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AT HOME WITH: Alicia de Larrocha; A Pianissimo Star

By JAMES BARRON

THE Spanish pianist Alicia de Larrocha has a lot of carpet padding in her apartment, down the block and around the corner from Carnegie Hall, but not all of it is under the carpet. Several thick rolls have been hidden beneath the sounding board of her Steinway grand -- out of sight, but they do the job.

"I do not want to disturb the neighbors," she said midway through a recent interview. Inspecting the old-fashioned coarse-hair material, she added: "I didn't want them to complain. The very first day, a friend of mine put the stuff under the piano. I can practice very comfortably."

Hans Boon, an assistant to her manager, was clearly agitated. What would Steinway & Sons think if they knew that Miss de Larrocha's piano had been -- what is the word? -- altered.

"Just say the apartment is soundproofed," he declared, trying to steer the talk to the forest of framed, autographed photographs on the instrument's closed lid, another sound-reducer. Three images stand out: of Miss de Larrocha with the virtuoso Vladimir Horowitz; her with the music director of the New York Philharmonic, Kurt Masur, and her with the violinist Itzhak Perlman.

Mr. Boon has it almost right: Miss de Larrocha's apartment is quiet, particularly for a postwar building, but not quite as quiet as a quiz-show isolation booth or a recording studio. Her floor-to-ceiling curtains, her yellow upholstered sofa and her grayish wall-to-wall carpet are all sound absorbers. But the strategically placed padding means the piano does not produce much sound to begin with.

Miss de Larrocha, who is 72, whips off a full-bodied warm-up arpeggio; it sounds small and far off. Mr. Boon says he has rung her doorbell without realizing that the faint piano playing he could hear in the hallway was coming from within.

Do the neighbors press their ears to the walls? They will never tell. But Miss de Larrocha values her own privacy, too. She wants to be able to practice, to smooth out tricky fingerings, without being heard. It is not always easy. In France some years ago, she stayed in a suite with a piano. Before long, a bouquet of flowers arrived with a card saying: "Please play louder. I want to hear you." A warm-up in Zurich had the opposite result. "The police came," she said. "They

said, 'On Sundays, it's forbidden to make any noise or to work in your garden.' "

In preparation for a recital this Sunday at Avery Fisher Hall, Miss de Larrocha could easily have stayed at home practicing, stopping only to answer the telephone on the little shelf at her elbow. After all, she appeared on the same stage, only three weeks ago, with the New York Philharmonic. But she has been across the continent and back since then, playing in San Francisco, San Diego, Louisville, Ky., and Pittsburgh. Next week she is off to Florida, for concerts in Naples and West Palm Beach, and she has 43 concerts or recitals scheduled between mid-December and next May.

Off stage, she looks more than ever like the incredible shrinking pianist, barely able to reach the pedals. "I used to be 4 foot 7," she said. "Now I'm 4 foot 6, or 4 foot 5." In other words, she is about as tall sitting at the piano as standing up. Her hands are tinier than ever. "I used to reach a 10th," she said. "Now, a ninth, with some difficulty." (It is extremely rare to find a concert pianist who cannot easily stretch a 10th -- that is, from middle C to the E in the octave above. Van Cliburn was renowned for covering a 12th, up to the G above that E.) Fans may have noticed this in her three recordings of "Goyescas" by Enrique Granados. "The first and second record, you can hear the 10th," she said. "The third, no, because my hand is shrinking." What about demanding, big-handed composers like Rachmaninoff? "I don't play him anymore."

Miss de Larrocha, who made her American debut 40 years ago and became a superstar after a New York Philharmonic appearance about 10 years later, says she has changed her technique as she has aged. To generate auditorium-filling sound, she used to set the piano bench as high as it would go, the opposite of low-benchers like Glenn Gould. "I used to play with all my strength from my shoulders and my back," she said, "so I had to be higher." But her arms are so short that when the music called for her to go from one end of the keyboard to the other, she had to twist sharply; she ended up almost facing the audience. In recent years she has taught herself to sit closer to the keyboard, minimizing the extremes of movement.

She made her debut as a youngster, at the 1929 World's Fair in Barcelona, Spain, her hometown. At 11, she was playing with a Madrid orchestra. About the same time, she went to a recording studio to watch the Spanish mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia, who finished an aria and told the young Alicia that it was her turn to make a disk. She played a Chopin waltz and a nocturne.

But while she is now a four-time Grammy Award winner and a regular on Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart programs, her ascent to the ranks of superstardom took some time. She was popular in South America and had toured Japan, but was not a big draw in this country until the public-relations executive Herbert Breslin heard one of her recordings (on the European label Hispavox) and wrote a letter asking if he could represent her in the United States.

"We got her involved in things she hates," Mr. Breslin, who became her manager, said from across the living room during the interview. "If you mention television to Alicia de Larrocha . . .

"I get sick," she said, finishing the sentence. This from someone who was seen on a "Live From Lincoln Center" telecast of Mostly Mozart's opening concert last July.

"I don't like anyone watching me," she said. "Sitting on the piano so short, I'm not nice to watch, and music is to listen to, not to watch." She wants concertgoers to keep their distance. "If I realize there are cameras around, I'm not comfortable." Usually she does not notice cameras, but in July, one caught her attention. "No distraction," she said, "but I was terrified."

Nor is she comfortable with being mentioned in the same breath as Horowitz, as critics have done since the 1960's. "I am me, and I don't like anybody to compare me to others," she said. "Everything in my personality depends on my mood -- sometimes very dark, sometimes very bright and optimistic. I am a very variable person."

As the daylight faded, she switched on a lamp in the apartment, which is one of three places where she spends time between concert tours. Her official residence is in Coppet, Switzerland, near Geneva. And her family has a penthouse in Barcelona, where she stays when she is there, as she will be next month, to listen to auditions at the music school that she took over from her teacher. Her husband, Juan Torra, also a pianist, died some years ago; their grown children remain in Barcelona.

The conversation turned to on-the-road stories. Once she was locked in a rehearsal studio in South Africa; the guard, not realizing she was still inside practicing, shut off the electricity for the night. "I was touching the walls to find the switch for the lights," she said. Finally she found a telephone and called the concert promoter, pleading, "Can you rescue me?"

And then there was a trip to west Africa. She was bumped from a scheduled jet flight from Johannesburg. With a concert to play, she chartered a single-engine plane whose pilot, it turned out, liked to fly low.

"He was saying, 'Look at the lions,' " she said. "Then he asked if I had a telephone number for where I was going. I said yes, but why? He said: 'Animals go out to eat and I don't want to leave you. There's a phone booth but nobody there. Don't go out of the phone booth.'" Left at a deserted landing strip, she said: "I was in that phone booth for 20 minutes before they finally came and picked me up. It was an eternity."

Photos: "I am a very variable person," says the artist, in her home.(pg. C9); At her muted Steinway. (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. C1)