for jet-age transportation and the availability of recordings have made the musical world an eclectic world. Alicia de Larrocha came from Spain, Martha Argerich from the Argentine, and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli from Italy, yet their playing and repertoires disclosed no national characteristics of major importance, with but one exception.

## Alicia de Larrocha

That exception was the complete identity of conception which Mme. Larrocha brought to Granados' *Goyescas*, and to Albeniz's *Iberia* and *Navarra*, which comprised the second half of her recital program at Hunter College on January 15. Obviously, this music has long been the subject of her special attention and affection, for her effortless skill in negotiating the complex figuration and difficult chordal skips of these major Spanish works was matched by a guileless charm, an aristocratic restraint, and a rhythmic crispness that would have made one swear her piano was equipped with castanets.

Earlier in the program, her playing of two sonatas by Soler and of the second *English Suite* by Bach displayed a pianism and musicianship, a clarity and simplicity, which belong only to the finest instrumentalists. Whatever she wants, she gets without pushing or pounding. There is also present a remarkable relation between her technical approach and the musical effects she achieves. All is planned, precise, and crystal clear.

These laudable qualities worked to enormous advantage in the works mentioned. However, Mme. Larrocha's far shorter supply of color, ardor, and variety resulted in reducing the emotional contents of Schubert's A major

Sonata, Op. 120, and particularly in neutralizing Mozart's A major Concerto, K.488, in which Mme. Larrocha was first heard with the New York Philharmonic under William Steinberg (January 1).

This popular masterpiece was not a fortunate choice as the vehicle for the pianist's first appearance here since her debut a decade ago. Her constrained approach to Mozart made this man of the theatre sound as though he were lacking in passion, drama, and humor. The corner movements sounded stilted. The avoidance of ornamental freedom in one of Mozart's most eloquent slow movements was disappointing but not unexpected, after hearing the first-movement cadenza played without any implication of its essentially improvisatory character.

Lapses and limitations notwithstanding, Mme. Larrocha is at all times a meticulous pianist of the highest integrity, and I look forward with pleasure to hearing her again, and soon.

## Martha Argerich

The American debut of the young Argentine pianist Martha Argerich was staged as part of Lincoln Center's "Great Performers" series at Philharmonic Hall, on January 16. The honor was undoubtedly accorded in recognition of her first-prize victories in three international competitions at Bolzano, Geneva, and Warsaw. Miss Argerich's playing immediately demonstrated that she has an abundance of talent and temperament, a lovely tone, a projective personality, and the superb confidence of intellectual innocence. The quality of her interpretations, coming from one billed as a major performer, also demonstrated that the minor standards of the current Broadway theatre have traveled northward to invade our musical citadels.

Her reading of a Bach Partita turned out to be no better and no worse than

that of other pianists to whom the Baroque style is still a deep mystery. Her playing of Schumann's great C major Fantasia was as musically raw as it was technically insecure. Her Chopin was a compendium of almost all the distortions that the precise poet of the piano himself listed as primary violations of his intentions. In Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata, she seemed singularly disinterested in the composer's textual directions, and also proved to be inadequate to the bristling difficulties of the challenging finale. In short, this recital emerged as another case of the public performances by prize winners of recent years which have posed serious threats to the prestige and value of international competitions, here and abroad.

It only remains to report that Miss Argerich was greeted with wild ovations by an audience whose knowledge of the piano literature was evidently on a par with that of the metropolitan critics who praised her playing of "Bach's Partita, No. 6, in E minor." That's how the program read. What Miss Argerich actually performed was the No. 2 in C minor.

## Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli

On January 10, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli appeared here for the first time in fifteen years as soloist with the New York Philharmonic under William Steinberg, in a masterly performance of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*. Nothing was obscure or obscured. Everything sounded strong, organic, and convincing. Michelangeli's technical prowess was no less than transcendent. It always was. How, then, has his art changed? It has been perfected and refined by dedicated work and by a vast pedagogical experience which empower him to command completely whatever he plays.

But more yet is the ideal goal:

*Continued on page 159*