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Artur Rubinstein relaxes in his New York home.

Rubinstein: Gifted Renewal

By Alan M. Kriegsman

To a cheering house packed to the brim Artur Rubinstein gave his first solo recital at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall last night.

That about tells all doesn't it? Can anything else be said?

Well, yes. Everyone knew in advance, of course, that the concert would be superb, and it was. But that is the one and only thing about a Rubinstein appearance that is predictable. For this incredible artist, who will celebrate his 86th birthday Jan. 28, has discovered the secret fount Ponce de Leon sought in vain, and manages to renew and revivify every measure of music he touches. No matter how many times he's played a work he succeeds in wiping the slate clean. Each piece becomes a premiere, each recital a debut. One suspects he surprises himself as much as his awed listeners.

So it was with the opening Schubert Impromptus from Opus 90. How many fresh and ravishing guises he found for the lacy arpeggios that deck out the melody of the A Flat Major, No. 4, like ribbons of tinsel. It wasn't a particularly inward performance, rather more glittery and charming. He saved the introspection for the G Flat Major, No. 3, which he let sigh out its broodings and sorrows in long, pensive arcs. Yet on other occasions he has all but reversed these two manners of approach.

If one thinks of Rubinstein in conjunction with the few other living pianists

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who might be mentioned in the same breath—Serkin, Michelangeli, Horowitz, De Larrocha and a few others, perhaps—the nature of his supremacy becomes clear. He is neither the most accurate nor the most intellectually probing nor the most stylistically circumspect nor the most brilliant or subtle of the lot. Still, it appears to me that he is the greatest, and for the most elementary sorts of reasons.

The most unforgettable feature of Rubinstein's playing is the striking absence of guile, the lack of strategems, calculation, "effects." Take, for instance, his delivery of the opening tune in the slow movement of the Brahms F Minor Sonata last night. It is, to be sure, a rather simply constructed, purposely folk-like melody. That doesn't prevent many a pianist from trying to push or pull it this way and that, in a wrongheaded attempt to "squeeze" expression from its rude simplicity. Rubinstein played it as the most innocent kind of utterance, direct and unadorned and went directly to the heart of its eloquence as a result.

This is not to say that he never "interprets," never stamps his own personality onto his performances by the unusual means of touch and articulation and rubato. But his ministrations always seem to move along the line of least musical resistance, giving nature—or the composer's innermost intent—a helping hand. It's simply the difference between art and artifice, and no one seems to comprehend it so well as Rubinstein.

There was plenty of freedom in his treatment of the Chopin Barcarolle last night, and of the same composer's G Minor Ballade. But in each case, the freedom seemed to spring from the rhapsodic urge of the works as naturally as a blossom sprouts from its bud.

And above all, there's the incomparable Rubinstein sound, that glory of pianistic glories, exemplified last night in the voluptuous chords of Brahms, the shimmering harmonic halos of Chopin (as in the F Sharp Minor Prelude, most notably), the coruscating runs of Liszt, and in a countless number of haunting, sensually charged instances.

The surprises, by the way, didn't cease until the last note. In the concluding Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, Rubinstein made Liszt's demonic thunder sound graceful, and even angelic. The grateful throng stood and bravoed, and was rewarded with encores by Chopin and Chabrier.