SYMPHONY REVIEW

Rubinstein's Piano Artistry Fresh But Familiar Sound

By JOHN K. SHERMAN

Artur Rubinstein has been playing forever, and one hopes that he will continue to do so. The old lion of the piano returned Friday night as Minneapolis Symphony guest and revealed to an overflow audience in Northrop his familiar but ever-alive mastery.

Rubinstein lives in the keyboard, his fingers not so much on it, his head full of musical brains not so much above it, as both in it—his field of action and his natural language. What a vocabulary is there! His tone almost matches the variety of color and shading achieved by the orchestra behind him. His style is infinitely plastic.

The solo in the Brahms Second Concerto is a noble protagonist in a long and many-faceted epic, and the pianist molded it as a consummate actor molds a character, realizing its emotion and thought at every turn of the plot. His is a power that knows delicacy, and a wisdom which long since has absorbed skill as an expressive tool, and not something merely to brandish.

The heroic struggle and heaving textures of the first movement were lit by the solo with both majesty and discretion as the thematic lines shifted from piano to orchestra and back again. That nimble but poignant theme in the scherzo had magic and heartbreak, and the slow movement with its almost Chopinesque glow and tenderness, its lyrical cello-piano duet with Robert Jamieson, cast a lingering spell.

After the tensions of earlier movements, the finale provided release in its cheer and crisp rhythmic patterns and brought the work to a rousing close. Applause was loud and long, leading to a Chopin polonaise as encore and standing ovations.

I find I haven't mentioned conductor Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, who was very much present and exerting dynamic control throughout. He fashioned an unconventional first half of the program, starting out with Gluck's "Iphigenia in Aulis," which showed the strings achieving fine purity of expression, and carried on with a Vivaldi concerto grosso, also a string show.

The latter had violinists Norman Carol and Henry Kramer and cellist Jamieson as soloists in a three-movement work. There was some sturdy sawing of strings in this baroque opus by Bach's great contemporary, some antiphonal effects between low strings and violins, a sinewy fugue in Chapter I, and fine differentiation between instruments and tone levels with wonderful growling from cellos and basses.

Novelty of the evening was the French composer Olivier Messaien's "Oiseaux Exotiques" in a first performance—an anthology of bird calls enriched and magnified in resourceful scoring by a composer who is also a bird-lover. Sounding something like Webern caught in an aviary, the composition employed a small and spaced group of winds, a percussion smorgasbord and piano solos of extreme complexity and speed. The latter were played wildly and well by Eva Knardahl in a technical tour de force.