March 17, 1973 Financial Times

In Memoriam Rubinstein/Record Review

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Artur Rubinstein was the last of the great concert pianists whose careers began before the turn of the century, and who were, for a few years at least, contemporaries of Brahms, Chaikovsky, Verdi and Debussy. In 1893, when the six-year-old Rubinstein made his debut in Warsaw, Brahms was working on his last piano compositions, Chaikovsky was writing his sixth symphony, and Debussy had just began his *Prélude à l-après-midi d'un faune*. In May 1976 at the Wigmore Hall in London he gave his last public recital. Last December he died, just a month short of his 96th birthday.

During that long and extraordinary career spanning more than three-quarters of a century, Rubinstein made more records (and probably also more public concert appearances) than any other pianist before or since. He is not short of memorials: even the most modest piano record collection will be liberally seasoned with them. A new Rubinstein release from the archive is therefore no more than an amplification of a well-documented tradition; but this one is a special pleasure, since it consists of excerpts, never before released, from the famous series of recitals which Rubinstein gave at Carnegie Hall in 1961 — 10 concerts in 40 days, without repeating a work in any programme.

We may accept the historical fact that Rubinstein was already 75 when he gave these performances; but the playing has the energy and agility of a 25-year-old. The touch is firm, the key-descent incisive, the manner quick and commanding. I remember Rubinstein recitals in London myself from that time, and this record recalls them vividly: the run up the steps to the platform, the jaunty walk to the piano, the customary warming-up period (during which he could sometimes play very badly indeed) but then, unfailingly, later or sooner, the moment at which all loose strands were suddenly joined, and the recital proper began.

In Memoriam Artur Rubinstein: Piano works by Debussy, Prokofiev, Villa-Lobos and Szymanowski, recorded Oct-Dec 1961. RCA RL 42024.

It may seem surprising at first thought that RCA's selection includes no Schumann, no Brahms, no Chopin: but the choice, as a memorial, is in fact particularly apt. Although from 1970 onwards Rubinstein tended to concentrate his energies mainly on a relatively small repertory of Romantic works, it should be remembered that his concert repertory was phenomenally large, and that for many decades he had championed the music of contemporary composers.

Music of the 20th century played a prominent part in the 1961 Carnegie Hall programmes. Here are preserved four Debussy performances, "La Cathédrale engloutie" and "Ondine" from the *Préludes*, with "Poissons d'or" and "Hommage à Rameau" from *Images*, fine-boned readings, classically poised, discreetly but not fussily nuanced; a group of 12 of Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives*, etched with brilliant clarity and good humour; the four Szymanowski, Mazurkas op 50 which the composer dedicated to Rubinstein, done with the deepest sentiment but quite without sentimentality; and for a finale, Villa-Lobos's *Prôle do bébe*, a joyful tour de force. Memorial indeed.