

## Music

## It Skirts the Question to Call Her the Greatest 'Woman' Pianist

By DONAL HENAHAN

IN THE peculiar world of the piano, as in the similarly surrealistic world of Little League baseball in New Jersey, being female has been regarded as an affliction about which little can be done. Women pianists have made their mark in history, but the feeling persists that theirs is a condition to be risen above, like congenital squint-eye or the petit mal. Something of that latent attitude often pervades reviews of Alicia de Larrocha, to choose the example nearest at hand: at some point during the Mostly Mozart festival that begins tomorrow night at Avery Fisher Hall, she is certain to be mentioned (possibly even by me in an unguarded moment) as "the greatest woman pianist of our day."

Such a glib description serves, like most labels, to discourage thought. It skirts the question, if you will allow the phrase in this context, of whether de Larrocha might actually be one of the finest living pianists of any gender. Or simply one of the foremost artists. And it offends the knowing minority that recognizes that there is no such animal as the "greatest" anything in the arts. Worst, perhaps, it diminishes de Larrocha's achievements by ghettoizing them.

How, in the name of 1974, does it happen that a woman pianist finds herself subtly condescended to by the very audiences and critics who believe they are praising her most extravagantly? To some people, that question is meaningless—they know there are genetic, hormonal disabilities operating to prevent women from playing the piano (or conducting, or performing on the timpani) with the male's authority and artistry.

Still, de Larrocha does seem to play so well. At times it is only by strength of will and concentration that one can remember that she is only a woman. The thought steals in, to tell the truth, that the categorization is, if not actually meaningless, a lazy way to listen. One of the givens of music criticism in an embarrassingly few years ago was that certain pieces were legitimately to be regarded as "ladies' music," and that while the occasional male might play them their essence was feminine. I believed some such thing at one time about the Schumann Piano Concerto, the Chopin concertos and Mozart's sonatas. Most Beethoven, on the other hand, was a man's work. Some music, such as Tchaikovsky's, seemed ambiguous or transsexual, and fair game to all.

This ghetto thinking has a long history, and pianists are to a great extent prisoners of their own role-playing in society. Pick up almost anything by Jane Austen or Thackeray, not to mention lesser novelists of the 18th century, and you will find women being put in their place, that place being at the harpsichord or piano, laboring to

master a few trashy tunes. Arthur Loesser's "Men, Women and Pianos," that wise and witty classic, speaks to the point in a chapter entitled "The Piano as a Female 'Accomplishment,'" which begins: "The history of the piano-forte and the history of the social status of women can be interpreted in terms of one another." According to Loesser, the 18th-century lady was expected to cultivate "something uselessly pretty" because it looked more ladylike than doing nothing. He quotes from "Practical Education," by Maria Edgeworth, who was a kind of proto-Emily Post: "Every young lady (and every young woman is now a lady) has some pretensions to accomplishments. She draws a little; or she plays a little; or she speaks French a little..." And even now, with the 20th century ready to move into its last quarter, the piano somehow continues to be thought the harmless toy of what Loesser calls "the average docile, young, well-bred female blockhead."

Despite more than two centuries of evidence to the contrary, we continue to think of the piano as a man's instrument that women persist in trifling with. That pioneering feminist George Bernard Shaw, during his time as a London music critic, championed women pianists such as Agatha Backer-Gröndahl, Alma Haas and Annette Essipov. But he was mightily offended by the South American Teresa Carreño because she would sometimes play Gottschalk, "treating us impartially to her Beethoven-Chopin repertory and to such arrant schoolgirl trash as I thought never to have heard again save in dreams of my sisters' infancy." Carreño's reputation survived Shaw's shots across her formidable bow and she is invariably mentioned near the top of the list of the great pianists. But even Harold Schonberg in his "The Great Pianists" consigns her to purdah, discussing her in a chapter entitled "The Ladies," along with such mistresses of the keyboard as Annette Essipoff, Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler and Cécile Chaminade. Coming down to our own time, he drops the distinction, impartially treating Josef Lhevinne and Alfred Cortot, for instance, in the same chapter as Guiomar Novaes, Olga Samaroff and Rosalyn Tureck.

It is in reference to Novaes that Abram Chasins, in "Speaking of Pianists," correctly points out, "No woman pianist has ever become celebrated in quite the glamorous way that Liszt or Paderewski or songbird Jenny Lind became celebrated." (It has always been recognized that sopranos, not being musicians in the ordinary sense, can achieve a kind of fame denied to other female artists, possibly because males find it so hard to compete with sopranos on the highest level.) And Chasins suggests why he believes a Novaes, no matter how gifted, poses

*'Let's face it,' says the critic. 'There are few male pianists who play as strongly, let alone as fluently and accurately, as Alicia de Larrocha.'*

slight threat to male hegemony at the keyboard: "We discern a modest, deeply dedicated artist, a woman proud to be a woman, and so fully in command of herself that she is also in full command of her music, her instrument and her public. Her expressivity is entirely personal. It has been that of a consecrated wife and mother and musician who sees life whole, who speaks from the heart of joys and sorrows she herself has known." There is truth to this, no doubt, but nowadays it does read suspiciously like a male critic's idiosyncratic view, and possibly not the whole truth.

There are women who simply do not play like anyone's stereotype of a wife and mother, though they might be as wifely or motherly as the next one in private life. Gina Bachauer is one such today, and Carreño plainly was one a century ago. Paderewski, who was endowed with great political charisma and a questionable technique, must have felt a bit challenged by Carreño's power. She was "a strong pianist," he said, "even too strong for a woman." Paderewski had some stature as a politician but a comment like that would lose him a lot of votes today.

As for Bachauer, few nowadays complain about her strength and vigor at the piano or put down her noble interpretation of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto because it is "too manly." But she, like Carreño, used to be criticized in some quarters for trying to play like a man. More insulting, perhaps, are those who backhandedly praise her for manly playing, as if that were the only reasonable goal for any pianist. (Would anyone think of praising Serkin or Rubinstein, in delicate or tender passages, for "playing like a woman"? Not within their hearing, probably.)

And yet manly virility can become as great a bore in music as too much delicacy and poetic introspection. The "greatest" pianists, no matter their sex, combine these and a universe of other qualities in their playing, always finding freshly interesting ways to mix the standard ingredients. Take de Larrocha,

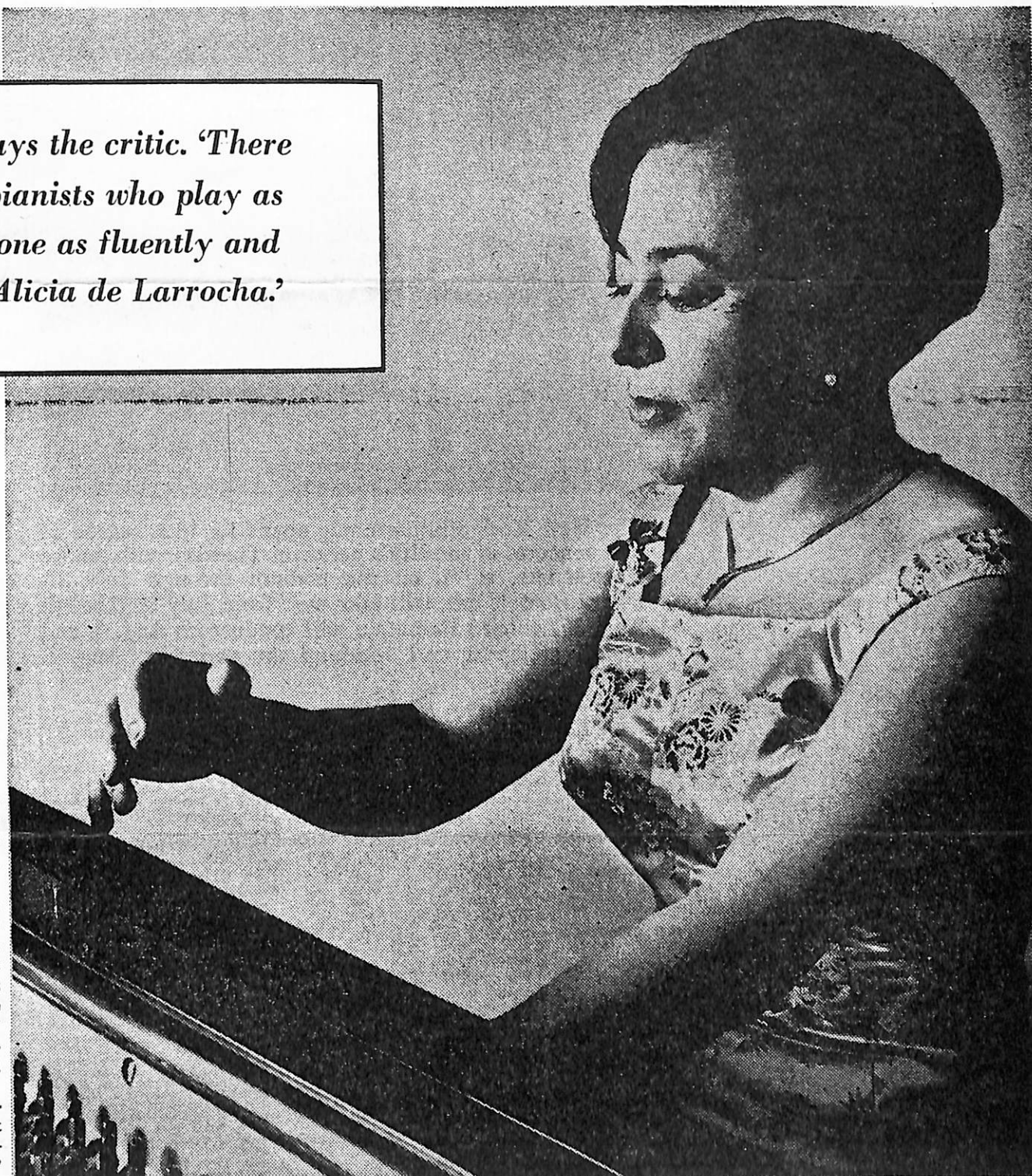
our case in point. She came to international notice fairly late in her career as a Spanish music specialist, and she remains an incomparable player of Granados, Albéniz and Falla. But she soon branched out. While keeping her Spanish roots she now explores Debussy and Ravel, Beethoven and Mozart (two concertos tomorrow night and sonatas at a recital later in the five-week festival), and Schubert (no less a challenge than the posthumous B-flat Sonata in her recital). As it happens, she is a wife and mother, but her playing is as different from that of Novaes as Dame Myra Hess's differed from that of

Landowska, or—if contemporary reviewers can be believed—as the electrifying Sophie Menter differed from the pedantic Clara Schumann. All one can say with confidence is that none of these pianists would in any way remind Chopin of those Scottish ladies who "looked at their fingers and played wrong notes with great feeling."

Some will object, of course, that all this truckles to Women's Lib and evades the great physiological and commonsensical facts. In general, women do have smaller hands than men, don't they, and less muscle? Doesn't that mean a lot where technical accomplish-

ment, at least, is concerned? Well, one would certainly assume so as a rule. But the rules are mocked by a de Larrocha, who stands well under five feet tall and whose hands are astonishingly small for anyone, let alone a virtuoso pianist. There are, let us face it, few male pianists who play as strongly, let alone as fluently and accurately as de Larrocha. Like any important artist, she is a special phenomenon, possibly a biological sport as well as an artistic one.

So remember as you listen, if it pleases you, that she is a wife and mother. But try not to let that influence you one way or another.



Alicia de Larrocha will keynote the Mostly Mozart festival at Avery Fisher Hall tomorrow.