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TV Preview

A Rare Rubinstein Album

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Fortunately for the "American Masters" series on PBS, pianist Arthur Rubinstein had a much-photographed life, from his coddled infancy as a musical prodigy into a ripe old age that lasted almost to his 96th birthday.

Besides still photos from childhood, marriage, etc., the producers of "Rubinstein Remembered: A 100th Anniversary Tribute" were able to draw on filmed documentation from the years he lived in Hollywood and even made a few movies, from the television special of a few years ago on his visits to his native Poland, even from a "Person to Person" episode in which Edward R. Murrow visits the Rubinstein household and the great pianist plays "Pop Goes the Weasel," holding his young son John on his knee.

Now, John Rubinstein is grown up into a show biz triple threat: actor, composer and conductor. He serves as host on tonight's program (9 p.m., Channel 26) and is also shown in one sequence observing his father's 100th birthday (last Jan. 28) in his father's birthplace: Lodz, Poland. And the Lodz Philharmonic (which has been renamed the Arthur Rubinstein Orchestra) is conducted by Rubinstein *fils* in a memorial program that includes his own sound track music, "Amber Waves."

Whatever his other talents, John Rubinstein makes an ideal host for a show about his father. His remarks, supplemented by the recorded reminiscences of the great man himself, give this show a sense of intimacy and a well-rounded view of its subject that would not be available for a documentary on most people (even rather famous ones) born in 1887. Rubinstein himself is heard recalling that when he was a year old he wouldn't talk; he sang all the time. He also tells the story of a little violin given him by his parents when he was 4 years old—and immediately smashed, because he was interested only in the piano.

The life story that emerges seems to be as happy—on the whole—as it was long. There is an exception, and Rubinstein himself tells of the low ebb in his life when he tried to hang himself and the rope (actually the belt of his dressing gown) broke. After that point, he recalls, "I fell in love with life . . . I said, 'What a terrible fool I've been.' "

This incident was part of the professional crisis he went through in 1934 (after encountering Vladimir Horowitz—though that is not mentioned). "My father had a great memory," John recalls, "and after he read a thing through a few times, he could play it quite well. But he neglected a lot of the details, especially the technical problems. It would sound fine to the innocent listener, but the initiated, his fellow pianists, would always know what was missing . . . He loved women and cards and brandy too much, and he almost never practiced."

Afterward he withdrew to teach himself to play the piano "the way it should be played." "Slowly and excruciatingly," he says, "I became a pianist." Still, as his wife Aniela told Edward R. Murrow, "His greatest talent is the . . . art of living. He has a special talent to make everything wonderful and amusing."

A lot of that talent is reflected in this documentary, along with qualities noted by his son: a devotion to music "that was completely pure and devoid of self" and a "genuine humility" that "made him really rare and special."