

## Spain's Alicia de Larrocha

## Tiny Pianist Makes It the Second Time Around

By Herbert Kupferberg  
FROM NEW YORK CITY

Fifteen years ago, a diminutive Spanish lady pianist named Alicia de Larrocha made her first trip to the United States, playing concerts in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. Her reviews were good. But the practical results of her trip, in terms of contract offers or return engagements, were nil. In her own words, "Nothing happened." She quietly went back to her native Barcelona, leaving the mass of the U.S. musical public oblivious of her existence.

Now Miss de Larrocha is back in the United States, and a good deal is happening. She is winding up a coast-to-coast concert tour which covers some 30 cities. This week she begins a seven-day stay in Colorado playing the Schumann Concerto in five appearances with the Denver Symphony Orchestra. After that she ranges across the country from Seattle, Wash., to Ithaca, N.Y., concluding her stay May 1 with the last of three all-Spanish programs at Hunter College in New York City. Wherever she goes she is saluted not only as an incomparable interpreter of her country's music, but as one of the two or three top woman pianists of the day.

Alicia de Larrocha has always had her warm admirers in this country—beginning

with Alfred Wallenstein, who heard her in Spain and invited her here in 1954, when he was conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. But it took a series of recordings she made in Spain for Hispavox, issued here on the Epic label in the early 1960s, to stir up popular interest in her. The albums were devoted to the works of Isaac Albeniz and Enrique Granados, both of whom died in the early years of this century after practically creating a whole new literature of atmospheric, folk-tinged Spanish piano music.

## Another Try at America

Among the avid listeners to these tunes was a New York musical agent named Herbert Breslin who thought he had never heard Albeniz's *Iberia*—perhaps the supreme Spanish keyboard composition—played with such dazzling beauty. He wrote to Miss de Larrocha forthwith, learned she was not averse to another try at America, and set the wheels in motion to bring her here. When she gave her second New York solo "debut" in January 1966, the house was full of pianists, headed by Artur Schnabel and Claudio Arrau. Since then she has returned annually for longer and longer visits, culminating in this year's marathon tour.

For all her brilliance, playing the piano does not come easily to Alicia de Larro-

cha. Standing only 4 feet 9 inches, she undoubtedly is the tiniest great pianist in the world today, and her hands are in proportion to the rest of her body.

But anyone who believes that long-fingered hands are a prerequisite to a great pianistic career has Miss de Larrocha as proof to the contrary. After years of stretching and straining, she can now span 10 notes on the keyboard. (Twelve is the maximum for long-fingered pianists.) She is proud of that 10-note reach, ascribing some of it to "a very long pinky."

Talking to Alicia de Larrocha across a Manhattan cocktail table, one is scarcely aware of matters like size and physique. She is a dark, vivacious woman, with a ready smile and the sparkling dark eyes that every American expects of every Spaniard.

Although she's resigned to being asked to play Albeniz, Granados, and de Falla wherever she goes, she declines to be categorized as a specialist in Spanish music.

## Every Country, Every Style

"I am a pianist who is Spanish, not a Spanish pianist," she says. "Today every pianist has to have a part of the repertoire he can call his own. That for me is Spanish music. But I play music of every country and every style—classical, romantic, baroque. I love all kinds of music. My favorite programs are those that are half Spanish and half other things. Sometimes when I am asked to play an all-Spanish program, I think, 'Oh, no, please, not again!' But always the moment I begin to play, I enjoy it."

She admits she isn't always overjoyed by the sounds she hears coming from her native land, for she fears that today's young Spanish composers are losing their identity and individuality. "We have an *avant-garde*, like everybody else," she says, "and they compose in the international style, like everybody else. I am a little sorry that folklore is finished for now. We have such riches in our heritage! The young people think it is a little ridiculous, but it will come back, I think."

## The Distinctive Qualities

Miss de Larrocha's basic schooling came in the music of non-Spanish composers. Her teacher—the late Frank Marshall, a Spaniard of English ancestry who had been a pupil of Granados—started her off at the age of 4 with Bach and Mozart. "My small hands made it difficult," she recalls, "but nobody discouraged me. As a child I couldn't reach enough keys to play Spanish music. It was good training; if you can't play Bach, you can't play Spanish music. In both you must keep the rhythms strict."

Miss de Larrocha also runs one of Spain's foremost musical schools, the Frank Marshall Academy, founded by her former teacher. Her co-director is her husband, Juan Torra, also a pianist, who looks after their two children, 12 and 10, while she is traveling. Mr. Torra long ago gave up his own solo career to further hers.

Does he miss playing himself? Miss de Larrocha smiles and says proudly: "No, no, he always encouraged me. He is my greatest admirer."



Miss de Larrocha: Arriving unexpectedly at the summit.