The New York Times Book Review
OCTOBER 16, 1949
Copyright, 1949, by The New York Times Company.
SECTION 7

CELEBRATING THE GENIUS OF CHOPIN

Four Books Appraise a Master Musician One Hundred Years After His Death

One hundred years ago tomorrow Frédéric François Chopin died at the age of 39 in Paris. His genius lives in his music. The romantic legend of his life lives on in books. His centennial year has brought forth a variety of fresh studies, four of which are reviewed in these pages.

NOTES ON CHOPIN. By Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman. 126 pp. New York: The Philosophical Library. $3.75.

By ARTUR RUBINSTEIN

ANDRE GIDE is considered one of the greatest writers of our time and by many is thought of as the most important of French literary figures. His artistic integrity, his daring philosophy, impeccable style and perfection of form have won him readers all over the world; his books are translated into many languages and, in 1947, he received the Nobel Prize. Among his works, the "Nourritures Terrestres," the great novel "Les Faux Monnayeurs," the play "Le Roi Candaule" and many others are accepted as classics, and his critical essay on Dostoevsky is regarded as one of the most important contributions to the study of the great Russian novelist.

Mr. Gide's "Notes on Chopin" held a fascinating promise. The distinguished author of "Dostoevsky," I thought, might give us some substantial revelation of the great composer's complex personality, of the varied and subtle Polish and French influences which played on his genius and on his character. Above all, there was the promise of the great novelist's psychological interpretation of Chopin's famous love affair with George Sand, a topic of controversial nature and of great interest to all his biographers. Unfortunately, the book fulfills none of this promise.

A strange volume, this, even in its presentation. The text contains, as a preface, a short dedication to the memory of the director of the Monte Cassino monastery, because of this church dignitary's predilection for Chopin's music. The "Notes on Chopin" proper are only thirty-eight pages of reading matter. These are followed by "Fragments from Journal," short sketches reprinted from previous publications, and by some "Unpublished Pages and Miscellanea." At the end of the volume is a letter from Edouard Ganche (editor of Chopin's works for the Oxford University Press) to Mr. Gide, expressing in substance the extreme satisfaction he felt after reading "Notes on Chopin."

JUST what does one find in these loosely tied fragments? Nothing about Chopin the man, about Chopin the artist, Chopin the lover. Instead Mr. Gide treats us in parts of his book to a long and pretentious music lesson, apparently written by a frustrated and embittered amateur pianist who has tried in vain to dominate the difficult keyboard for the last sixty years.

Frederic Francois Chopin, 1848.

In some places his book reads like those tiresome program notes with their usual musical illustrations, which try to explore every detail of a composition and thus disturb the listener in his enjoyment of the music. But chiefly, and all through the book, Mr. Gide indulges in an orgy of invective against concert virtuosi and other performers of Chopin's music. He uses the term "virtuoso" ("virtuous" in Italian, but strangely applied to pianists) with insistent wrath, denying concert performers, without exception, any capacity for understanding the inner meaning of the Polish master's works. In his opinion they strive for nothing but "effect," which they usually obtain by betraying the intentions of the composer.

The futility of these assertions is easily shown by the fact that Chopin himself had often expressed his satisfaction with the performances of his works by such "virtuosi" as Liszt and Clara Schumann, and that for 100 years countless concert pianists have succeeded in turning Chopin into the universally best known and beloved composer; I cannot imagine any public being fooled for long with cheap "effects."

TO be sure, one finds here and there in Mr. Gide's book a few sentences of fine sensibility, with a poet's iridescent light on them, but they soon get lost in a maze of dilettante chatter about musical matters of little consequence. Here are a few examples:

"What I love him [Chopin] for is that through his sadness he attains joy * * * which has nothing of the somewhat hasty and vulgar [!] gaiety of Schumann."

"How charming Alibert [?] was yesterday when he cried out, 'I'd give all of Beethoven's symphonies * * * for a single ballade of Chopin's' [!]"

And here are a few samples of his treatment of the poor virtuosi: "They don't know how to play him [Chopin]. They falsify the very intonation of his voice * * * they play Chopin as if it were Liszt, they do not understand the difference * * * That unbearable assurance of the virtuoso which strips it [the composition] of its allure * * * Someone knowing Chopin only through the too clever virtuosi might take him for a purveyor of show pieces * * * To manage to make of this exquisite offering something chaotic is a tour de force which the virtuoso achieves and which leaves me dumfounded."

MR. GIDE, on the other hand, becomes more and more optimistic about his own pianistic progress. He confides to his "Journal," "Am amazed that I now play Beethoven's sonatas so easily." Or, "Returned to the Barcarolle [of Chopin], which is not so difficult to play more quickly as had thought." Or, "Excellent work of the piano * * * I have at times been able to play the Preludes * * * in a manner to satisfy myself and surprise and delight someone who might have heard me." And here sounds the voice of frustration: "But had he been there and had I known he could hear me, my playing would have turned cold immediately!"

Mr. Gide likes to compare Chopin to the French poet Baudelaire, author of the morbid "Les Fleurs du Mal," holding that "Chopin occupies in the history of music approximately the place of Baudelaire in the history of poetry, both of them having been misunderstood at first and for similar reasons." Nothing can be more wrong. Chopin's genius had been recognized at his earliest age and there is no morbidity to be found in his works.

And here is a coincidence: Mr. Gide, who professes to feel no need to see music in terms of literature or painting, is "irresistibly inclined to liken two preludes of Chopin to the purling of a stream." Looking up a letter of Chopin to his friend Count Grzymila, *(Continued on Page 30)*

Mr. Rubinstein, noted pianist, is one of the well-known interpreters of Chopin.

Celebrating the Genius of Chopin

(Continued from Page 1)

dated Scotland, Oct. 21, 1848, I find the following paragraph:

> Those who know my compositions ask me, "Please play your second 'Sigh' * * * I like your 'Bells' and each remark ends with "It sounds like water." I have never played for an Englishwoman without her saying: "Like water."

Chopin felt a great distaste for descriptive titles given to his compositions, he disliked wordy comments on them, he wanted his music to speak for itself. I am glad he died before the publication of "Notes on Chopin." As for myself, after having read it, I intended at first to write, in retaliation, an essay on how "Hamlet" should be interpreted, with due insults to all the actors who ever performed it. But on second thought, I decided to take up again "Dostoevsky" and "Nourritures Terrestres" and try to rediscover the true André Gide.