Clive Barda

Rubinstein: 'I'm not at all ashamed of repeating that I'm the happiest man I have ever met . . . I have done everything I want, been everywhere, met everyone.'

Practising? I never do any

Artur Rubinstein talks to Bryce Morrison

TEN YEARS AGO I left a recital by Artur Rubinstein feeling instinctively that although the playing had been exceptionally powerful and poetic, this would surely be the last great recital by this incomparable artist, that his reign as one of the supreme pianists of the age was drawing to a close.

I could not, of course, have been more wrong. This summer in London, Rubinstein at 86 proved yet again that the grandeur of his conceptions, their moving simplicity and mature eloquence, remain unimpaired. Speaking to him I tried to discover something of what lies behind his unique success. For once he confessed to being just a little bit tired, but within minutes he was as spry and alert as ever.

RUBINSTEIN: Well, of course there is no formula for success except, perhaps, an unconditional acceptance of life and what it brings. I am not at all ashamed of repeating that I am the happiest man I have ever met, although at my age I have to be philosophical. One day my feet hurt, the next my ears, then comes my stomach. But these are small things; nothing to worry about. This morning I didn't even bother when I was dragged out of the shower dripping all over the floor, because Danny Barenboim was on the phone. He's a special friend as well as a great musician.

Actually, I must confess that I'm feeling particularly happy at the moment. The day before yesterday I played in Madrid and gave what is a rare thing for me, a really good performance. Most concerts are simply experiments from which to learn, but this time I left the stage feeling very elated. But what a fight with the orchestra! I played the Grieg and Mozart D minor concertos and in the Mozart they suddenly became shy and virtually inaudible. You know the heart-breaking theme for the violins at the end of the tutti, one of the most important ideas in the entire concerto? Well, you couldn't even hear them! I begged them on my knees, even offered them extra money to play a little more loudly, but no, they behaved like shy girls at a dance. The Spanish are wonderful people but they have an odd way of suddenly losing their natural ebullience and becoming timid and farouche. You wouldn't have to ask a singer to be a bit more forward; they always love any opportunity to show off! Finally, I got so fed up I simply banged the theme out myself!

MORRISON: Do you still practise a great deal?

R: No, thank god. All that is basically behind me. I never liked practising very much, particularly technique. The only thing I do now is a little five-finger exercise which I work at away from the piano, on the table or on my knee. Look, it will be a little secret between us. Try it before you next play and you will have no problems.

M: Do you ever read reviews of your work?

R: I used to but, you see, they are always so contradictory, especially in London. They all sound so definite, like judges in a court, and yet one says I play too fast, the other too slow. It's a case of point counter point and very amusing. But, generally, they have been very tough on me here. They wouldn't pardon me a single wrong note, and I always play so many. I am a follower of the old school, much given to inaccuracies!

Nowadays, they have perfect techniques but they sound too similar – bleakly percussive and impersonal as if they had been locked away in a cupboard all their lives. They reflect so little of the quality of life and experience. It's awfully depressing.

M: What is the reason for this?

R: I wish I knew. Somehow the *joie de vivre* has vanished from music making – they don't seem to have it in them and everyone is in such a hurry they don't have time to live. *Some* musicians talk as if the only book they had ever read was a telephone book. Who wants to spend time with people who can only talk about agents and contracts and who think in exclusively mechanical terms, as if the composers lived only to provide them with vehicles for their wildest excesses! My greatest friends are invariably artists, writers etc. I knew Cocteau, Picasso, Henry James. . . . I remember how Arnold Bennett always came to talk about his work, also Hemingway and Conrad. I also knew Norman Douglas intimately, though not, I hasten to add, in any improper sense, for I am a great lover of women!

M: You have often spoken of what you call the 'first raters', that small and elite group of pianists who, in each generation, somehow tower above the others, pianists such as yourself, Gilels, Richter, Horowitz, etc. More recently you have expressed deep admiration for Alicia de Larrocha.

R: Yes, this is true, though obviously one can't be dogmatic. Really great artists have a certain largeness and generosity. You can tell it in the sort of sound they make, something instantly recognisable though not at all easy to

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define. Alicia de Larrocha is a wonderful artist who came to play for me when she was five. She chose the Chopin Nocturne in B major, opus 32, No. 1, and she was so small that her aunt had to help with the pedals. I can remember it vividly because just when I was thinking: 'My god! *another* prodigy, *another* gifted child . . .' she suddenly produced the most ravishing and sophisticated inflexion, absolutely spontaneously. Even then she had the instincts of a great pianist. I gave her a gold bracelet which she always wears for luck, and it seems to have worked very well because, at last, she is now recognised throughout the world as a very great pianist.

M: You are not very encouraging about the younger players. Is there anyone who particularly stands out for you?

R: Actually there are several, but I have been most impressed by a young Frenchman called Francois Duchable. He is still only 21, but hearing him play the Brahms Paganini Variations is enough to give me complexes for life. More important, he's a born poet. The outer sections of Chopin's 'octave' étude are stunning, but the thing you remember most of all is the slow central episode where his playing sings incomparably with a perfect sense of line and phrase. I have arranged an American tour for him where, no doubt, they will call him Dutchable and think he comes from Holland! He should have a terrific success though I do hope he doesn't succumb to poor Horowitz's fate of being forced to provide one inhuman circus stunt after another – faster octaves, devastating crescendos, etc. I know how insensitive the public can be to one's simple human needs. I remember once in Paris when Horowitz had nearly killed himself with his amazing 'Carmen' transcription, a man at the front shouted out, *'Un peu de Tosca, maintenant, s'il vous plaît!'*

M: For you, music reflects the vital quality of life itself or it is nothing, something gloriously conveyed in your autobiography. Could you tell me how you came to write that amazing book?

R: It really resulted from continuous pressure by my children. They were more outraged than I by the lies and gossip that constantly appeared about me in the Press, and particularly the American Press, which is so often vulgar and malicious rather than witty. They wanted the truth. Then Knopf the publishers flattered me shamelessly. I used to tell them, 'I am a pianist, not a writer or an intellectual,' but they insisted until finally I broke down. I might tell you that I was also tempted by the money. I couldn't believe that I, a pianist, would actually be paid for writing. Anyhow, once I got started it was easier than I expected. I have very little imagination but I have total powers of recall and can remember even the tiniest details of my life as if they happened yesterday.

I wrote the first part of my book with great facility, but I cried when I came to the death of my first love, my little cousin. I was only a child when that happened and yet it still seems so vivid and painful. But things got more difficult when I got to my departure from Poland and I stopped writing altogether. I remembered what a thoroughly nasty little boy I became soon after I arrived in Berlin. I was wilful and stupid in a way that still embarrasses me to recall.

I was also conscious of my lack of experience as a writer and spent large parts of the day thinking up high falutin language and fine phrases. But when I read what I had written in this style I was nearly sick. I offered to return my publisher's advance but they wouldn't hear of it and became even more pressing and insistent, and so I continued as I had begun, simply telling my story as I would relate it to you now; in a loose, informal and conversational style. Now, much to my astonishment, it's a best seller and my children, to whom I promised all the profits, are doing very nicely. They write saying, 'Daddy, another enormous cheque has just arrived for us'. My four wonderful children are much too shrewd, and sometimes I regret my promise!

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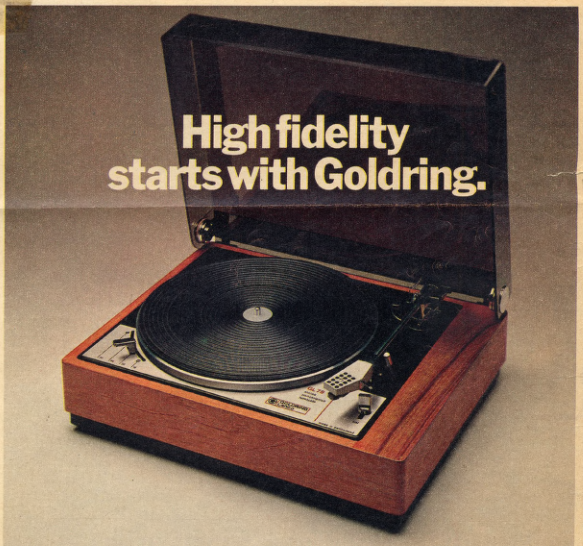

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M: Do you intend to write another volume?

R: I still haven't decided. On the one hand, there are too many people still alive who might be offended by what I write. On the other hand, at my age you become indifferent to public opinion. I have done everything I want, been everywhere, met everyone, so let them think what they like! Again, after the age of 30, which is when my autobiography ends, my life became more settled, my career rapidly advanced, I married, and a lot of the comic and alarming incidents that filled my younger years vanished. I don't think a second volume would be so interesting simply because, ironically, success brings an element of dullness.

M: Your repertoire is still enormous, but your book makes it clear that at one time or another you played works no longer associated with you, such as Beethoven's Hammerklavier sonata, the complete 'Iberia' of Albeniz and the sonatas of Szymanowski.

R: I used to play a lot of music which I later came to feel was unsuitable for public performance. I first learnt the Hammerklavier after hearing it played by a young German pianist (Alfred Hoehn) in the one and only contest I ever entered. His performance was superb, even better than Schnabel's, but although I often included it in my programmes, I gradually decided that the slow movement strains an audience's concentration unmercifully. It is so long and so intimate and should be played only for one's friends. And I feel that the final fugue, which is a brutal challenge to Bach, doesn't crown the work in the way Beethoven intended. In some ways there is a similar problem with the late piano works of Brahms, which convey a lifetime of regrets and unhappiness. It seems almost indecent to expose such painfully private feelings to the public glare of the modern concert hall. This is chamber music no less than the greatest of the Beethoven and Schubert quartets. I am thinking of the former's Rasumovsky Quartet, opus 59, No. 1 in F or the latter's opus 29 in A minor, D.804 [here Rubinstein went over to the piano to illustrate something of the particular quality of these pieces]. All these works are ideal for recording rather than for public performance.

M: There are some areas you seem to have entirely avoided.

R: I haven't played certain works simply because I was too lazy when I was young. I could have learnt them, but I didn't. It's my one regret and I will die with it. You asked me about late Beethoven and to tell you the truth I think there is a great deal of snobbery about this music. Of course it is wonderful but 90 per cent of the audience prefer middle period Beethoven – the Appassionata and Waldstein sonatas rather than opus 110 or 111.

In the romantic field I should very much like to have done Rachmaninov's third concerto, but when I finally got round to it Rachmaninov himself and Horowitz were both performing it in incredible style. It would have been suicide to have competed with them!

M: You are the sort of artist who loves his audience and the whole glamorous ambience of the concert hall.

R: Yes, but it is always a fight between the public and myself and they are not easily won over. I walk on to the stage and there is that hideous black coffin in front of me. The men are thinking of their money and mistresses and the women are looking daggers at other women who have somehow contrived to arrive in the same hat. So you have to *make* them concentrate, hold them with every note; it's the only way. In Paris they like to talk all the time and once they chatted so much just when I was ready to start that I simply played a huge fortissimo chord. There was an astonished silence and so I began!

But of course I love my audience and every time I try to give them something special, something which reflects my life and experience. If they listen I hope it is because I can tell them particular and individual things. You see, a certain quality is added when you have lived.