FESTIVAL HALL

Edward Greenfield

Rubinstein

GALA CONCERTS in the presence of royalty have a way of stiffening performers and audience alike, and if next to the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in the royal box there is a musical adviser from 10 Downing Street, it doesn't necessarily make things better. This was the London Symphony Orchestra's annual concert at the Royal Festival Hall in aid of the LSO Trust, and the orchestra's principal conductor, André Previn was directing a programme of Elgar, Stravinsky and Brahms with Artur Rubinstein as soloist.

Analysing just why the orchestra sounded unrelaxed in Elgar's "Cockaigne" was hard enough. Previn as an adopted Londoner and an already enthusiastic Elgarian did splendidly in underlining the tonal and emotional contrasts—at times forgivably exaggerating them in his ardour—but the music didn't flow as easily as it can do in the hands of a Boult or a Barbirolli. Then in Stravinsky's "Firebird" Suite (1919 version) the delicacy of scoring was what gripped one. Instead of thinking of Rimsky-Korsakov as the obvious influence, one kept more in mind the parallels with the exotic and refined Ravel. Above all the pianissimo tremolo on violins and violas that leads one from the Berceuse to the finale was magically refined. If Previn has had an influence on the orchestra's playing since he joined the LSO, it has not been so much in the expected direction towards greater brilliance (they were the most brilliant London orchestra already) but towards greater refinement, an ability to play really softly that was missing before. Even so I am glad that at the end of "Firebird," Previn, the dedicated Waltonian, brought out more than ever the brash likeness with "Crown Imperial."

Rubinstein, an unbelievable octogenarian, then gave the most youthful performance of Brahms's First Piano Concerto that I can remember. When he was younger his lightness of touch, his ability to lighten heavy textures gave him the reputation of being a lightweight as an interpreter. How wrong that was. He has certainly had the last laugh now. One might complain in principle that some of Brahms's double octaves need more shoulder behind them, but how wonderful as an ever-youthful alternative to hear this miraculous pianist tackle them at full tilt, faster almost than anyone. To tackle too the finale at a roaring pace which said plainly (amid a highly forgivable spattering of wrong notes), "To hell with the difficulties." As for the slow movement, there one had it written as plain as could be that Rubinstein in his persistent youth thinks deep, conveys in the simplest phrasing a hushed expressiveness more intense than ever.