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NPO Gala

Festival Hall

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Every orchestra likes to present its patrons with something out of the ordinary at an expensive charity concert designed to further its own cause. The LSO recently netted a conducting Prime Minister. At last night's concert from the New Philharmonia Orchestra, in aid of its own trust, Mr Heath and other diplomatic celebrities were part of the outsize audience paying their respects to an Emperor: Beethoven's piano concerto in E flat, played by Artur Rubinstein.

Without disrespect to Lorin Maazel or the orchestra, and all were in superb form, it has to be said that the occasion was a personal triumph for Mr Rubinstein. He gets weary of being reminded of the fact that he is an octogenarian-extraordinary. Last night you forgot it altogether. It would be difficult to name anyone half his age who could have played so many right notes, or played them with greater rhythmic buoyancy and freshness of spirit. Everybody must have their own personally cherished Emperors (not forgetting Arrau on this same platform a decade or so ago or Brendel early this year). But Rubinstein, in March, 1972, must surely join them.

The opening bars gave warning of things to come; this imperial authority never wavered throughout the first movement. Descending chromaticism in the left hand, proud octaves in the development, all were done with supremely incisive strength. Like many people, Mr Rubinstein allowed himself a little unspecified relaxation of tempo in second subject territory, but who would grudge him that when it was done with such measured awareness, plus beauty of soft tone.

Crystaline definition of every note within an elegant line were the hallmarks of the Adagio. Mr Rubinstein has never been one to overdo the soulful element in Beethoven's slow movements (such as makes "strong men with whiskers brush away a silent tear" as Vaughan Williams once put it). But all the romantic expectancy in the world was compressed into those uprising pianissimo E flat major chords at the end. The finale was enormously exhilarating, once or twice even more robust than the specified markings. The cooperation of soloist and conductor was never closer than in the gradual waning and sudden resurgence of energy at the end.