Nothing is more striking about Artur Rubinstein at seventy than his *joie de vivre,* whether he is talking about his strenuous concert tours (he had an enthusiastic reception in London last week), his family, his gourmet tastes, or his paintings. His French Impressionists are in his Park Avenue flat in New York, where this interview took place: drawings that Picasso made of him he keeps in his Paris flat —with all his attachment to the United States, where he has brought up his family, he remains a European Bohemian. Although he has been pressed for twenty years to write his memoirs, he has never had the opportunity; so he used this occasion to deal for the first time with much about his life and himself as an artist that he thinks has often been misrepresented or misunderstood

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN HENRY BRANDON AND ARTUR RUBINSTEIN

BRANDON: You started life as a child prodigy. I presume that made your transition to becoming a mature man and artist difficult.

RUBINSTEIN: In my case it was very difficult, because I had been educated in that very strict German school. When I played my first concert in Potsdam (I was eleven years old) I played a Mozart concert; the thing was a huge success. And seeing friends in the audience who had brought presents for me, boxes of chocolates, I became suddenly completely relaxed. But the success was such that my teacher asked me to give an encore, a Mendelssohn *Lied ohne Worte* And I went back to play it, and already so distracted by the success that after four bars I completely lost my way, and instead of stopping I started to compose. I improvised a whole new piece. Of course, I expected my teacher to use an axe and cut my head off, but instead of that he took me into his arms and said: "You devil, this I wouldn't have done in ten lifetimes. . . ." Well this, of course, showed what I was made for.

My actual, absolute début, my first utterance on a piano in a public hall, was at the old Queen's Hall, in a sonata recital with Pablo Casals. I was then twenty. I had no impresario, and Casals was an old friend of mine.

BRANDON: Had he heard you before?

RUBINSTEIN: Oh, we played lots together. I had known him since my first days in Paris, when he was not Casals and I was nobody. So we played together, and that gave me a certain lift in London. They started by taking me very seriously.

Light-hearted

But later, you know, due to Spain mostly, they lost that serious outlook on me. After Spain, the English critics and musicians thought that I was a sort of light-hearted player of Spanish music, which is a little folk-loric; it doesn't reach the heights of a Beethoven or a Mozart. They didn't trust me any more, and it made me very angry; in addition I became a little bit too much involved in London society. They thought I was also a society fellow, not quite serious. And it takes time for the English to change their minds. Quite a long time.

They were very much right in some things: I was a little light-hearted about technical perfection in the old days because I didn't have a great respect for the position of a great pianist. I thought a great musician more important than a great pianist. I still think so, but I do think now that you ought not to take liberties with a work you present to the public. And then in those times I had no time for perfection, and they resented it. They wanted their money's worth. They were right. But other people—in Latin or Slav countries—pretended that they liked the wrong note of a boy better than the right notes.

BRANDON: How much notice do you take of critics?

RUBINSTEIN: Of good reviews none of us takes notice, but the minute there is one word of antagonism, we never forget it. . . . It's a very strange thing. I had a family in Poland who were very poor linguists, I mean as far as I know none spoke English, very few French. . . . But I could have come back to Poland from South Africa, from God knows where, from the United States, from the whole wide world. They would ignore triumphant concerts in such and such a city, but they had all read that in Johannesburg someone said that my Chopin was not poetic enough, or my Beethoven was not deep enough. . . .

Musical criticism depends on personality. I'm so often asked: Who is your favourite composer? Whom do you consider the best violinist or pianist or conductor or composer? It is *absolutely* impossible to say such a thing. How could you say, for instance, if I asked you: Who do you consider the greatest . . . Velázquez, Rembrandt, Rubens, Raphael, Titian? You would be completely lost; it's impossible. You love them all by themselves. That applies to our approach to music exactly.

You see, I was born, probably, with a distinct talent for interpretation—not for composition. I did compose, like every musician, when I was young, but I discovered fortunately soon enough that I didn't have the real impulse—you understand that it was cerebral. That means it was an imitative art, and I was too proud to follow it up.

Chameleon

In any case, the talent of interpreter was very strong in me, and I knew that I had to go ahead with it. You see, of course, that means that, like a chameleon, I can change from one composer to another . . . my whole musical being becomes something else suddenly, it's transformed completely. When I stop playing a Beethoven sonata and I have to get into a piece of Chopin, of Bartok, or of Stravinsky . . . well, my whole musical nature immediately is that of another person.

BRANDON: Aren't you at heart a romanticist?

RUBINSTEIN: I am absolutely not a specialist, no. I fought that very much, with great rage. Critics like to pin us down. . . . "Oh, this one is good for that . . . Schnabel, of course, a Beethoven player." You know? This is a *terrible* mistake. Look, Schnabel was very unhappy about that because he composed the most modernistic stuff that I've ever seen in my life; it's impossibly modernist, it's even aggressive. But it is very strange for a man who was officially so much devoted to the exposition of Beethoven sonatas and Schubert and so on. There you are, you see. . . one mustn't do that. . . .

There are epochs, you know, in our lives. When I was three, four years old, music was a natural language to me. Everything I heard was at once absorbed naturally. It could be something from "Aïda," it could be the Moonlight Sonata, just what came along. . . . But my first conscious love for a composer, funnily enough, was for Brahms.

BRANDON: That *is* very romantic.

RUBINSTEIN: "Very romantic" . . . I don't know. The most romantic music really is Beethoven . . . Men like Schumann or Berlioz——

BRANDON: Or Chopin——

RUBINSTEIN: No, Chopin is not a romantic at all; it is a vast mistake to think so. You see, we call him romantic chiefly because we think of him in terms of the 1830s. People who are born around 1830, or have been busy around 1830, are called romantic —but that's not at all so. Just as now people would be called —what should I say—"brutally modernistic."

I call Beethoven the greatest romantic because he is the one who dared to break the line of that severe classicism which was Mozart and Haydn. You see, Mozart and Haydn have just as much emotion in them . . . I hope you know that . . . as any Beethoven had. For me Mozart can express in a few bars more than Beethoven in a whole movement of a sonata. I *adore* Mozart; he is my great, great, great, deep love.

Chopin's masters

The thing is simply that Mozart was able to put all his heart and soul, his musical talent, his genius, into the forms, into the mould. It was called the objective, classical form, I mean the sort of thing which didn't show one's personal feelings too much. But Beethoven was the first one who risked it. He *risked* it, and that risk is a very strong point. It means he really was a convinced romantic. "I want to express my own feelings, I will suffer, I will show them how I suffer . . . nobody loves me. . . . I want to fight for freedom. . . . Napoleon . . . yes, I will write an Eroica."

BRANDON: And how about Chopin?

RUBINSTEIN: Chopin was always a little bit critical of Beethoven. He was not a fool, he knew his genius, but his love went to Mozart and to Bach. They were definitely his masters. He played every morning a few fugues by Bach, just as a pleasure, a sort of necessity, more or less as an entrance into life. Mozart was his master in his works. Look, his two concertos are absolutely Mozartian; there's nothing of Beethoven in them nor of any sort of a romantic. His expression, you see, was attuned to the current time.

You can well imagine that Bach, born nowadays, might dismiss the organ completely. He would probably stick to our beautiful Steinway pianos. He would probably *not* write solo sonatas for the violin or for the violoncello. I'm sure he wouldn't. You see, this goes with the times . . . he had no other means. He wanted to express a vibrant tone, which he couldn't find on the clavichord in those times, so he used the violin, which has been the same for three centuries, has never changed. But I'm perfectly sure that he would write practically all his organ and clavichord works for the piano . . . which Beethoven did and, after all, all the people thereafter.

BRANDON: Where do you place Stravinsky?

RUBINSTEIN: Stravinsky pretends, he's a theoretician who, I think, belies himself in his works very much. He loves to proclaim manifestoes, and he changes terribly and he changes sometimes very practically, too.

I have known Stravinsky since 1910. We met in London at a performance of the "Sacre du Printemps" and we became very very close friends. He lived with me sometimes. And when we meet we behave like a couple of brothers. We fall into each other's arms; we are very concerned about each other's health and the family and so on, and after about two hours we start discussing music with *terrific* rage. He always hated the piano —he preferred the Hungarian cembalo.

Percussion

When I told him that after all, so many masters have given their best to the piano, he said: "Well, it's all a big mistake. The piano is a percussion instrument and has been ill-treated by Chopin and Mozart, Beethoven and everybody. . . . They just have mistaken it." He wants to persuade us that music has no need to be emotional and in *my* conception music devoid of emotion has no sense. Nothing would induce me to go to a concert or to any performance of a work which will not give me any emotion at all. I should prefer to go to a café and have a good cup of coffee; it gives me a certain pleasant emotion of well-being—with a cigar.

But Stravinsky belies himself very much, because in spite of proclaiming all the time that emotion is unnecessary, he couldn't write without it. You see, he ignores it himself, but his music, which is written by an absolute authentic genius of music, cannot. And of course he may try to ignore emotion himself . . . but the public doesn't.

BRANDON: Do you think this is true of most modern composers?

RUBINSTEIN: Well, they try to follow in Stravinsky's steps because he *is* in a way their leader. I mean, he has had an impact. . . . Even Bartok has said so to me. Then look at Bartok's music—it is full of flaming emotion.

Even Schönberg . . . I saw his very controversial opera, "Moses und Aron," in Paris and I was deeply impressed by its emotional impact. I didn't understand the music well; but "understand" is a word one shouldn't apply to music; there's nothing to be *understood*—for me, music must be *felt*.

BRANDON: Where do you fit jazz music?

RUBINSTEIN: It has developed into something very important in America, chiefly because it makes a tremendous lot of money; if people wouldn't pay so much for it, it would be much less talked about.

"Folksy" music has always been much more taken up by millions than serious music . . . just as detective books will be read by far, far more people than a volume of poetry by the greatest poet. That is quite natural.

Too savage

Do you want all the inhabitants of the United States to listen to Beethoven sonatas? We are very proud that a small élite is able to do that. We are very proud that concert halls are filled (though they are not so frightfully big); but millions will dance the Twist and follow any sort of rather vulgar dance. Jazz is not exactly vulgar; it has developed into a sort of splendid art. I mean, they have done marvellous things with it. There are pianists who play much better than we do, technically. . . . Of course, the tone is brittle, it has no expression; they treat the piano like a percussion instrument. It has colour, but for my taste it is a little bit too savage.

As for the popular music in America, the music written in popular vein, let's say, by Kern, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rodgers . . . well, they showed a tremendous talent in using the American idiom and giving it a beautiful musical colour. You can compare them with people like Johann Strauss in Austria, who

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also had a much greater following than Brahms or Mozart or Haydn ever had, who lived in the same city. The music went to everybody's heart; it was easy to take up a waltz by Strauss—and not so easy to take up the Ninth Symphony or the Mass in B Minor.

BRANDON: Why don't you play more English or American composers?

RUBINSTEIN: Critics think we are obliged to serve the public with novelties, or that I should play them because I am an American citizen. I'm absolutely against it. We have a talent of our own and it must stop with our real conviction. I can play what I can express fully when the music compels me to express myself. I haven't yet had the real contact with American composers' music. I like them very much: there is Copland, there is Sessions, Schuman . . . they are all terribly gifted composers, I listen to them with great interest. But I have nothing to say personally.

Window of hope

BRANDON: What about Benjamin Britten?

RUBINSTEIN: Absolutely no —no, no, no. I like Walton very much, but he hasn't written for piano much. To play just for the sake of playing modern music is quite wrong. You cannot convince an audience if you are not convinced yourself.

BRANDON: You said some time ago that you don't approve of perfection in art because it's too pedantic.

RUBINSTEIN: No, this is a misquote. I mean the word "perfection" is something impossible in art because it means death. Really a good concert, in my conception, which I might have given or might give, is just a little window of hope for something better to come. That is the real expression of feeling happy, you know. I would like to tell the public that really my dream, my daydream, is to be able to say to the audience after a good performance of a work: "Would you have the patience to let me play it once more? I will do it much better, I hope, now."

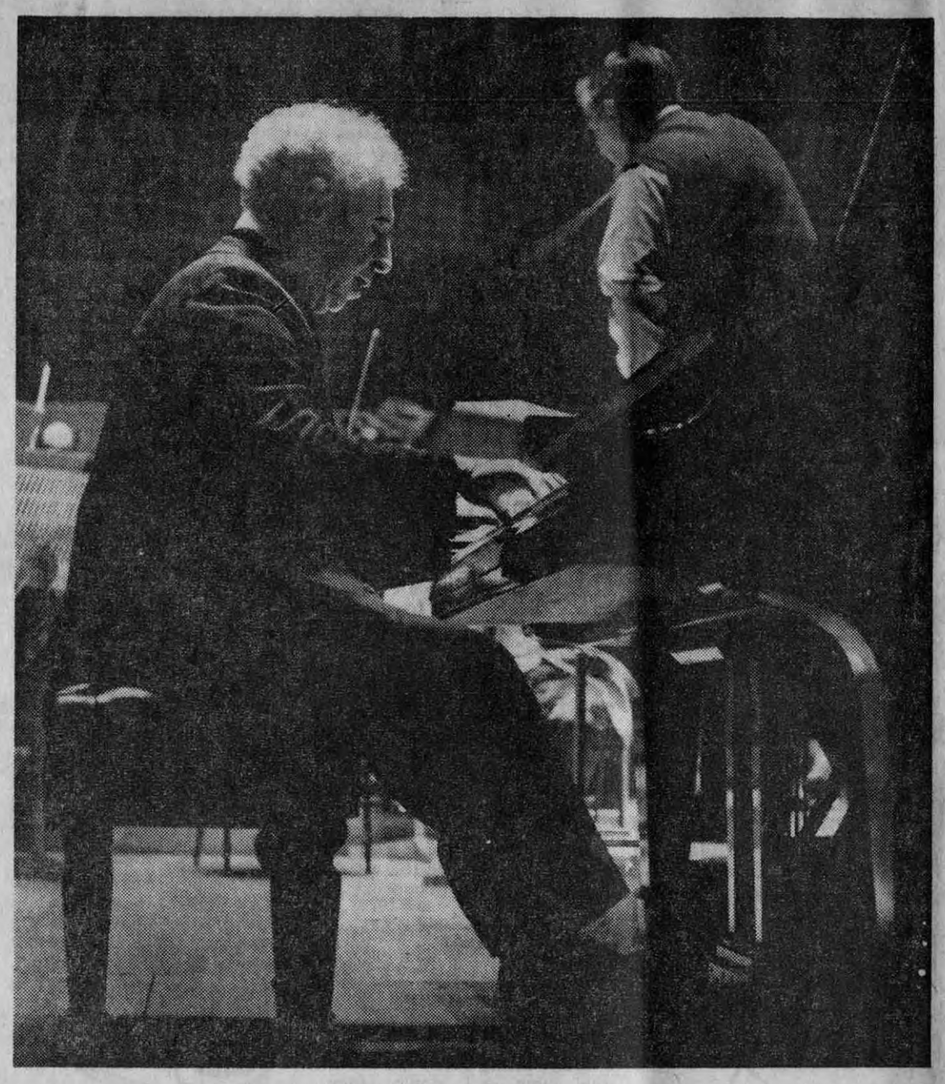
BRANDON: How do you feel about playing on television?

RUBINSTEIN: A microphone always makes me terribly shy because I'm suddenly conscious of those millions of people who might have listened in while they play bridge or something like that, or just people who dislike what I'm playing. You see, with a live audience I have my ways. I try to draw them in; it is an action of some sort of interior power. I have no will over the mike.

But television again—there's *something* personal to it.

BRANDON: You are now talking about playing or about talking on television?

RUBINSTEIN: Talking, talking. Oh, playing—terrible, no, no, no; this I loathe. I have to have a feeling of intimacy. Some English people prefer to be on the stage rather than in the audience. I remember once, in Edinburgh years ago, I saw all the tickets for seats on the stage at one of my recitals being sold. I was terribly flattered. I said, "Oh, this is wonderful! For once I will have a packed hall." Not at all. The whole right side of the audience was empty, but the stage was full. They like to watch, to be right there.



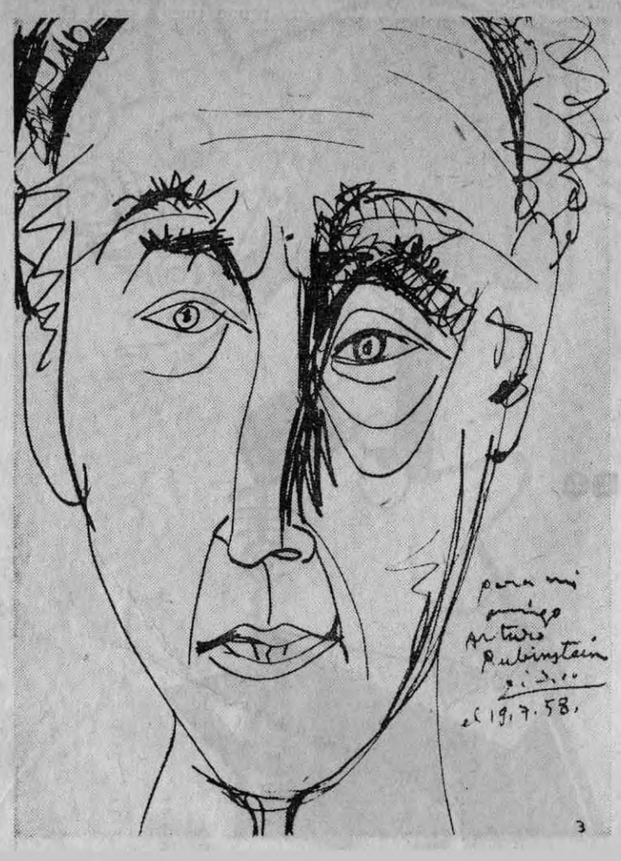
BRANDON: Do you mind people watching over your shoulder—how you play?

RUBINSTEIN: In a private house, I don't like it. Therefore, I have always the pianos in strategic positions, in order not to have anybody behind me. But in a concert I don't mind it. I like people on the stage because they give me that feeling of intimacy, they are with me. And funnily enough, they are more on my side than the audience in the hall; those are somehow my enemies; I have to fight them and they want to be convinced.

Did I tell you what happened to me once in Cincinnati? It was terribly funny. A theatre owner for once risked having a recital by me in his hall, which had never been done before. It was sold out and he put people on the stage (which I allowed). But he didn't know about the proceedings. He foolishly let the curtain down, you see. Well, the moment of the concert came, the curtain went up and suddenly one public faced another public, so they gave them an ovation. And the public on the stage became offended, they didn't like it . . . So they started to applaud furiously back and there was a sort of fight of irony and sarcasm going on between the two until I came out.

BRANDON: Do you find a difference between audiences in different countries?

RUBINSTEIN: I think it all depends on ourselves. It's our work to mould the audience into one audience everywhere. We make an audience. We hear very much from people who say: Oh! aren't the Stockholm audiences cold? They might be cold—but they might be the warmest in the world. I've seen the Swedish audience get up and shrick after certain things they liked especially well. It is very strange for them certainly, but it shows they can do it. I've seen, on the other hand, the so-called "hot"—I mean absolutely passionate — audiences, say in Madrid or Naples . . . well, they can be very cold.



A changed London

London, since the war, has changed completely. Londoners were always very conscious of their neighbours . . . you mustn't show your feelings. Now they behave quite wildly, they do, really, they let go . . . it's completely different. Since they don't change into evening dress they feel more comfortable in tweeds for applauding.

BRANDON: Picasso has done some drawings of you. Did he do them in your presence?

RUBINSTEIN: Oh, yes, indeed. I, like many others—and especially the English—I took passionately, *passionately*, to the Diaghilev ballet eruption. Being a musician I jumped right into the centre of things. Diaghilev came into Spain during the first war . . . I got the King of Spain to give the ballet some financial support, and myself gave two concerts to pay their hotel bills. Picasso, too, was then very much taken by Diaghilev . . . and we became close, close friends. He married a Russian dancer out of Diaghilev's ballet, who was also a friend of mine.

BRANDON: How did Picasso react to music?

RUBINSTEIN: He's not very musical, though he adores Spanish music because he is tremendously patriotic. And he reacted to it then as he did to bullfights. He is tremendously Spanish. But he can live only in France.

But I gave up my friendship with Picasso, thinking that he had become so terribly great, such a personality, that I didn't want to annoy him. You know, he was not enough interested in music. Then we met suddenly about three years ago at the Cannes movie festival. For me it was a most astonishing fact . . . I saw him in a dinner jacket. He said: "This dinner jacket's the one you recommended me to get in London at your tailor's. Till now I never had it on." Well, we became better friends than ever; we were very touched to see each other.

The next day I went and I told him casually that a drawing he had done of me all those years before, in Spain, had been stolen by the Germans during the last war. He said: "Well, I never do those things any more, but if you have time come down and I'll make another drawing of you." I did come down, as you can well imagine. I spent three days with him. We spent two days eating bouillabaisse and going to San Tropez, enjoying ourselves . . . he gave me the most marvellous food. But then suddenly, just as I had to leave, he said: "Ah, I will send those people away; let's go into the dining room." And he put his foot on the dining table, opened a huge sketch book and started to draw.

Picasso at work

He started to make a drawing, and then he looked at it and turned the page. And he said, "That's no good, it didn't come off." So he started another one and went on and on and on. . . . After about an hour, I said, "Look here, I hate to disturb you so much." He said, "Shh . . . sit still, sit still, don't pay any attention." He made twenty-four drawings. They were all different, completely different . . . very extraordinary.

He said, "Choose." It was terribly difficult for me—I loved them all. At one moment he even said "Do you want them all? I give them to you." I said, "Ah—impossible! That would cost me a fortune." Then he gave me four as a present. I wanted to pay but he wouldn't let me. They are all different . . . four different persons, really, if you look at them.

BRANDON: You said earlier there was a period when you were very much interested in society and royalty.

RUBINSTEIN: I *was not* interested in royalty. I *know* all about royalty because they were the concert managers of my young years. I lived in Germany when there were seventy . . . how many dukedoms, archdukedoms . . . and then there were Kings of Saxony, Kings of Bavaria. . . . I was introduced to some of them as a child prodigy.

And I was told: "The dowager Grand Duchess of Mecklenburg is very important because her son married the Queen of Holland, and if you play there she will give you an introduction to the Queen of Holland." Then, "The sister of the Queen of Holland married the King of Denmark." "Oh, very important, yes . . . but who is the King of Denmark?" "Well, he is the nephew of Queen Alexandra of England and of the Empress of Russia." You understand? I had my head full of those details, just as I know now who is the manager of Columbia Recordings, you know, or the manager of the London Symphony.

BRANDON: Did the Prince of Wales help you?

RUBINSTEIN: We became very friendly. A mutual friend gave a little dinner party . . . we were six . . . he was at her right, I was at her left, and being an absolutely unmusical man it amused him to be amused by me. Then we went to the Embassy Club to dance and from then on he started inviting me for tiny dinners, sometimes for four. . . .

Once, about three in the morning, he said to me "Look here, I hear you are good on the piano, would you play something for me? Let's go over to my place." St. James's Palace, of course. In the living-room he laughingly told me, "My mother, Queen Mary, arranged this room and she put the piano in there, she thought it would go very well in that corner." Well, the piano was a ridiculous piano from Queen Victoria's time. I was in despair. I said, "Well, I will do my best." And I tried to play something for an unmusical person . . . what could I? . . . I started to play the "Marche Militaire" of Schubert. I knew he would enjoy that, but the minute I reached the fortissimo I broke the whole piano to pieces. He laughed himself into tears.

Marriage

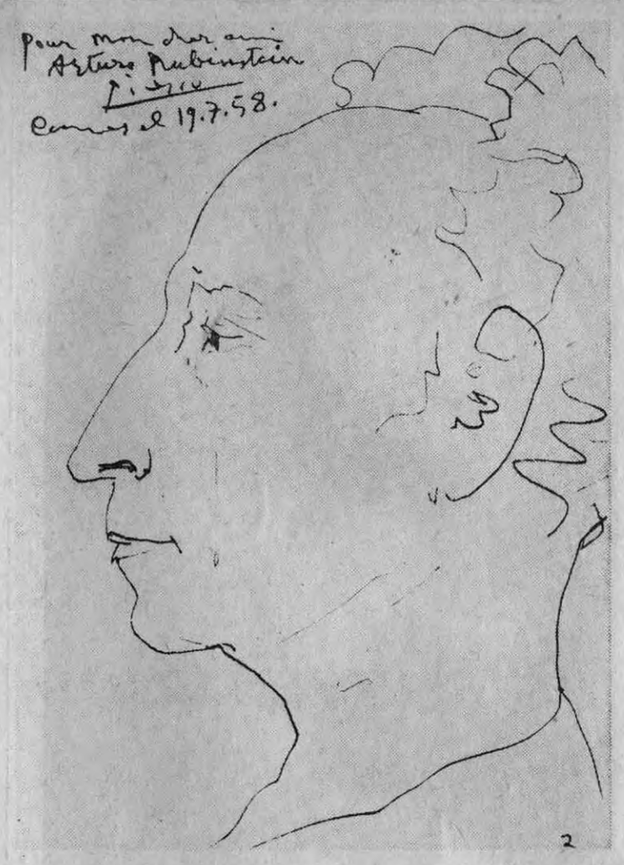
A few weeks later he invited me again to dinner and there was suddenly a Boesendorfer grand piano, and I was very flattered. I thought I had made him feel more musical and that he had spent money on a really beautiful piano. But later I discovered that he only rented it for that night . . . and sent it right back. I have met him since and he always asks me: "Have you broken any more pianos?"

BRANDON: To come back to your own career, there came another crucial transition in your life later on which made you the great, serious pianist you are now. . . .

RUBINSTEIN: This was my marriage. Having heard some great artists who lacked taste and who acted too much like showmen—I don't want to quote their names—they gave me a feeling of disrespect for the stature of a pianist. So I thought "Après moi le déluge." Who cares? I get away with my ways. . . .

America and Madrid and Poland and Russia, and Italy . . . well, if England didn't quite take to me, *tant pis*.

But, when I married I suddenly felt responsible, I suddenly felt guilty, I suddenly felt a nasty feeling of my children being approached by some people after my death and being told, "Your father had so much talent but he really never quite did it, he didn't work well enough." It did something to me and I suddenly took fire, I suddenly took pleasure in going into the piano world wholeheartedly, I learned to learn; I learned to study . . . which I hadn't done before.



I always cheated my masters. In Berlin I remember when I was ten or twelve I closed the door with the key and I practised with the left hand some silly little passage, but I had some chocolate or some cherries in the other —and read a prohibited novel by Zola or by Dostoievsky at the same time. You see? It was very bad. But I was so terribly interested in so many other things, you see, in languages, in culture, in history, even in philosophy. I was terribly interested in living—too much maybe.

Many of my colleagues and other artists are so frightfully concentrated that they never take any trouble to know anything else. And some of them never read a book. And I travelled . . . instead of going to a piano I went to a museum, or to see the curiosities of the city. I never missed anything.

It may have enriched my imagination, I don't know. But this change in me is certainly due to my marriage. It made a very big change . . . happily.

BRANDON: Was it your own inner reaction, or was it something your wife said to you?

RUBINSTEIN: Oh, no, no, no. It was simply the feeling of responsibility. You see, I'm a Jew. Jews, I think, have an approach to marriage that goes a little bit deeper than Hollywood actors. Therefore I waited a long, long time. But when I did marry I married with conviction. I thought it would be for the best, and I wanted children. I owe my family the best I can give them of myself.

[CONCLUDED]