



Alicia de Larrocha (right) with Rosina Albeniz the composer's granddaughter

Lady of Spain

Alicia de Larrocha interviewed
by RONALD CRICHTON

SOMETHING ABOUT BARCELONA favours the arts. It may be the sheltered position on the Mediterranean, in a semi-circle of wooded mountains, the mild climate, or the long history as the chief city of the thriving province of Catalonia — Barcelona was a capital centuries before Madrid was imposed on a united Spain. The Middle Ages are still a presence, in the cathedral, in grim palaces like the stone warren that now houses the Picasso Museum, tucked away in the huddle of streets in the old city. A fresh wave of expansion in the 19th century caused Barcelona to spill out to the North and West, with new residential quarters intersected by tree-lined boulevards, studded with art nouveau or 'modern-style' — tendrilly shop-fronts, fantastically spiked iron grilles, façades of glittering mosaic.

Pedrell, the father of modern Spanish music, was a Catalan. So were Albéniz, Granados, Casals. In more recent times, Barcelona has given us Conchita Supervia, Victoria de los Angeles, Montserrat Caballé, and the pianist Alicia de Larrocha, whose brilliance and mastery have added new colour to a field dominated mainly by Paris and European capitals further East. At a time when Western countries (our own among them) were becoming acutely conscious of their national cultures, two Spanish composer-pianists helped to put Spain on the musical map. Albéniz drew nourishment from French impressionism, Granados, though he was the younger man, drew it from German romanticism. Both transmuted what they took from abroad. That their major piano works, *Iberia* and *Goyescas*, are becoming more

familiar is largely due to the authoritative, sharply evocative performances of Alicia de Larrocha. But of the background from which this music and these performances spring, we know little.

Alicia de Larrocha is as elusive as most international artists. When I was in Barcelona last autumn, she was in the United States. I went to see her pianist husband Juan Torra, whom she met when they were pupils at the Marshall Academy in Barcelona. Record collectors may identify Frank Marshall as the pianist in some of Supervia's song recordings. He was the Catalan-born son of an English engineer. He became a pupil and eventually assistant of Granados, who left to him the school that now bears Marshall's name, a private foundation with about 100 pupils, mostly children, with some post-conservatoire students. Juan Torra showed me a pile of recordings, mainly of Spanish music, made by Alicia de Larrocha in recent years for Spanish firms, many of them available also on Erato, but hardly known here. Since Spanish records have a habit of quickly becoming unobtainable if not untraceable, a full discography would be welcome.

The lady herself was run to earth some weeks later in her London hotel, when she was here for the new recording of *Iberia*. Short and stocky, with mobile hands that look small until you notice the spread and the strength of the finger-tips, that enable her to pounce on big chords like a hawk on a mouse, eyes sparkling with humour and enthusiasm. The conversation began, inevitably, with Frank Marshall.

"He was a child prodigy, who realised that everything he had been taught at the conservatoire was zero. He heard about Granados and asked him for a lesson. Granados tried him out, said 'Forget everything — start again at the beginning.' In the end Marshall had to get a diploma from the conservatoire, but when he was given it, he tore it up, under the noses of the authorities! Later on he became assistant director at the school Granados founded in 1909. When Marshall died in 1959, he handed the school on to me.

"Granados was a superlative romantic. He adored Schumann, who influenced him very much, while he was positively in love with Grieg. Yet at the same time he loved Scarlatti. You can see the influence of Scarlatti's ornaments in Granados's later music. It's one of the things that makes him so hard to play, this problem of combining the harpsichord approach with the romantic colour. Granados led a kind of musical double life. It was all spontaneous — he wrote as he felt, romantic and Scarlattian at the same time. He fell in love with somebody new about every two days. He used to come back home to lunch and say to his wife, 'I saw a girl this morning, she was so pretty, just like this . . .' and he would sit down at the keyboard and play.

"He spent almost the whole of his life in Barcelona. He did go to Paris as a young man for a short time, and had some piano lessons with Diémer, who was a famous teacher then, but he caught typhoid, and

the lessons had to stop. And earlier in Barcelona he studied with Pujol, but as a pianist he was to quite an extent self-taught. As performer and as teacher he was mainly concerned with tone quality, sonority, and pedalling. He was very easy-going. He needed money, and he wrote quickly, but he was always losing manuscripts or giving them away. He made careful corrections for his own benefit but he didn't bother to give them to his publishers, with the result that the printed versions of his music are about 80 per cent wrong! Frank Marshall, who collected what manuscripts he could, always hoped to make a definitive edition, but there was never time. He handed them on to me, and I want to do the same, but shall I have the time?

"Albéniz was quite different. While Granados was happy to stay at home, Albéniz travelled widely, and his experiences in Latin America influenced his early things. He began with salon music and zarzuelas, but also sonatas composed of dance movements, and lots of habañeras. Like many other Spanish composers, he was forced in his early days to play dance music in cafés to earn a living. Gradually his style became more personal. *Mallorca* and *Córdoba* are little masterpieces. His mature piano style differs from Granados absolutely. The only thing they have in common is that they both created personal styles in their last periods. They need special and separate techniques. Albéniz was much in Paris. Debussy and especially Ravel influenced him enormously. The

basis of *Iberia* is French impressionism. You could call it Spain seen through the eyes of French impressionism.

"Albéniz was looking for a sort of orchestral palette on the piano. The conception is large, often with three staves. It looks like an orchestral score, with a huge range and widely-spaced chords. Yet it is really piano music, with the pedal very important. It won't orchestrate. The arrangements by Arbós are no good. I doubt if even Ravel — (note, Ravel was invited by the dancer Ida Rubinstein to orchestrate parts of *Iberia* as a ballet, but discovered that the rights had been sold to Arbós. Instead, in an ill humour, he wrote *Bolero* for her) — though he was a genius at that sort of thing, could have done it.

"Falla? Different again. He was a perfectionist, a sort of reaction against Albéniz and Granados who in their various ways so enjoyed life. There was something of the monk about him. Music became for him a sacred creation. In his old age he grew more and more religious, and suffered terrible remorse because of his earlier works. He believed he was in sin. He wrote *Atlántida* as a kind of penance. You know that he also started with dance pieces and zarzuelas, which he destroyed? His evolution was really amazing!

"Yes, I was born in Barcelona, and I have Catalan blood, but I'm a bit of a mixture. My father was a Catalan born in Madrid. My mother was from Barcelona but of Navarraise ancestry, and I also have Andalusian and Basque blood. I suppose you could call me a Spanish cocktail."



Albeniz, Iberia and de Larrocha

JOHN DUARTE reviews the record



Albeniz (above) c1904, and (top right) in his home in Nice, 1906

EXTRAVAGANCE WAS A millstone that Albéniz carried throughout his life and it extended into so many facets of his activity. A childhood of musical precocity and domestic rebelliousness, capitalisation on his meretricious ability to play the piano behind his back, years wasted in persevering with the zarzuela (to which, despite his and its essential Spanishness, he was not suited), brought to his senses only when a friend shot himself, temperamentally unstable and financially unwise, it was only "in character" when his last gesture proved to be a massive work of uneven quality, which even he could barely play—and then only with eccentricity and some gamesmanship. It is strange that the great resurgence of Spanish music around the turn of the century should have occurred at the hands of pianists but, at that time, the guitar had still not enjoyed the revival that was to lift it clear of the folk-musical tag: it remains the Spanish-musical instrument par excellence—even though its origins in its present form were in Italy and its development largely in Vienna. This is ground on which I have speculated

before. The fall of the pianistic works of Granados and Albéniz from fashion has been coincident with their rising popularity in guitar transcriptions, suggesting their 'restoration' to the instrument that inspired them.

Spanish-domiciled composers from Scarlatti on have been wont to treat the keyboard as a 'big guitar'. This remained very true of Albéniz in his earlier works and the *Cantos de España* has already become familiar to listeners of all kinds through guitar transcriptions of most of its items. Despite Albéniz's own professed contempt (in later life) for the *Cantos* and other works of its period, it remains a vivid yet lyrical evocation of Moorish Spain that is none the less powerful for its comparative economy; depth of feeling can always transcend medium and it is seldom more telling than when it is expressed with an economy of means.

Alicia de Larrocha's playing of the *Cantos* is exceedingly fine in every nuance and tersely crisp where called for, as in the opening Prelude. What lovely little works these are, free from the faintly lush

and occasionally cloying romanticism of Granados on similar ground, and how de Larrocha loves them; she has the blend of sensitivity and nobility that brings out the essence of the contrast of extremes that comes close to defining Spanishness. Albéniz really needed to do little more than this to win his modest place in musical history but, characteristically, his sense of proportion served him less than well. Appointed to the Schola Cantorum in Paris and anxious to justify himself, and confronted with men of the calibre of Fauré, Dukas, D'Indy, and Debussy (whom he did not like personally), he again fell victim to extravagance. The direct simplicity and unpretentiousness of his earlier works vanished and with them his perfect sense of aptness to the keyboard. The growing preoccupation with harmonic and contrapuntal complexities, the latter often expressed in terms of difficult rhythmic syntheses, led to denser textures that were further thickened by the heavy weighting of many passages — the inevitable outcome of thinking that became increasingly orchestral rather than pianistic. This latter point was not unapparent to Albéniz himself and he made an attempt to orchestrate *Iberia*, the apotheosis of his new and last period; when he realised that this was a task beyond his ability he entrusted it to his lifelong friend Arbós, whose success suggested that this was perhaps the most effective and certainly the most painless way of presenting this music.

A fine recording of Arbós's setting of five of the pieces, under Argenta (Decca LXT 2889) has long since vanished and is now adequately replaced by another, still fairly elderly version under Ansermet (Ace of Diamonds SDD 180). In *Iberia* Albéniz taxed the pianoforte to, if not beyond, the limits of its expressive powers and manageability. Fashion apart, this goes far to explain the wide berth given to it by pianists, and to the absence of a comparative recording. It is difficult to imagine a convincing performance by any artist who cannot add spiritual involvement with the music to a magnificent technique; Alicia de Larrocha may not be able to play the piano behind her back, but she does have command of the necessary addition sum. It is customary for pianists to cheat a little and to thin out some of the more massive passages, often loaded beyond all necessity, but it would be a brave man who would say whether de Larrocha has exercised this licence — if she has then it is not apparent even with an open score before one — and it is certainly not important to the music. Prodigality is stamped all over the score of *Iberia* — enough pedallings to see the performer through a Tour de France, passages of a density that comes near to defeating the power of clarity of a piano (and sometimes succeeds with the recording), and dynamic markings that range from quadruple forte to quintuple piano; as *ppp* already means 'pianissimo', it takes a Spaniard to visualise the super-diminutive of *ppppp* — a capacity reflected in his language.



Caricature published in *La Ilustración Musical* (Barcelona, 1883): "As a man a midget, as a pianist a giant"

Alicia de Larrocha does her level best to meet these highly notional demands and probably played some of the notes by blowing on them, but at other times her dynamics differ by no small margin from Albéniz's. Many of these are failures to observe some rapidly transient demand on Albéniz's part, made in the thick of the fray, and may be written off as justifiable casualties of war, a few others such as the final notes of *El Puerto* cannot be ascribed to anything but a difference of opinion — and it's funny how many of these pieces, after pages of stunning complexity, end squarely with 'pom' (dominant) 'pom' (tonic). *Iberia* is justly famous for the rhythmic knots from which the performer has to escape, and de Larrocha unravels them with the ease of a Houdini. Some spring from the opposition of rhythms that are native to Spanish music, others from attempts to write in the fluid freedom of phrasing that belongs to it equally; the cantando passage in *Fête Dieu à Seville*, with the languorous

melodies, characteristically making their phrase-end flourishes, has a bar of common time set against two bars of guitar-like accompaniment in six-eight — and it is given the leisurely independence of a voice that, when it feels so moved, floats free of the accompaniment but invariably comes back to meet it. As in other places, the scoring encompasses three staves in an effort to clarify the content, though in this instance the need is less pressing.

Similarly there are places in the *Rondeña* where the upper part becomes a voice that holds back obstinately until the accompanying figuration does likewise, and then ends the little game with a flourish — a game which the accompaniment eventually tires of playing, finally abandoning the field to the cantilena, which sings its triumph *dolcissimo*. This little device, even in de Larrocha's hands, cannot rescue the *Rondeña* from outstaying its welcome, the material not being quite man enough to see it safely through its 13 pages.

El Polo, though only lasting a little more than seven minutes (not long by the standards of *Iberia*), likewise fails to hold the interest. These two weak movements excepted, there is some magnificent music to be enjoyed — the delicacy of *El Albaicín* (a gypsy quarter of Granada), the robustly pictorial *El Puerto*, and the equally evocative portrayal of a religious procession in *Fête Dieu à Seville*, to mention only those that impress the most deeply. I'm not sure whether Albéniz had infinite faith in the pianistic ability of others or whether, as has been suggested, there was a measure of joy in straining the sinews of others, but I would dearly like to know what he intended at that point in *El Albaicín* where two sustained notes are marked 'vibrato'. After the other torments of *Iberia* a directive to shake the piano up and down (or even side to side) might well seem reasonable; de Larrocha contents herself with thinking the vibrato. *Navarra* was intended as a part of the Suite but was left unfinished (and therefore not published with it); the conjectured ending is the work of Déodat de Séverac.

In man's present state of evolution it is unlikely we shall have a perfect recording of this work, compelling for all its excesses, realising all Albéniz's liberally scattered requirements; meanwhile de Larrocha's is a most satisfactory approximation — better, one is tempted to think, than Albéniz's unreasonableness deserves. The recording is as good as can be expected and if the 'flat out' passages approach resonance saturation then we should remember the attendant problems — which are not all the pianist's. Magnificent pianism and superb artistry applied to an uneven work that rises to the eights and subsides on occasion to near boredom. The printer of the original edition was called Laroche, a coincidence that would surely have pleased Albéniz.

ALBENIZ: *Iberia. Navarra. Cantos de España*. Alicia de Larrocha (piano). Decca SX1. 6586-87. £4.54.