





Alicia de Larrocha coaches senior Greg de Turck during a masterclass at the Eastman School of Music, October 2003. Gelfand-Piper Photography.

Pianist Alicia de Larrocha Takes a Final Bow and Retires

BY ADAM KENT

Legendary Spanish pianist Alicia de Larrocha recently ended her nearly 75-year performing career with a series of farewell concerts in New York. I watched the diminutive virtuoso return for curtain call after curtain call after the final staccato low Ds of Manuel de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* reverberated through Avery Fisher Hall.

Larrocha was obviously moved by the standing ovation of the cheering audience at this New York Philharmonic concert, for which she also performed Haydn's Concerto in D, Hob. XVIII:11 with delicacy and sparkle. The music of her native Spain and the works of 18th-century classicists had always been among her specialties. She seemed conscious of the links between folk and classical traditions, whether the music was the Gypsy-inspired finale of the Haydn or the expressive *coplas* towards the end of the Falla. Her vaunted sense of rhythm made the music breathe and dance in her inimitable way.

These performances were also a personal farewell to an artist who influenced my life as a pianist and as an enthusiast of Spanish music. I first heard Alicia when I was a young piano student in 1976 at the inaugural piano recital in newly renovated Avery Fisher Hall. That diverse program included works by Bach, Haydn, and Mendelssohn on the first half, followed by the music of Falla to honor the composer's centenary. I cringe to recall I was interested only in the familiar pieces on the first half, but all I knew then by Falla was the *Ritual Fire Dance*. Because traffic was horrific in New York City that afternoon, I arrived in time to hear only the second half of the program and was skeptical about sitting through half a recital of Spanish music. When a tiny, black-haired woman in a blue cape approached the piano with the solemnity of a religious rite, and then played the opening measures of Falla's *Four Spanish Pieces*, my life changed. I became a convert to the cause of

Spanish music and was indebted to the petite woman who had opened my ears to it.

A few years later I was one of many autograph seekers following a recital by Alicia in 1978 at the Mostly Mozart

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Festival. The meeting made a lasting impression on me. Throughout high school, undergraduate, and graduate study, I attended every New York performance she gave. For several years I made banners and displayed them at the end of her concerts: *Viva Alicia!* and *Te Queremos, Alicia!* People stared, and the international artist often acknowledged my homemade tributes from the stage.

Alicia was born in Barcelona on May 23, 1923; her mother had been a student of Spanish composer and pianist Enrique Granados, and her aunt Carolina de la Calle had been one of his most brilliant disciples. In an interview with Dudley Moore on R.C.A.'s *Concerto!* series, Alicia explained that at age two she had been fascinated with the piano and picked out tunes by ear. However, when she drew on the keys and pulled up the ivories, her aunt locked the piano. Alicia then banged her head on the floor until she bled. Her aunt finally relented, and the rest is history.

Alicia became the youngest student of Frank Marshall, who inherited the music academy Granados founded in Barcelona in 1901. At age five Alicia performed at special events at the Academia Marshall, one of which was introduced by the Spanish composer Joaquín Turina. At age six she performed at the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, and at 13 she played Mozart with celebrated Spanish conductor Enrique Fernández Arbós in Madrid.

From Alicia's early years one 1932 recording remains, documenting her playing of a Chopin Nocturne and Waltz. The disc was made when Alicia attended a test recording session by mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervía, accompanied by Frank Marshall. The singer was fascinated by the young pianist and asked her to record a few favorite selections. Only three copies of the original 78s were pressed, one for Supervía, one for Marshall, and one for Alicia's parents. IPA recently released these pieces on the album *The Catalan Piano Tradition*, and her playing demonstrates artistic maturity and skill.

Alicia received the Gold Medal of the Marshall Academy in 1943, when she also performed outside of Spain for the first time. Her American debut in 1954 was with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Alfred Wallenstein; she performed in New York a year later. Over the next 10 years Alicia recorded Spanish repertoire on several albums for Hispavox, many of which

are currently available on EMI. When Frank Marshall died in 1959, the direction of the Marshall/Granados Academy passed to Alicia, and she is still its third president. Her international reputation grew out of her expertise in Spanish music, in part because few pianists had such an encyclopedic grasp of this repertoire or played it with such mastery. Alicia returned to New York in 1965 for a series of engagements with the New York Philharmonic, and these gave rise to an international concert career. Little by little she came to be known as the première woman pianist of her generation and eventually joined the ranks of the truly great pianists.

Her impressive series of recordings for London Records (now Decca) throughout the 1970s and 80s covered most major works by Spanish composers as well as the standard piano repertoire. She became associated with the music of Mozart, and her annual appearances at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival became legendary and led to a similarly titled series of recordings. In

the 1990s she recorded a complete Mozart sonata cycle for R.C.A., numerous Mozart concertos, as well as several readings of Romantic works by Schumann, Chopin, and Mendelssohn. Remakes of the core Spanish repertoire in digital sound were inevitable.

The qualities that made her artistry special were her rhythm and sound, both hallmarks of the Granados school of music making. Her sense of rhythm was hard to resist as it danced, teased, but never lost its steady underpinnings. Audiences often had to restrain their natural impulse to clap or tap their feet as she played. Her tonal balances were perfect, and she created excitement and color through subtle inflections and dynamic shifts, rather than splashy display. Her sound was crystal clear, and her touch was reminiscent of a harpsichord sonority when necessary. A light, flowing staccato made her a consummate interpreter of Baroque and Classical-era music. If many pianists emphasize the need to think vocally at the instrument, I would call





Alicia the piano's greatest folk singer for her simplicity. Her interpretations of Spanish music showed the connections between art and folk music: richly colorful, sensuous, and still clear and direct. This style paid handsome dividends in other areas of the repertoire, such as in her delightful interpretations of French repertoire or in the last movement of Schubert's B \flat Posthumous Sonata, which danced and sang as the Viennese composer probably imagined.

Technique is tricky for an artist like Alicia to discuss, because at her level technique and musical vision are inseparable. Her playing gave the illusion of sweeping away any obstacle between her fingers and the music. Her ease at the piano and her focus on musical values astonished listeners; she never resorted to grand displays of pyrotechnics or virtuosity. When I mentioned that many pianists envied her beautiful trills and embellishments, she scoffed at the praise. For her what counted was *hacer música*, making music, and not just playing the piano.

I was 17 years old, hopelessly stage struck, when Alicia agreed to hear me play Granados's *Goyescas*. It was overwhelming to meet my idol, and I was not yet in control of the difficult score. She was enormously gracious as she explained that the difficulties of the *Goyescas* had to do with Granados's blend of three distinct stylistic elements: a Spanish *casticismo* evoking 18th-century Madrid; Scarlatti's delicate harpsichord technique; and a general Romantic approach to the

sonority of the work. Her breathtaking demonstrations of several pieces are still in my ears whenever I return to the score. The experience of watching her toss off the final cadenza of *The Maiden and the Nightingale* was similar to marveling at a magician's sleight of hand. Her insight into pedaling included solving the dilemma of sustaining harmonies and bass notes without creating overly thick textures or smearing adjacent melody notes. Alicia spoke of the importance of sonority in piano playing, of discovering the special sound of every composer, and the need for critical listening in the process.

I continued to attend Alicia's New York appearances, and the repertoire of Spain and Latin-America became increasingly important in my musical life. In the fall of 2001 I gave a lecture-performance at the Foundation for Iberian Music at the City University of New York Graduate Center to commemorate the centennial of the founding of the Academia Granados-Marshall. The Foundation honored de Larrocha for her lifetime commitment to the performance of Spanish music with a special tribute from D. Emilio Cassinello, the Spanish consul, who presented her with a commemorative plaque.

In a telephone conversation the following day Alicia expressed delight to know so much Spanish music was

finally being heard outside of Spain. With resignation in her voice, she talked about the passage of time, aging, and being plagued by medical problems. The following week she presented an all-Granados recital at Alice Tully Hall. I marveled at the beauty of her playing in the recital in spite of the many physical infirmities. Her first encore was a touching rendition of "La Campana de la tarde," the first piece she played by Granados at the age of six.

About a year later Alicia returned to New York for a Farewell to Carnegie Hall performance, with Mozart's Piano Concerto #12 in A, K. 414, in the composer's arrangement for piano and string quartet with the Tokyo Quartet. She offered a sparkling, ebullient reading, full of the grace and simplicity of her Mozart. After her final bows, the pianist's cheerful but firm wave of a hand seemed to say good-bye to the audience without any sentimentality or regret.

I met Alicia during her stay in New York. A tender, humble woman, she shared photos of her family and chatted about the possibility of exchanges with her academy in Barcelona. She spoke about retirement, mentioning several remaining tours in Europe and Asia before she would settle down to a

life with her family and students in Barcelona. Within a few weeks, however, she agreed to further farewell concerts in New York City, at the Mostly Mozart Festival and with the New York Philharmonic. Our conversation centered around numerous musical topics, especially the music of Spain. She expressed admiration for a newly available edition of Albéniz's *Iberia* by Guillermo González, including a facsimile of the autograph that elucidates numerous questions raised by the standard printed edition.

I was struck by her unsentimental comments about Enrique Granados and his death, when she debunked the popular romantic view that he perished at sea in a doomed attempt to save his wife: "Granados was always afraid of the water. He was even nervous about making the short trip from Barcelona to Mallorca. His wife, on the other hand, was a champion swimmer. She must have jumped in the water to save him." I was also touched by Alicia's kind comments about my recently released recording of Ernesto Halffter's complete piano music and her curiosity about this rarely heard repertoire.

Alicia returned to New York a year later for several performances with the New York Philharmonic. By now it was clear that she would retire from performing, although she seemed buoyed by the prospect of teaching and giving masterclasses. She was due to give a series of classes at the Eastman School of Music later that week and had already agreed to appear at a piano festival at the Mannes College of Music in the summer of 2004.

We talked again about the music of Spain and her many insights into Spanish rhythm. *La síncopa*, or syncopation, is a vital component of this music, with many examples in such pieces as "El puerto" from Albéniz's *Iberia* and the sixth *Canción y danza* of Federico Mompou. She stressed the importance of feeling the resolution of syncopations when notes are held over strong beats. We also spoke about Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, which she had just performed so magically with the New York Philharmonic. Alicia confessed to some frustration with the work, finding few orchestras that understand its nature and emphasize its chamber-like qualities. She explained the piece is not a concerto but a work for the piano scored to weave in and out of the orchestral fabric. Falla had originally

intended to compose a set of four nocturnes for solo piano, she said, but was persuaded by the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes to orchestrate the evocative composition. As a young student, Alicia heard Frank Marshall perform the work under Falla's baton. She advises pianists who study *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* to start by learning the orchestral score. She also said there were several problem spots in terms of balance: towards the end of the first movement Falla writes black-key glissandos for the piano, but Alicia plays rapidly fingered arpeggios instead. "Even at that, it's almost impossible to hear the piano," she complained.

We spoke about the Spanish-American composer Joaquín Nin-Culmell, a close friend of Alicia's, who dedicated one of his charming *Tonadas* to her. Nin-Culmell, who died in January 2004 at age 95, looked forward to Alicia's frequent telephone calls and spoke about her playing with awe and admiration.

Alicia also reminisced about her performances in Japan. When she first played there years ago, the audience hardly applauded after her rendition of Haydn's F Minor Variations. Later she learned that in the Japanese culture, applause is considered a rude intrusion into an artistic performance and likely to shake a performer's concentration. More recently, Alicia said, the Japanese tend to applaud at public concerts in typically Western style. Moreover, at a special 80th-birthday recital in Tokyo in May of 2003, she recalled being surprised and delighted when pianist Krystian Zimmern appeared on stage following the performance and embraced her.

In some ways Alicia had come full-circle professionally. After so many years of performing the standard repertoire and trying to overcome the stereotype of being a Spanish-music specialist, she seemed pleased to pass on her legacy as an authority on Spanish music. She spoke with determination, wanting the public to appreciate how much more there is to Spanish music than Flamenco, and speculated about the relatively low esteem the repertoire is still accorded by many professional performers and teachers. Alicia acknowledged that there are fewer master works in the Spanish piano literature than in the German repertoire. Still, such compositions as Albéniz's *Iberia*, Granados's *Goyescas*, Falla's *Fantasia Baetica* and *Pièces espagnoles*, and Turina's *Sanlúcar de Barrameda* are worthy of serious



Alicia de Larrocha with the Damocles Trio: cellist Sibylle Johner, violinist Airi Yoshioka, and pianist Adam Kent.

study and high regard; they should not be taken less seriously because of the numerous lighter, more salon-oriented works by the same composers.

I saw Alicia one last time before she left New York. On the day of her departure, she called to ask me to stop by her apartment for a moment so she could give me a *recuerdo* – a souvenir. During a break from teaching, I hurried down to her apartment and gazed around at the empty closets, the huge valise, and the gaping space in the living room where her piano had once been. I smiled bravely as Alicia spoke warmly about the recent recital of her compatriot Joaquín Achúcarro. I wished her a joyous retirement – a life surrounded by family as well as young musicians eager to absorb all she has to impart. In her quietly idealistic way, she may continue to change many lives. □

Festival at Northwestern University

Northwestern University School of Music recently presented From Vienna to Harlem, a piano festival of repertoire from Classical to jazz styles. A recital by Leon Fleisher featured works by Bach, Brahms, Schubert, Kirchner, Koston, and Sessions; and pianists Menahem Pressler, Sergei Babayan, and Margo Garrett performed recitals and chamber music. Two jazz nights featured Michel Pilc and the Marcus Roberts trio, and Chicago area pianist and harmonica player Howard Levy gave a concert for children. Eight faculty members performed on eight pianos and Marvin Blickenstaff gave a masterclass. (847-467-4000; www.northwestern.edu/news)