

ALICIA DE LARROCHA

Talks to ALAN BLYTH

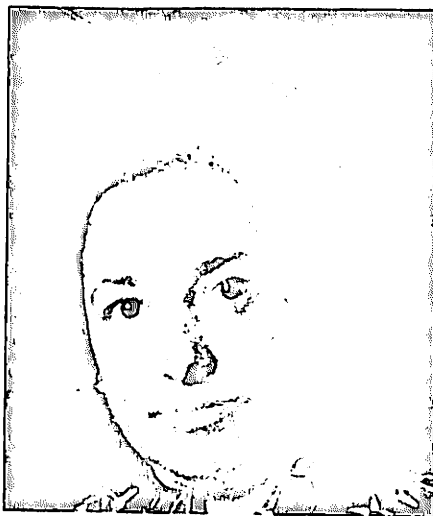
FAME comes to some artists in their extreme youth and often fades as they grow older: with others it strikes only when they reach maturity—as has happened to Alicia de Larrocha, and in this case it is all the more likely to prove lasting. Certainly Decca seems justifiably to have placed its faith in the Spanish pianist with results that have proved almost uniformly satisfying and enjoyable. Her performances, for all their undoubted technical prowess, seem to me particularly notable for their subjugation of personal display to the cause of the composer, so I was not surprised to find Miss Larrocha not only the most modest of pianists but also one still living very much in awe of the recording studio, where we met, and all its attendant trials and tribulations.

She had much music in the home when she was very young because her aunt was a teacher and her mother a pianist, both pupils of Granados. "Even when I was very small, I was listening to my aunt's lessons. I think that she didn't like it very much, and she tried to discourage me from learning the piano when I was so young. At least so she told me. On another occasion she wanted me to leave the room while she was teaching. I apparently got so angry that I banged my head on the floor. She also said that once after I had heard a pupil play Grieg's *Spring Song*, I was able to pick it out on the piano myself without difficulty. These things persuaded my aunt that she should teach me. I was only two-and-a-half.

"When I was three, she persuaded the teacher, the late Frank Marshall, to take me as a pupil. From then on the piano was everything to me—my toy, my life. I began with Mozart Minuets and Bach Inventions, and gradually progressed to more difficult things. I remained with Marshall through my time at the Barcelona Academy. At first I continued with normal schooling, but my parents realised it was becoming too much for me, and they sent me to a private tutor. I did at one time have a wish to be a singer, and while I was learning theory I worked through all the well-known arias, accompanying myself. I think I ruined my voice that way!"

When she was 18 she became Marshall's assistant in his classes, and she continued as a teacher until about five years ago. When he died 14 years ago, she became director of the Academy. She first appeared in public at the age of five. Her first concert with an orchestra took place when she was eleven in Madrid—Mozart's *Coronation Concerto*—but she was never a child prodigy, restricting her appearances at this time to two or three a year. "My public career really began, mainly in Spain, only after the Civil War. I didn't appear abroad until 1947".

However, her real break-through did not come until much later. She toured occasionally but most of her career was still in Spain. Elsewhere she was known mainly for her playing of Spanish music. Her first tour in 1955 of the United States, as one critic there recently put it, "had added up to nothing". Then in the middle 1960s, after her Carnegie Hall debut—which she remembers as one of the outstanding events of her life, it all seemed to happen. By 1969, she was appearing no less than ten times a season in the United States, and her concerts received 'rave' notices. As she modestly puts it: "I never thought I would be a pianist like that. I played all my life, but I never thought so".



(photo: Decca)

She demurs if you say today that she is a specialist in Spanish music: "I never specialise—it's just what people want to hear from me. But until I was 18, I hardly played any of it, except for one or two pieces of Granados that are not even in a recognizable Spanish style. What I played was the classical repertoire. Today I have no special favourites. I like to play Mozart as much as Debussy, Scarlatti as much as Chopin. I prefer mixed recitals because I like the contrast. I think you could say that I like most the last thing I've played. Sometimes I imagine I've got tired of playing something like *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, but when I get to it, I find my love of it is renewed, because the piano, the acoustic of the hall, or whatever, is different".

She does not really like recording. "I'm allergic to the microphones. I see a microphone, and I feel ill. I think I become a different sort of pianist. That may be because I don't feel quite so free—I'm always worrying about the wrong notes. Or maybe I'm concerned that, having played a phrase one way, perhaps I should have played it another. I'm a bit inhibited. Occasionally, of course, I forget it all. No, I don't miss an audience. When I'm rehearsing in the studio I play very freely, but as soon as that light goes on . . . very strange".

She admires many of her pianist colleagues "but my god is Rubinstein, ever since I met him when I was a little girl. Kempff is another of my idols, specially in Schubert and Brahms. And in the younger generation, well, there are so many good players, it's really incredible. I try not to go and hear any of them just before I have a concert because it only depresses me! Then I have to say to myself, 'Go home and close the piano'".

At recitals she considers it most important to have a good piano and for the acoustics of the hall to be fine. "I don't like the Queen Elizabeth

Hall too much. Its reverberation is of the confusing kind: it doesn't add a bloom to your tone. I prefer the Festival Hall".

She is very friendly with her fellow-countrywoman, Victoria de los Angeles. "We have given joint recitals. We had a big success together in a programme of Spanish music some eighteen months ago in New York. I've known her since she was 16 or 17 when she was in a radio competition. After she won it, she asked me to play for her in a test she had with HMV. She sang Mimi's and Butterfly's aria. We've been friends ever since and always try to go to each other's recitals".

The death of Soriano last year affected her deeply. "He was such a great-hearted person and an exceptional musician. He had been a great influence on me".

To meet, Larrocha is a little disconcerting because she is so tiny, only four feet nine inches tall. Her hands, for a pianist, are also very small. That naturally could have been a handicap to her, but in spite of the fact that her span is only about a ninth, she has little trouble with technique, overcoming difficulties with her own, new fingerings. She is a great believer in the importance of a rhythmic sense. "The first thing I have always said to my students is if you can't play Bach correctly, you can't play Spanish music. Both keep the rhythms strict. The Spanish style is like Chopin Mazurkas in some respects—free in the melody but solid at the bottom. Spanish music is more difficult than mazurkas but similar", and she illustrates the point at the piano.

Larrocha is, at heart, a very home-loving person, who does not care very much for meeting a lot of people or travelling a great deal. "Some years ago I didn't really like house-keeping. Nowadays it's my favourite occupation, together with looking after my family. My husband was also a Marshall student, but after we married he stopped playing and took over my management. We have a boy of 16 and a girl of 14. Both love music but they won't become professionals".

When we met she had just been recording part of *Iberia*, which is released this month and reviewed on page 695 of this issue. "I would like to do some Mozart soon and also more of the Romantic repertoire, and Bartók and Prokofiev. We must see, but nothing too modern".

Her advice to young pianists? "I think they are too much in a hurry—always faster. faster. For me, art—music and everything—is something that comes little by little and needs time for development. Today, they want to do everything—boom, boom, boom, to start on the roof. I know that life is different from what it was, and it's hard for youngsters to hold back, but still I believe you can't, as it were, put a coin in a machine and expect maturity to come out the other end. Also, many pianists do not have sufficient sense of vocation: it's become too much of a profession. I've never thought of it like that. They might as well be an engineer or an architect. That's sad but maybe I'm a little old-fashioned. I remember always and vividly what Granados once said to a pupil, who came to him and said: 'Maestro, I want to play for you'. Granados asked him what he could play. The young man said he could ask for anything. Granados asked if he knew a Beethoven sonata: 'Yes, any one you like'. To which the composer said: 'You had better go home and when you can really play just one, come back to me'. That was the truth".

ALICIA DE LARROCHA
 Details of her recordings in
 this and other lists in
 THE GRAMOPHONE
 CLASSICAL RECORD CATALOGUE
 see page 702 for information

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