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The Listener

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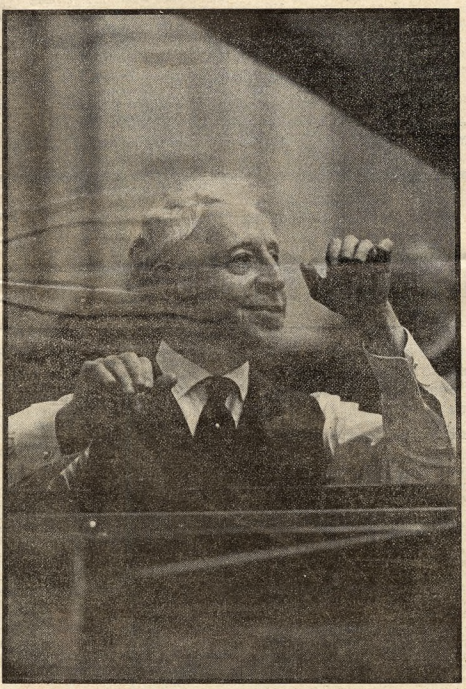


Arthur Rubinstein at 90

Tony Greig: idol of the Indians

Broadcasting and the Arts

Rubinstein reminisces / Derek Parker on radio drama / Gavin Millar on Mel Brooks / Lynda Morris on Stanley Spencer / Keith Kyle on Hubert Humphrey / John Dunn on John Locke's letters

Arthur Rubinstein at 90: 'I am a piece of music'

These are extracts from a conversation, broadcast on Radio 4, between Arthur Rubinstein and John Amis on the occasion of the pianist's 90th birthday.

JOHN AMIS: *Have you ever felt that you wanted to give up music? Could you have done another job?*

ARTHUR RUBINSTEIN: No. Impossible. There are jobs which I might have done not too badly. I had a passion for philology; I still have. I love words; I love to find out why they were built, where they came from. But music is something very

Music

strange. People think it is something I loved or I had a passion for, but it was simply living with me. When they ask me—what else do you love besides music? I say—I don't love music; I am a piece of music. I was born with it. Music is to me exactly what another sense is. A sixth sense, in a way.

I would like to ask you about some composers that you might have heard play the piano. For example, I have always been very curious to know how Saint-Saens played.

Did you ever hear him?

Yes. He played for me the four scherzos of Chopin and he allowed me to visit him, when I was quite young, 17 years old. He received me very charmingly, in spite of being called a very rude man. He was famous for being rather rude in general, like Brahms. The first thing he told me was that the best work of Chopin is the four scherzos; he sat down at the piano and played it, and played it technically perfectly, a little bit too quickly for my taste. Then I heard him again when he gave a public concert in a small hall in Paris. He played two pianos with the very great French pianist of that time, Francis Planté—Planté is forgotten now, but he was then considered the tops.

He was retired at the time; he was about 85. Saint-Saens was more or less the same age. And they played Saint-Saens compositions, and the Mozart Sonata for Two Pianos but mainly Saint-Saens. And it was a very funny thing because while they were playing in front of the audience, they were talking to each other. It was a time, as you know, when the public was able to say, after a nice phrase, right in the middle of a movement of a sonata: '*Oh, charmant, c'est délicieux, comme c'est joli, bravo* . . .' Well, the two old men while playing were all the time complimenting each other loudly. When one played the variations very nicely, the other would say '*Oh, très bien alors!*' It was wonderful; like in a private house. And the concerts were a little bit more private than now; it was not so frightfully stiff and official as now.

People are supposed to behave like in a church, which is not quite natural, I think. It doesn't flatter nor serve music very well. I think we need encouragement.

Did you hear Ravel play the piano?

Ah, Ravel was a friend of mine. He was very nice to me from the beginning. I owe him really, in parts, my contract with Mr Astruc when I came to Paris for the first time.

But you don't say how Ravel played the piano.

Well, I was kind to him by not saying it!

I've heard some people say he was very good and some people say he was very, very bad.

I would say that he didn't really know how to play the piano.

Did you know Enesco well?

Very well. I was terribly fond of him. He was not only a great violinist, a great musician and a wonderful pianist, but he was one of the noblest hearts I have ever known.

Shall I give you a good anecdote about Enesco? Enesco became famous in Paris. He had nothing but admirers in Paris. One day, a Rumanian gentleman arrived at his apartment, a man who had helped him when he was a youngster, with some money. And he came and said: 'Georges, I hope you remember me.' 'Of course,' says Georges. 'Ah yes, you were so nice to me I never can thank you enough, and it was so, so generous.' 'Well, I'm glad you remember it, dear Georges. I came here to ask you a favour now. I have a son who plays the violin with lots of talent and I want you to give him lessons.'

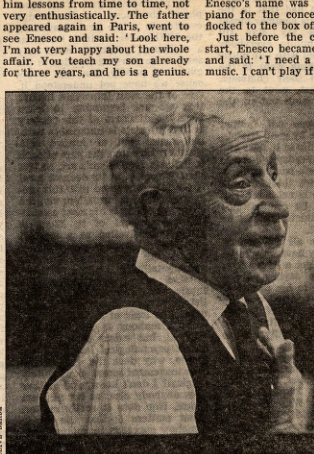
That was difficult for Enesco, who was busy conducting, writing music, playing the violin on tour —a very occupied man. But he couldn't refuse. 'Well, I am very busy,' he started to say. 'Remember what I did for you, my dear, you know you must not forget.'

Well, he forced him to give lessons to his son who evidently, I tell you in secret, had no talent at all, was just playing. That went on for three full years. He had to give him lessons from time to time, not very enthusiastically. The father appeared again in Paris, went to see Enesco and said: 'Look here, I'm not very happy about the whole affair. You teach my son already for three years, and he is a genius. His aunt said that nobody plays better the violin than he does. He is absolutely fantastic and you don't give him a chance to give a concert. What's the matter with you?' 'Well, he is not quite ready yet.' 'What do you mean? A cousin heard him the other day and they screamed with enthusiasm. You must give him a concert. Give him a chance.' 'Well, all right,' said Enesco.

He took the Salle Gaveau in Paris for a recital of this violinist, and poor Enesco somehow had to prepare that poor fellow to play decently at that concert. Well, of course, nobody bought a ticket. Nobody had the slightest idea about the man; nothing at all happened.

The father was in Paris, so he went to see Enesco and said: 'You remember, Georges, what I did for you?' And Georges dutifully remembered—yes, he did. 'You know no tickets are sold for my son's début? There is one thing which would save the situation—if you accompany him at the concert.' That was the biggest blow to Enesco. 'No, I never do that.' He forced him to accept to do it, and, of course, right away when Enesco's name was printed at the piano for the concert, the people flocked to the box office.

Just before the concert had to start, Enesco became very nervous and said: 'I need a turner for my music. I can't play if I have nobody



CLIVE BARDA

Rubinstein: 'I think we need encouragement'

to turn the pages.' Well, they looked around. 'We have nobody here.' So Enesco said: 'I will not go on the stage if you can't find anybody. It is out of the question. I cannot play the music like that.' 'Oh,' one man said, 'I think Cortot is in the audience; Alfred Cortot, he might know somebody.' He dashed to see Cortot, who was sitting there and said: 'Enesco is in a terrible situation; he has nobody to turn his pages; what can one do?' And Cortot looked around him and said: 'My old friend Georges? I will go myself and turn the pages for him, why not? Nothing to me at all.' He did turn the pages. The concert passed. Well, I can't tell you that it was a success. It was just nothing. They listened respectfully, but without any sign of enthusiasm.

But a critic, the next day, wrote in the paper, I think it was *Le Figaro*: 'A strange concert took place last night at the Salle Gaveau. A man whom we adore when he plays the violin sat down at the piano and played the piano. Another man whom we adore when he plays the piano turned the pages. But the man who should have turned the pages played the violin.'

Do you think that the young pianists today have an easier time with all these competitions, scholarships and things?

Of course. Not only that, but we poor fellows of old, we were always terrified if we weren't rich. And if our parents weren't exactly rich, we were terrified of the summer, of the long summer when there was a frightful fear of starving. Poor Chopin had that in the highest degree. The summer meant that from, let's say May till October, pupils, public, everybody who was concerned with our music or our music-making went to the country, went to their châteaux, went to the coast, went to the mountains; they were out of the cities.

And if we were not invited to a country place by good friends, we were going to die of hunger and simply perish. Nowadays, there is a festival the whole summer long, everywhere. I can't think of any place where there is not a festival. There are about 50 competitions for pianists, violinists, cellists or whatever you want.

They now have all the chance in the world. They have only to be mediocre good to get a living. You know the famous saying of the pianist who came to his professor triumphantly and said: 'I won the first prize in the competition in such and such a city in Italy.' The professor said a little sadly: 'Were there others that bad?'

I am told that once you were a judge in a piano competition, and you gave each pianist, out of 20 marks, either 0 or 20. And when they said to you: 'Why have you done that?' you said: 'Well, they can either play the piano or they can't.'

Is it true?

Absolutely.

Arthur Peacock

The art of Elgar

The heavy emphasis on the classics in Radio 3's output sometimes seems to represent musical creativity as something that took place in the mythical past, like the biblical flood. Apologists for modern music reinforced this impression by demanding a complete break with the past—specifically, the 19th century—as though man had suddenly become a completely new creature with unprecedented needs and capabilities. There is certainly an element of truth in this outlook, but it has been vastly exaggerated; and the continuity between the present century and its predecessors is far greater than we often imagine. There are no neat lines to be drawn across the stream of history. I think we shall achieve a deeper insight into the greatest music of the past if we see it as reaching forwards into a future which still lies ahead of us. (I am listening to the *Heiliger Dankgesang* of Beethoven's late A minor quartet as I write this.) To complete the paradox, the supposedly progressive music of our own time can often be the embodiment of blinkered conservatism.

To represent Elgar's First Symphony (broadcast on Wednesday evening in a live performance by the NPO under Andrew Davis) as a visionary, prophetic work may seem to be carrying paradox to the extent of parody. But that is because we have not understood it. One of the most important lessons that we are beginning to learn from the disasters of this century is that progress is impossible without some kind of inward self-transformation on the part of each individual. Now Elgar's art, no less than Wagner's, at its deepest level is entirely concerned with this process of self-transformation; and the First Symphony is his most concentrated treatment of it. Elgar is probably unrivalled as a musical pearl-diver, grasping some elusive, shimmering fragment of a dream and crystallising it into a precisely notated score. Sometimes his music quite inaccessible to many listeners, even musically expert ones. The logic of a work like the First Symphony is not primarily musical, but exists on this very subtle psychological level. For example, why does the end of the slow movement sound so absolutely magical? I don't know, and neither does anybody else, as far as I am aware. Nor does it really matter. What matters is that the music somehow succeeds in communicating the hitherto incommunicable; and that is surely a much more tangible sign of progress than the sort of things that musicologists get so excited about—a bit of randomness, or a few spiced-up harmonies. But because it is not actually visible on the printed page, it slips by without comment.

Again, take the last movement. The broad melody that suddenly appears in the middle of the movement is far more than just a beautiful tune; in its circularity (it always leads back into itself, like the alchemical serpent that swallows its own tail), and in the apparently miraculous way in which it arises from a simple transformation of some very unpromising material, it is a perfect musical equivalent of the mandalas often created or used by contemplatives. Since the mandala represents psychic wholeness, this passage is the spiritual core of the symphony. (The only serious flaw in an otherwise fine performance occurred here: the melody was taken so fast that its timeless quality—which, paradoxically, takes time to make itself felt—was altogether lost.) Later, near the end of the movement, another very simple thematic transformation conveys both the spirit and the actual physical sensations of what has been called 'magic flight', the ecstatic sense of release from the limitations of bodily existence. This is more than a great musical work; it is a spiritual classic—once we learn to read its inner meaning.

The same theme of spiritual growth was illustrated again, albeit mirror-fashion, in the 15th Symphony of Shostakovich (broadcast on Saturday evening in a live performance by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, again conducted by Andrew Davis). The last of Shostakovich's symphonies—it is barely five years old—it is, perhaps, also his most pessimistic; the satire of the first movement is drained of its venom, while the slow movement comes near to a state of complete resignation and hopelessness. In the middle of all this despair, where does Shostakovich turn? To the music-dramas of Wagner, with their theme of individual self-transformation. To find something like this happening in the work of a modern Russian symphonist is startling, and perhaps more significant than we can yet realise. Moreover, there could scarcely be a more apposite illustration of the thesis—which I have advanced before in these columns—that in a period when artistic advance seems blocked, a temporary return to a previous age of progress may be the most progressive course available to us. Opera, for example, was created by men who saw themselves as reviving the ancient Greek drama, with its glorification of the divine in man; and this act of apparent conservatism led ultimately to Wagner. In invoking the spirit of Wagner in our own time, Shostakovich may well have been choosing the only way open to him of pointing the way forward to even greater achievements in the future.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I approached Sunday afternoon's broadcast of *Die Meistersinger* (in Solti's recording). The result was to confirm my view that Wagner's influence on the course of musical history would have been a great deal healthier if his followers had modelled their works on *Die Meistersinger* instead of *Tristan*. Similarly, Beethoven's devotees overemphasised the Fifth Symphony at the expense of the far greater Seventh. To bind energy is a higher function than to unloose it, even though simple people are always more impressed by the latter, until they begin to feel the tangible benefits of the former. Wagner himself recognised *Die Meistersinger* as his greatest achievement, and the work itself explains why. In order to win his bride (symbolising the heart's desire, in a spiritual sense), the impassioned young rebel, Walther, has to discipline his wild song, to bring it within the ordered realm of Art. In this work, Wagner *did* discipline his song, and that is why we feel a sense of inward growth while listening to it. *Tristan* and *The Ring* operate at a deeper psychological level, but fail to lead to any conclusion that a sane person could regard as desirable—by no stretch of the imagination, for example, can the downfall of Valhalla by the waters of the Rhine be held to symbolise a higher level of consciousness. It may be a necessary stage in the development of that higher consciousness, but that is not how Wagner presents it. The secret of his power as an artist was that he always saw art as having an intimate relationship with life—indeed, as being a tool for living with. If we could recover that vision now, what could we not achieve?

Television

Peter Buckman

Yielding to temptation

There aren't many drama series about contemporary life on television: that, I am sure, is one reason why *Another Bouquet* (London Weekend) pulls in such vast viewing figures. Our own foibles are usually the subject of comedy (why, incidentally, shouldn't we have a historical comedy series?) or preserved in the amber sagas like *Coronation Street* (Granada), which, in their never-ending flow, grind everything to sand. But there is nothing funny about the situations in Andrea Newman's sequel to her very successful *Bouquet of*