Revisiting Rubinstein

Pianist wants to give audience 'fresh blood'

By MARY CAMPBELL
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NEW YORK — Artur Rubinstein, classical pianist beloved by three generations, made his American debut in Carnegie Hall in 1906.

Last month, 60 years later, he gave three concerts in the same hall, creating new interpretations, mixing a few notes and providing scenes of the most beautiful piano music the audience ever heard or ever expects to hear.

But Rubinstein has an unexpected weakness. After all these years, he can still get stage fright.

THE WORST case was in Russia where, he admits, "I was scared to death.

"During the time of the czars I was often in Russia. But I was absent 30 years and when you don't go for many years, you become a legend.

"I was afraid they would revive me like an old man who can still play the piano. And I was thinking, 'If I fall through in Russia, I'm done with. Why should I risk such a thing?' So I think (the impresario) and my wife were wrong. Why did we bring him here in all this nervous tension?

"Then I went off beautifully. The standard of culture came on the stage and said, 'Look, this man is young and lion and big cat!' " Rubinstein recalls with a chuckle. "The minister of culture was a fine-looking woman. Then we knew we were worthwhile."

WHY FRIENDS said I hadn't Rachmaninoff fall, but I can assure you it is not so. He had two days after the fall.

A visit with Rubinstein is like the most pleasant and pun a visiter under his spell. The massive frame gives way and his eyes twinkle when he smiles. At 77 he is lively, alert, interested in people, country and nonsense.

"If I had a fall and I drop in a year," Rubinstein says, "people would say, 'Well, he sound tired.' I always stay ahead of my fall. Before and after concerts there are people who want to see me. I visiting. I sleep very little.

"Two things I have to see published, the Chopin and Brahms without concerts and that I can do only if I have time to get money for concerts, I'm poor anyway. I have to earn. I read that can get much more money with the Beatles. Nobody sees too many concerts and I say, 'You have to pay for them.' He says, 'You love it?'

REFERRING to his three concerts last month, Rubinstein said, "Everytime I come back from Europe I substitute for the audience people think they are far better than European audiences. They are not."

"I gave a concert at the University of Michigan on a sunday, so half of the people called. "It took me about 35 minutes to get around — block (acts out a mincing along on (ice). From the audience I said, 'I don't like to step in the middle of a sonata, so let's start at the latecomers.' Only five minutes later, an hour, they were all there. 4,000 people. I gave a very difficult program — Schubert sonata, Schumann; things where are not in the usual run, no Liszt, no show-piece anything. I know that my interest and that I served it.

"You couldn't imagine such a thing in Europe. It is a very, very difficult thing to fill Festival Hall in London. In France, outside of Paris, nobody would dream of risking to give a concert unless there was some special festival or push around it.

"OF COURSE, in Russia the audiences for music are divine. The Russian public is extremely inclined to music. It always was, even hysterical. In my childhood I remember in Moscow and Leningrad young girls cut themselves in concert halls because they wanted to survive hearing such music."

Rubinstein always was, and remains, a romantic pianist, devoted to conveying the mood and meaning of the music.

"I criticize the trend of young artists who come on stage as if they have the whole thing in their pockets, so well prepared," he said. "I don't hear a performance. I hear an exercise.

"I expect from an artist at least one drop of fresh blood. There must be something which comes out of his inspiration, which he didn't plan, that brings real vitality to it.

"IT IS MY rule that when people say, 'I hear you had a great success in Russia,' I say, 'Yes, and do you know why? They heard for 30 years nothing but perfection?' They were happy to hear some a pianist who makes false notes, it was like fresh air for them."

"When I go to a piano, I go to develop a piece artistically, to get into the core best of it. I go for the sound, contrasts, dynamics, beauty of sonority.

"If I'm not sure of it, I sit in a cafe and think about it. Sometimes in the morning I start innocently a symphony of Beethoven or Brahms, or an overture of Wagner, and I play it in my mind, a good orchestra, conducted by myself, displaying it absolutely to my satisfaction. I get a telephone call or they bring in my breakfast or the paper. I take that all in, later I say goodby to go out for a walk. I'm in the street and forgetting."

HOLDING BACK THE YEARS.—The fingers of pianist Artur Rubinstein, which have endured three generations of music lovers, still have the stamina and nimbleness to play around 160 concerts a year. Here the 77-year-old musician's hands are seen in various exercises around his lively face during a recent interview in his New York apartment. The unconventional pianist does not practice with scales on the piano, but does exercises wherever he is.

I find myself in the third movement. I never finish planned playing, somewhere back in my mind, classically."

RUBINSTEIN believes progress and change. "There is nothing more stupid than when someone says, 'I heard you say 15 years ago . . .' Well, fortunately, now I have better judgment. When one progresses, one has to have the courage to change. Once I was crazy about Tchaikovsky. I could hear the Sixth Symphony and cry. Then I fell in love with Brahms, and Tchaikovsky in a way left me. Now I wouldn't mind getting rid of Brahms but I can't because he is too great."

Rubinstein decided 20 years ago to write his autobiography. He is finally getting around to it. "First of all, I'm now old enough to feel about everything.

"In my book, it is not so much myself I'm interested in but the era. I lived in the first row of it. I was always right there — London, Paris, Rome. So many personalities I have known closer than they are known by many. I'm going to leave out anything. I was a great adventurer. I never ran away from anything which was interesting."