The Art of Arthur Rubinstein and Chopin

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On October 3 Arthur Rubinstein, master-pianist and sometime protegé of Joachim, appears at the Festival Hall in the first concert of the Royal Philharmonic Society's 1973-74 season. His already sold-out programme is planned to include the Mozart D minor and the Grieg Concertos. A Gold Medallist of the Society (1961) he first took part in one of its concerts as long ago as 1915, playing the Saints-Saëns G minor. Incredibly, he has now been active on the concert platform for 75 years — ever since, in fact, his Berlin appearance in 1898, when he made a notable concerto debut. His career began in earnest in 1905 with a series of six recitals in that once legendary home of all the finest pianists in Europe, Paris. These were followed by concerts in London and a tour of America in 1906. From then on he never really looked back and if at first he was seen to take a positive delight in the role of society pianist (named or otherwise) the years and public and critical reaction eventually changed and sharpened his awareness of his real responsibility as an interpretative artist.

Yet even so Rubinstein has never lost that early element of pride (and, some might say, conceit) in his own achievement which is at least one fundamental in his make-up that helps determine the overall character and individualism of his music-making. I remember, for instance, reading some years ago an interview in which he expressed a belief that what was important to him as a pianist was that no one should have cause to find fault in his playing, not, significantly, because he was worried about letting down a composer, but because he did not want his family to live with the memory that as an artist he was fallible. Similarly, while many great musicians will be seen to play solely for the sake of the music, Rubinstein plays in addition to the gallery and outwardly at any rate such a spectacle is an important manifestation of his 'act'. It can perhaps be seen as an assertion of himself, a physical domination of an audience, and the inevitable climax at the encore stage is symbolic of a victory, which, one suspects, is for Rubinstein a real necessity: his love of life is perhaps ultimately his love of this victory, of this moment when the public is in the palm of his hand, a willing slave to his every whim.

That Rubinstein has such a command over his audiences pre-supposes a powerful and magnetic personality. This he has in abundance. But personality in itself is inadequate for long-term survival. In the same way egocentric arrogance can more often than not lead to rapid disenchantment. The fact, however, that Rubinstein has survived the footlights for three-quarters of a century, the fact that his inherently proud manner stimulates affection, not dislike, the fact that the world unites in applauding him for his abilities rather than his age — all this suggests that Rubinstein is a man who must not be judged on the strength of his public image alone. Rather, to understand him and what makes him one of the aristocratic lords of the piano, a grand survivor of an age of romantic pianism that is all but gone, we have to probe further.
To say that the true essence of his genius is one of musical and pianistic ability is to underestimate the case. Many people possess just such abilities yet remain in oblivion. No, what especially makes Rubinstein the man he is, I think is a supreme degree of intuitive musicianship, reaching back to early childhood, that is hard to define in precise, calculable terms, yet which remains a recognisable phenomenon present in all that he does. In reviewing RCA’s reissue of Rubinstein playing the Chopin Concertos (December 1972), I touched briefly on this subject, and made no apology for paraphrasing my original conclusions: what lent distinction to Rubinstein’s performances, I observed, was their unfailing clarity, as strong or as delicate as the situation may demand, their full piano tone with no strain of harshness in the top register; exemplary phrasing and limpid shaping of paragraphs, an incomparable feeling for nuance and style, faultless technique, a fine judgement of tempo. I concluded that in particular one was fancy about good Chopin playing and wanted the nearest thing to travelling back in time to hear the composer playing himself with that magical touch which none of his contemporaries was said to possess, then one could do little better than hear Rubinstein play with that keyboard alchemy, the exact secret of which continues to remain elusive.

As far as Chopin is concerned, indeed, it may actually be so elusive and so subtle that when Rubinstein is no more it will become a memory of the past, because Rubinstein’s Chopin, it seems to me, is nothing less than the art of rubato, and that remains something which can only be sensed in a temporal span but not taught or notated in its exact detail. To listen to Rubinstein’s Chopin is to become acutely aware of what a master he is in interpreting ‘rubbed time’. Writing in Grove AH Fox Strangways once defined rubato as “the effect of pitch upon duration”, and went on to say: “Rubato is the free element in time, and the more it recognises the norm the freer it is. The law which it has to recognise is the course of the music as a whole; not a bar but a page, not a page but a movement. If it does not do this it becomes spasmodic and unmeaning, like correspondence which is too much underlined.”

No one in my experience understands rubato to quite the extent of Rubinstein. His whole being seems to respond to its sensual liberalism yet he never indulges in excess and that is at least one clue to the nature of his genius. It is also the quality that most distinguishes his playing from that of other pianists. There are those like Arrau, for instance, who offer us deeply searching (and no less valid) accounts of Chopin’s style and structure, but who avoid any real involvement with the quick-sand perils of rubato; others, in an all-out effort to ‘identify’ with the so-called Chopin style, go in the opposite direction and end up emasculating Chopin’s music and falling into a trap of inescapable sentimentality. Rubinstein, it seems, strikes the perfect balance — at least, it’s perfect for me.

Yet this very mastery is not always an asset. To be sure it stands Rubinstein in good stead when it comes to composers like Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Grieg, Saint-Saëns, Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky and so on, but it can prove problematical in Beethoven or Brahms. Thus in something like the 1968 recording of the Third and Fourth Beethoven Concertos one encounters moments of un-classical shaping of phrases and note values (slow movements), or else a total absence of any kind of rubato which makes for a mechanical, stiff approach. Occasionally, as though uncertain, Rubinstein returns to mixing passages of ‘straight’ and rubato playing (Finale of Third Concerto) with the result that the performance acquires a stilted manner. Similar problems arise in Brahms, though here the tendency is consistently to apply a degree of rubato that seems against the fundamental classic-

ism and seriousness of purpose that lies at the root of Brahms’s creativity: the slow movements of both Concertos are predictable victims — beautiful, yes, but undeniable romanticisations of their purity of spirit. Rubinstein’s Mozart, in contrast, is less prone to mishandling, and the sum total, even in spite of textual corruption, is more convincing than might be expected; on the other hand it must be remembered that Mozart was the source of much in Chopin, and not least in matters of rubato, especially in lyrical passages.

As I see it, then, the secret of Rubinstein’s art is this perception of rubato, and he has always excelled in music which makes such a quality a prime requisite of interpretation. Thus his understanding of the Spanish school (Falla wrote theFontAwesome suite for him) is as complete as his understanding of Chopin, because it, like Chopin, calls for the same kind of temporal freedom. It is accordingly this parameter that ultimately makes Rubinstein’s Chopin so memorable; I would suggest that it has nothing whatsoever to do with any suggestion of nationalistic associations, or the frequently encountered assumption that Rubinstein as a Pole has a greater right to understand this music. True, there may be aspects that spark off a certain response, but it is equally true that I have heard some Poles mutilate Chopin’s art and some foreigners play with an expression no less striking than Rubinstein’s.

It is appropriate that as Rubinstein approaches his eighty-eighth year RCA should reissue in a scrupulous boxed set his recordings of virtually all Chopin’s solo piano music, made in the 1950s and 60s. Appropriate because by what he has done future generations will certainly remember Rubinstein not just as a pianist but as one of the supreme Chopin interpreters of all time who by his example evolved a style of performance that for many has become the only true way to play Chopin. It is of course not the only way, but it must be admitted nevertheless that in his choice of unvarnished tempi, his ability to ‘breath’ a phrase as though it were sung, his respect for piano sound in colouring Chopin’s textures, his firm grasp of allowing a structure to unfold gradually without ever forgetting to underline its basic points, his fundamental simplicity of statement (no sentimentality, no over-emphasis, utter lumpiness of presentation) and, finally, his incomparable and crucially important application of rubato — as personal a hallmark as the timbre of the human voice — Rubinstein has set an example that is not far short of the ideal norm.

In such an atmosphere of what for me is perfection, there is room only for regretting the omissions: the Opp 10 and 25 Studies, the Opus 4 Sonata, the Rondos and Variations, the
Allegro de Concert, the early Polonaises, and the Op 28 and 45 Préludes. Unlike the Studies (which, curiously, have never been recorded by Rubinstein), the Préludes are available on disc, but at present only in America. Many years ago, incidentally, five of the Opus 28 set (Nos 1, 4, 10, 21, 24) were cut for a Duo-Art piano-roll. Apropos this it has been widely assumed that Rubinstein's earliest recording was made in 1928. Before this, however, he made at least 17 rolls for Duo-Art, as well as nine for Ampico, which appear to date from some time between 1916 and 1925. The Duo-Art and Ampico catalogues then contained a whole series of famous or new pianists of the day, among them d'Albert, Arrau, Backhaus, Busoni, Carreño, Casella, Cherkassky, Cortot, Dohnányi, Edwin Fischer, Gabriël-Witsch, Gershwin, Godowsky, Arthur de Greef, Grainger, Granados, Myra Hess, Hofmann, Horowitz, Iturbi, Kreisler, Lamond, Landowska (in Beethoven and Viennese waltzes!), Legniska, Lévine, Novaes, Poulshoff, Prokofiev, Ravel, Rosenthal, Sauer, Scharwenka, Schnabel, Siloti, Stravinsky, and many more. The list was frankly dazzling as were the publicity drives to promote player pianos: one of these, held by Ampico at Carnegie Hall on February 3, 1920, featured Rubinstein himself, alongside Godowsky and Moiseiwitsch. Today, sad to say, the whereabouts of many of these rolls made by the giants of another era are all but unknown. That they preserved a unique heritage, of which Rubinstein is almost the last survivor, is suggested by those that have come down to us. A veritable treasure would seem to await a record company with the enterprise (shown by Argo some years ago) to seek out good copies of these rolls (as well as those of Welte-Mignon) and transfer them to record. How fascinating it would be, for instance, to hear the youthful Rubinstein in Chopin, or in some of his early concert successes like the Ritual Fire Dance, Prokofiev's fourth Suggestion Diabolique, and selections from Le Coq d'or. Our assessments of his developments could become so much more meaningful.

But to return to the RCA set. Certainly, whatever the omissions, the consequential Chopin is all here. The Ballades (1959) come over with tremendous strength and imagination and as organicunities: the projection of No 2 is a vivid case in point, the contrasts always striking yet at the same time evolving and never static. The 51 Mazurkas (December 1965 to January 1966) are exquisitely fragile cameos in fantasy, while the 14 Waltzes (June 1963) emerge as subtly-felt stylisations of the Parisian salon which unfold with a limpid quality that is bewitching. The Nocturnes (1965-67) similarly flow at a pace that allows for maximum expressive articulation of notes. Nothing here is hurried, nothing is over-dramatised, and, as in the Ballades, contrasts are pointed without ever losing the vital threads of blend and continuity. The Polonaises, Nos 1-6 (March 1964), are studies in grandeur (as they should be) and if, in Opus 53, one might wish for the greater clarity and less pedalling of the pre-war 78 issues or the old HMV version, there is no denying its overall imperialism or the well-judged dramatic projection. The F sharp minor, Opus 44 (one of the works originally recorded by Rubinstein for Duo-Art) comes over with spectacular effect and the imagery of its martial sections and the Mazurka-trio is glorious. The Polonaise-Fantaisie, Opus 61, is another gem which allows the subsidiary detail to colour our conscience without ever obtruding: the last pages are masterly. The Impromptus (March 1964) are unassumming and by no means as fast as some pianists would have us believe. The posthumously published Fantaisie-impromptu is especially sensitive in its D flat central section, and the coda is wrath-like. The four Scherzos (1959) belong to the same vein of performance as the Ballades, and include some brilliant examples of even, pearly touch. The Trio of No 1 is silver-lined, the B flat minor headlong in its onslaught, the C sharp minor-all powerful and dramatic (yet with plenty of time for the quiet cascades of the Trio sections), and No 4 alternately capricious and mercurial but with a grandiose coda. A miscellaneous record (1962-65) includes the F minor Fantasy, the Barcarolle and Berceuse, the Bolero and Tarantella, and the three Nouvelle Etudes (played in the order 1, 3, 2). All are models of their kind, and nowhere more so than in choice of tempi.

Finally, we have the Second and Third Piano Sonatas, recorded in January 1961 and 1959-61 respectively. These are among the greatest performances in the history of the gramophone, and really there is nothing else one can say. The ‘Funeral March’ Sonata, Opus 35, has a rock-like first movement, again notable for its basic speed and for the way thematic inter-relationships are clarified. The Scherzo is not without a hypnotic menace, temporarily relieved by moments of solace, while the Funeral March itself has perhaps never been played so movingly nor placed so naturally. The full sombre spectacle of a military funeral is all here, with its measured slow-step, tolling bells, muted drum-rolls, heartfelt sorrow, tremulous cadences, impassioned outcries... Rubinstein’s reading, if avoiding Rachmaninov’s personal idiosyncrasies, is nevertheless not without some personal touches, not least in the return of the March (after the Trio) which grows with a greater dynamic intensity than in the relatively constrained exposition. The Finale is like the fanciful flight of a lost soul. Quite remarkable.

The B minor Sonata is no less convincing, with structurally firm and spacious outer movements, a Scherzo that's as subtle as the finest champagne, and a slow movement which dreams to eternity. One can offer no adequate comment on an interpretation of such thoroughbred distinction.

Production-wise, the set of 12 records uses re-mastered tapes, and each side was re-cut. This does not prevent (on my test pressings) a certain amount of surface noise, an occasion ally low recording level (as in the Opus 35 Sonata and the Impromptus, which required a suitable gain in volume), some fragmentary break-up of sound (the Impromptus are the worst offenders, with some additional trouble in the Opus 40 No 2 Polonaise), and the odd rumble. The Polonaise disc struck me as having a rather coarse tone, and the Ballades and Scherzo reveal their age in the slightly wavering piano sound. The Mazurkas and Nocturnes come off best recording-wise, and the B minor Sonata has a good deal of presence.

I daresay that most of the faults I found will be eradicated by the time the records reach the market. I hope so, but in any case the value of these performances as a whole is in no way diminished by possible engineering shortcomings. I can say quite confidently that this is a notable reissue, and an appropriate tribute to a great artist. To study these performances in depth tells us a good deal about both Arthur Rubinstein and the art of Chopin. We cannot expect more, and we must be thankful that such interpretations are preserved for posterity. Their like will certainly not be witnessed again.

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