Artur Rubinstein

Elder Statesman Of The Keyboard Termed 'World Citizen' To Millions

By EARL WOLSLAGEL

Elder statesman of the keyboard and "world citizen" to millions of appreciative listeners, pianist Artur Rubinstein today occupies one of those niches reserved only for the greatest in their fields.

Performing publicly since he was 11 years of age, the 83-year-old Rubinstein (he'll be 84 later this month following his recital at Duke on Jan 11) has become known not only for his wizardry at the piano but for his love of humanity, his capacity for understanding his fellow man, and his on-going vitality and zest for living.

New York Times critic-at-large Howard Taubman once described Rubinstein's artistry as that of "the romantic with the firm underpinning of rationalism." He called Rubinstein the "singer of the intimate songs of Chopin and the proclaimer of the thunders of Beethoven. When you hear him play, you sense that you are indeed in the presence of a rich, integrated personality!"

Talking to him, listening to his anecdotes of a life full of music, people and places, then hearing him in recital brings one to the immediate realization that here is the complete, civilized human being — a much too infrequent example of man in a world which today is replete with violence and neuroticism.

We are thankful for a man like Artur Rubinstein! He is living proof that there still exists a culture which lifts one above the banalities of everyday existence!

Rubinstein was born in Lodz, Poland, on Jan. 28, 1889, the seventh and youngest of a family with little or no musical background. True, the womenfolk in the close-knit family circle — his sisters and aunts — all took piano lessons in order to be able to play for dancing or to accompany for singing, Rubinstein says. But his parents knew nothing of talent, or how it showed.

As a lad of three or four years, it is said, Rubinstein watched his sisters' piano lessons. He would "shriek and yell" if they tried to remove him from the room. Even at that tender age, he tried to imitate them, placing the fingers of both his hands on the piano and instead of dipping or banging the keys as most children do, he somehow would find the notes, one by one.

Picking them out, he soon could play their pieces with them. His preciousness at the keyboard soon became the talk of the town.

"It took a sympathetic uncle's [illegible]r, to the famous Hungarian violinist, Joseph Joachim, to open the door to a musical career for the young Rubinstein.

Joachim's reply to the family, Rubinstein recalls, was "noble, and in keeping" with the character of the man then the most revered musician in the world. It suggested that the boy "not be taught like a little monkey to imitate," but instead to listen to "all kinds of good music" as he grew up.

He was kind enough, also, to say that if the parents were able to bring young Artur to Berlin, where he was teaching, that he would be happy to see for himself what talent there was!

The rest is largely history.

After having performed in a charity concert, in Warsaw at the age of five and having studied there for some time with Prof. Rozycki, young Rubinstein was finally presented to Joachim in Berlin during a sister's visit to that city to buy her trousseau.

The artist now recalls that he played "a little Mendelssohn piece and a Mozart rondo" for Joachim, who, it seems had made his mother and sister leave the room "because the maestro was afraid they had taught me some tricks."

Rubinstein still remembers Joachim singing a melody from Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" and asking him if I would repeat it on the piano. "I played the melody with one finger," he said, and "Joachim was pleased." Then the teacher asked: "Can you make an accompaniment to the melody, now?"

"I don't recall what I did, but somehow an accompaniment came out all right and Joachim believed in me ever after!" he laughed.

Joachim was indeed deeply impressed — so much so that he sent young Rubinstein to study piano technique with Heinrich Barth, a pupil of Von Bulow, Karl Tausig and Franz Liszt. Joachim assumed personal responsibility for Artur's musical future, and arranged also for him to have instruction in composition and harmony with a composer-conductor Max Bruch and the noted pedagogue Robert Kahn.

At 11, Rubinstein made his formal debut in Berlin, his musical godfather, Joachim, conducting the orchestra in Mozart's A major piano concert (K.488). By the time he was 15, Rubinstein's talents were known throughout most of Germany and Poland. He had even performed once in Warsaw with orchestra under the baton of Emil Mlynarski, whose daughter — Aniela, at that time yet unborn — was later to become Rubinstein's bride.

But the youth was considered lazy. With the hand of the natural pianist — broad palms, spatulate fingers, little fingers about as long as the middle ones and a span that easily takes in a twelfth, from C to C-octave above — he had found he didn't have to work too hard.

He memorized with facility — almost instantly — and practiced little. When he was to give a recital, he took quick glances at the music, but never bothered to sit long hours at the keyboard minutely working out the difficult passages.

"I found out during those early years that there were other things in life that were more enjoyable and more important than practicing . . . good food, good cigars, good wines, women!" he once told an interviewer.

When he played in Spain, Italy and France — the "Latin countries" — they loved him because of his "temperament." Then when he performed in Russia, there was no trouble because Anton Rubinstein (no relation) had conditioned audiences there to wrong notes, he said.

"But when I played in England and America, audiences felt that because they had paid good money to hear me they were entitled to hear ALL the notes, and since in those days I really was dropping maybe 30 per cent of the notes in my playing, I guess they were being cheated," he smiled.

Such a brash young artist could have cared less in "those unperturbed years," as he described them in retrospect. "It's hell with the German pianist and their exact technique. Temperament, that's what counts!" He admits he was terribly spoiled then.

"But," he recalls, "as I have never played in Germany since 1914, I at least have escaped their criticism," he told his interviewer.

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