

Alicia de Larrocha

First Lady of the Piano

BY JAMES L. FORSHT

Alicia de Larrocha's enormous reputation and impeccable artistry are inversely proportional to the size of her hands — presumably even smaller when, at age five, she first beguiled the public in her native Barcelona. Both have grown naturally enough since then, and those dainty hands remain proof that you don't need the mitts of a Horowitz to tackle the intimidating chords of the Rachmaninoff Third (for example).

Critics have frequently praised the refined level of her playing, her discriminate attention to detail, her sensitive shading, her unique way of sculpting and tapering phrases. She is particularly renowned for her performance of Spanish composers such as Granados, Albeniz and Mompou. When it comes to the Romantics, she can heaven-storm with the best, while her Mozart is as clear and clean as a mountain pool.

Alicia de Larrocha announced her determination to play the piano when she was only two-and-a-half years old. Her aunt, a piano teacher, had finished her day's lessons when little Alicia climbed up to the instrument and proceeded to imitate the students. Her aunt was sufficiently impressed to take the child to Frank Marshall, a friend and pupil of Enrico Granados who had taken over Granados' piano academy after the composer's death.

It was too early to start lessons, Marshall said, so young Alicia turned the piano into a toy. "Once my aunt locked it," recalls Mme. de Larrocha, "and I cried. I put my head on

the floor and banged it so hard that blood began to flow out, and at this moment my aunt said, 'Well, we'll start.' So we went to Marshall and I screamed at him, 'I want to play the piano!' and he told me to come the next day."

At age five, Alicia de Larrocha made her recital debut; at nine she was playing Mozart with an orchestra in Madrid.

Before she was out of her teens, she had become one of Frank Marshall's assistants, combining teaching with recitals and occasional accompanying. (She was once asked to play a couple of arias for a young soprano who was cutting an audition disc for HMV. The recording was the first step toward fame for Vic-

toria de los Angeles. The two women have been friends ever since and in 1971 combined their talents in an extraordinary pair of recitals that were recorded by Angel Records.)

The winner of countless awards, including several Grammys, the Paderewski Memorial Medal, the Edison Award and special honors conferred upon her by the Spanish government, Alicia de Larrocha stands today, in the words of *The New York Times*, as "a pianist's pianist and a musician's musician."



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In performance, her masterful control goes hand in hand with a no-nonsense stage demeanor; her hands work carefully and gracefully across the keyboard, her arms lift occasionally, and not a single motion seems wasted. This approach to touch and technique, explains Alicia de Larrocha, has a purely musical origin.

"I think the question of touch is absolutely personal," she says. "While I play a certain passage in a particular way, other pianists will play it differently. I couldn't tell you whether what I'm doing is good technique or bad technique. It's just the way I have to play to get the phrasing I want."

"When I lift my arm at the end of a phrase, or perhaps on just one note, it is because of the musical situation. In an appoggiatura, for instance, the second note is less important than the first, so I want to get off that second note. But I also want to make the sound as resonant, as alive as possible. That's when I will lift my arm."

"As for fingering, it's obviously important, especially for accuracy. Because of my small hands, I usually use crazy fingerings. They may not be easy but they get the kind of sound I want."

When practicing, she explains, "I first look at the general structure and form of a piece. Then, when I have some idea

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as to what it's all about, I go to work on the details — the technical problems, the sound problems, the phrasing problems. I work specifically on each one. Then I try to put it all together. If it doesn't work, I go back to the details. At this stage I never use pedal.”

The end result of this discrimination invariably projects a sense of everything falling neatly into place — the various details, the dynamics and articulation, the exquisite phrasing. Mme. de Larrocha's playing does indeed get it all together. Before any given piece can be played, she says, “everything has to be already constructed so that when you do play it, you can forget it. It's like pushing a button and having everything there.”

If technique is subservient to musicality, there are certain interpretive principles that Alicia de Larrocha can offer that might make a difference in our own performance practices. One is that the left hand is more important than the right. “It's the most important hand in everything,” she says: “in balance of sound, in rubato, in style. The left hand is like a column that holds the whole building, the whole monument. The melody is nothing, really — just the first thing the ear captures.”

Her concern with the left hand points to an overriding focus on the structure of a piece. This comes into play again in dealing with other technical questions, such as how to properly execute a *rubato*, in which slight accelerandos and ritardandos alternate to create an elastic, flexible feeling of tempo. “Of course, the nature of rubato is always romantic,” explains Mme. de Larrocha, “but the degree depends on the particular piece. You shouldn't be thinking just about rubato, because it is merely a momentary change in the tempo or the character of the music. Therefore, you must instead think of what you are playing *before* and *after* the rubato. That is what makes it sound natural. Otherwise, it will be too superficial, too *artificial*. Rubato should be like a little detour, but one that you, and the listener, don't realize you're coming to.”

Spanish music has a kind of rubato which seems endemically important, the very essence of the sound. Are there certain characteristics that pianists should be aware of when they play Spanish music? She responds, “I don't think it's the same rubato you find in romantic music. Spanish music has a certain freedom to it. It should sound natural, not strange or forced, and the tempo should flow out



Federico Mompou and Alicia de Larrocha

of the style. It's not really a rubato so much as this free style of the music itself. You must aim at an overall balance between the melody, harmony and rhythm.”

Another consideration in her approach to a piece is the hall in which it will be performed. “Acoustics and tempi are very important. In a very big hall, for instance, you can't play the same tempo you would play in a small hall, because the increased size and distance *make it sound faster*. There's no relaxation to the rhythm. The tempo appropriate to a small hall will sound much too fast in a place like Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center — not that you can hear this from the stage itself. But if it is taped so you can hear it later — it's absolutely too fast, too rushing, too . . . *precipitato*. There is no breathing room. So you must slow it down. That's one of the problems with broadcasting or recording concerts. Because if the tempo is good for the audience, it is too slow for the microphone. So either you play for the audience or the microphone. It's an interesting thing, and true. Sometimes you listen to broadcast concerts and find yourself saying, ‘too slow.’ But it doesn't sound that way to the audience.” Is there an ideal hall? “The Musikverein in Vienna comes close. Not perhaps ideal for impresarios and managers, but ideal for music.”

Alicia de Larrocha's repertoire is constantly expanding in new directions. Her recordings of the Beethoven concerti are about to be released on London Records. “Conductor Erich Leinsdorf cautioned me against doing them,” she reports. “‘Why play Beethoven when you play the romantic pieces so charmingly?’ he asked. ‘Don't play Beethoven. *Everyone* plays Beethoven.’” Yet, she is not one to be content with well-worn programs. Even as a youngster she delighted in branching off into new directions. “Young people today play everything, even the most difficult works,” she declares. “When I was young I couldn't play all that. But I used to improvise a lot. That's something I miss. I'd improvise on everything and everyone — Debussy, Prokofiev, the French, the Romantics, Wagner . . . oh my goodness! I would spend hours improvising in Wagner's style!” She even wrote a few songs.

But today this piano great is more interested in bringing depth and imagination to the notes on the page. For Alicia de Larrocha, each composer she plays has a special quality and value. Of living composers, she is perhaps closest to Federico Mompou. “It's difficult to talk about Mompou,” says Mme. de Larrocha. “It just sounds as if he is always looking for the simplest harmonies, that he writes for the pleasure of these harmonies — for the resonance between the notes. It's a highly personal style. And the touch . . . he is always looking for a singing sound. I've thought about Federico's music all my life, and I've tried to absorb his approach. Very seldom do we have this marvelous opportunity to be close to a composer, to know so well what he is doing. There is this peace, this calm, this intimacy — something very deep inside himself in the music.”

“As for other composers, I know their styles, or think I do. Composers are each so different that when I'm playing one I don't think or remember anything about any other. If I play Bach, in my mind I play only Bach. When I'm looking for those clear rhythms, the voices, the nobility in those adagios or sarabandes or dances, I never think of Debussy or of Chopin or Liszt. And when I play Mozart, I hear only Mozart.” Pausing to reflect on the challenge of pulling this off, Alicia de Larrocha seems at once authoritative and humble. “It is not always possible to succeed,” she muses, “but I try.” ■