Artur Rubinstein Returns To Give Superb Performances With Mehta And MSO

By JACOB SISKIND

Rubinstein was back last night in all his glory to give Montrealers another memorable evening of music making. Every time he has come in the past ten years he has sent people home with a new awareness of the magic of music, of the simplicity, the eloquence and the communication possible in great music making.

Last night was no exception. If anything he scaled new heights — new for music in this city and, it was possible to feel at times, new for him. Certainly he has never played either the Schumann Concerto or the Chopin No. 1, which he has done here on so many occasions before, with greater charm, more telling understatement, or more spine-chilling excitement.

And the wonder of it is that he generates this excitement, this total involvement in his performance, not in the bravura passages but in the soft, lyrical, slow moments in the music. It is a very long time since any pianist, any soloist for that matter, has wrung tears from my eyes at a concert at Place des Arts. At the close of the slow movement of the Chopin Concerto last night, I found it difficult to get the stage and the musicians in focus.

The evening was filled with equally touching moments. Never before have I heard the slow movement of the Schumann Concerto treated with such reverence. Never before has the linking passage between the two final movements of the concerto seemed more meaningful, more significant. The dialogue between piano and orchestra was whispered back and forth until it seemed that the spell could not be sustained any longer, but it was, superbly.

There were other moments, wonderfully human moments, that brought you back to earth with a welcome thump. One came at the beginning of the cadenza in the Schumann when Rubinstein began to indulge in a little excessive rubato. Then, suddenly, as though ashamed of this lapse, he pulled himself up sharp and began to play the rest of the passage in particularly strict time, as though to compensate. He soon settled back to a happy combination of the two extremes and continued on with a superb performance of the remainder of the movement.

Or there was the succession of left hand trills in the Chopin concerto which are usually brought out to camouflage dirty linen in the right. Rubinstein used to make much of this section and the succeeding reminiscences in the other movements. Last night he chose to toy with the counter melody, and he made the entire passage sound fresh and new.

And that is the other wonder of a Rubinstein performance. How this incredible artist succeeds in renewing himself year after year, playing the music again and again and making it sound as new and fresh as the day it was written is a secret he shares with no one. He does not dig into the scores to find new relationships to the things up in new and different ways. His secret seems to consist in playing the music as simply and unaffectedly as possible. There is no question that he takes liberties, that his change of tempo is more flexible than any other pianist, but it all sounds so completely natural and so perfectly right when he does it that you are really not aware of what he has done until after it is all over.

He carried his listeners by storm at the close of each of the two works, and the applause broke into the music before the last chord had been struck. And this is one time I was in complete accord. As an encore he played The Chopin Polonaise as only he can.

Zubin Mehta provided some of the best orchestral accompaniments I have ever heard. There was a sensitivity in the orchestra that has rarely been equalled. In the Schumann it was particularly gratifying to hear Mehta shape the phrases in such perfect imitation of what the piano was doing, and he succeeded in drawing from some of the players performances I did not believe possible. Special mention must be made of the clarinet solos by Emilio Iacurto which had a rare sensitivity.

The concert began with a performance of the Mozart Haffner Symphony which was given a good reading but which lacked the finesse heard later in the evening. The outer movements seemed to be taken at tempi far too rapid for the strings and the articulation of the notes in the rapid passages left a great deal to be desired.

But the rest of the concert — well, I can only say that it is a great pity that this particular program is not being repeated this evening. It seems an incredible waste that only 3500 Montrealers were able to hear this amazing conjunction of great music and inspired music making.