Without risk, there’s no art

By MARY CAMPBELL
The Associated Press

A fan tells pianist Artur Rubinstein that he will never forget the sight of him, on the stage at Carnegie Hall, sitting erectly on the piano bench, stage light making his white hair glisten, and then Rubinstein lifting both his arms up high, holding them an instant and bringing them dramatically down to play his first notes.

"I'm glad you remember that as a dramatic moment," Rubinstein says, "but I do it for another reason.

"When you want to play very cautiously and never to strike a wrong note, you push the keys. You play your fingers very close to the keys. It gives a very harsh, hard sonority and I don't like that. I was taught from youth that when you make a big impact on the keys, you get a soft sound — even if you make the greatest fortissimo in the world. There is risk involved, but I don't care."

Rubinstein had said once that he sometimes tries out new ideas of phrasing during a concert rather than doing it the way he did it the last time, because each concert deserves — as he put it — at least one drop of fresh blood. Laurence Olivier has said that nothing is really interesting in theater unless the actor, in some degree, risks sudden death, another way of stating Rubinstein's philosophy.

"My namesake, Anton Rubinstein, a pianist who was a rival of Liszt, was famous for playing more wrong notes than right notes in a concert. There was a saying that he could make another concert of his wrong notes. Yet nobody objected, because the impact was so musical and so great.

"There is a story, not very nice, but so artistic in my way of thinking. Toward the end of his life he was giving a concert in St. Petersburg, the 'Appassionata' of Beethoven. As they told me when I was young, those who had been present, he played it as never before, something absolutely incredible. They couldn't believe it; pupils were sitting on the edge of their seats. When he reached the big sarcophagus at the end, his hands became stiff and he couldn't do it.

Cutting off heads

"A minor pianist would somehow get to the end, would do something. But he couldn't stand that. He stood up, dropped the lid with a great noise, spat, and walked away. He got the great ovation of his life. It's something like a sculptor who would cut the head off a marvelous torso he had made, if the head wasn't good enough and the torso lives. It is real art."

Rubinstein praises recordings in several ways, one that they were his real professors.

"When I'm playing, I don't hear what I'm playing. I hear what I want to hear. I'm moved. I want to give out something. What the result is, that is for the objective listener, not for me."

"Then later you hear a record. What did I do? No accent here, it's too loud; that is too soft. I learn.

"You can only learn from yourself if you are an artist. Otherwise you are an imitative fellow and become Paderewski No. 2. You must be Yourself No. 1."

The pianist, 88 on Jan. 28, admits that in the 1920s he feared that records would cut down the concert-going audience.

"In the '20s people in America Ages 17 to 23 would rather go to jail than be seen at a serious concert. And the tired businessman wanted to go to a bridge party or burlesque. Suddenly as he sat there playing the bridge the radio would play a record of a Toscanini concert, right in the middle of a slam. Who is this? A great conductor? Oh, I would like to hear that man in person. Records brought us millions of people to concerts. There are infinitely more concerts now than years ago.

"Women are an easier public than men. A woman will tell you, 'I heard your concert and I wanted to cry.' She lets herself go to the emotional impact. I hear from men, I don't go to concerts because I didn't learn music and I don't know much about it. I say, 'You don't need to know anything about it. You must like it, that's all.'

"We don't play for people who know music. If, in a hall of 2,000, there are 25 real musicians sitting, it is very rare."

Rubinstein will record Beethoven's last three concertos, or maybe all five, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. Told that he has won a prize in Japan for a recording of three Brahms trios and the Schumann 'Trio in D Minor,' made with cellist Pierre Fournier and violinist Henryk Szeryng, Rubinstein says their record of Schubert trios to come out next summer is even better.

His most recent record on RCA, for whom he has recorded since 1940, is two Faure piano quartets made with the Guarneri-Quartet, out in November.

One regret Rubinstein has is that he never recorded with conductor Georg Szell. They had contracts with different record labels. "He was really the best conductor of my later years. Artur Nikisch (who died in 1922) was my ideal."

"When I played with Szell and the Cleveland Symphony, it was unforgettable. What a chance I missed. It's really sad."

Last summer, Rubinstein felt a pain and thought he had an ulcer. "I decided to stop everything, to sit in a chair, read books, not see anybody. Finished. Then I discovered I had no ulcer. It was very funny. It puts me into an excellent frame of mind and humor. I became again interested in everything. It was an acid test and if I get nervous it causes certain pain. The whole thing is to keep from getting nervous.

"I won't overdose things. I won't go on tours of 40 concerts in America. For many, many years I was giving 100 concerts a year. I don't have the wish to do that any more. Now I promise a few concerts, always with the provision in the contract that I can cancel them three weeks in advance. It's horrible, canceling at the last minute."

The Rubinstein are in the United States from Paris, where they live most of the time, to see their four children and grandchildren, for concerts with the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics (Feb. 3 in New York) and for Rubinstein to go to Stanford University for a "study of man."

"There will be five Nobel Prize winners there, studying my mind to see why it still works at my age and how it got that way. I'm very interested in that, too."