At 91, Rubinstein's still master romantic

By Arthur W. Hepner
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For the better part of seven decades Arthur Rubinstein has brought cheering audiences to their feet as he did in Symphony Hall on Saturday night. Appearing in the Boston University Celebrity Series, the nonagenarian pianist gave a lesson in the art of performing romantic music to several younger generations.

Before a sold-out house with an overflow crowd on the stage, he presented a traditional program supremely cut to the strength of the Rubinstein style. With flair and panache he swept through the Beethoven Waldstein Sonata, Schumann's Carnaval, the Valses nobles et sentimentales by Maurice Ravel, and Four Etudes and the C-sharp minor Scherzo, opus 39, of Chopin. The grand, aristocratic manner was abundantly evident.

What dominated the occasion, though, was the remarkable authority and command in the playing of an artist of Rubinstein's age. Into his 91st year there seems to be no diminution of his powers of romantic interpretation or his ability to bend the piano to his will. And so the Schumann Carnaval received an extraordinary elegance and poetic cast as he drew from the instrument a vivid array of tonal colors, wide range of dynamic changes, and lovely lyric line. The episode ASCH had particular beauty, and one seldom hears the kind of perfection which marked the entire presentation of the Carnaval. It is to be savored as an epitome of the romantic mood.

The Waldstein fared less well. Except for the brief adagio interlude which separates the opening allegro from the closing rondo, the playing was forced and harsh. Uneven and occasionally exaggerated tempos produced a jumpy rendition. The adagio, on the other hand, was evenly paced and deeply moving.

Nor did Rubinstein make the most of Ravel's undulating waltzes. He gave them a clean, articulate performance but the subtle rhythmic excitement in the music was conspicious by its absence. In the Chopin he was again uneven. Long master of Chopin's music, as he was indeed in the Scherzo, which was a brilliant tour de force, his precision deserted him in the Etudes. It would have been miraculous if it hadn't. Rubinstein's program would test the mettle of any pianist, and how many would even dare attempt it beyond the age of 70?

Perhaps the evening was best summarized by the young piano student in the row behind me. "I don't play Mozart," I overheard her informing her companion. "There's nothing to interpret." Rubinstein rarely programs Mozart, or Bach, I suspect, because the classical idiom demands much too rigorous an interpretation. Nevertheless, he put on a stunning show.