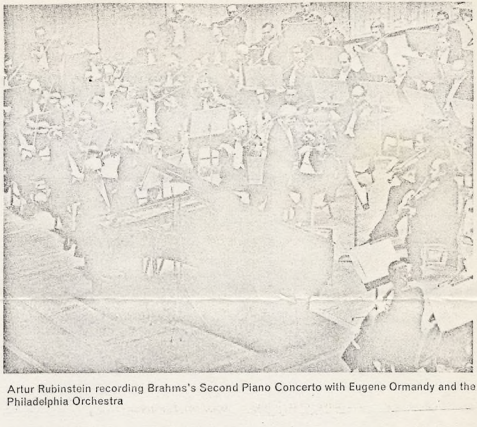
RECORDS & RECORDING
March 1973

RCA RED SEAL



Artur Rubinstein recording Brahms's Second Piano Concerto with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra

BRAHMS: *Piano Concerto No 2 in B flat, Op 83.* Artur Rubinstein (piano), Philadelphia Orchestra/Eugene Ormandy. RCA Red Seal SB 6869. £2.49.

RICHARD OSBORNE

"NEW RECORDING" the sleeve announces over the main heading, clearly distinguishing this from Rubinstein's several earlier recordings of the Concerto — the most recent (1960) version newly reissued as part of a two-record bargain album. The new performance, though, distinguishes itself — is quintessential Rubinstein in a way that to my ears at least the earlier performance was not.

Every so often on record Rubinstein will touch off playing of the purest, most relaxed and most beguiling magic. He did it in his London-made recording of the Chopin First Piano Concerto (where he wasn't blessed with so lambent an accompaniment as he is here). And here too there is wizardry: playing that is refined and relaxed whilst remaining beautifully, and undemonstratively, attuned to the Olympian scale of Brahms's thinking. It is the kind of performance (and there are several such in the catalogues) that makes one want to exclaim afresh at the miracle of the work itself — here like a lake one once thought grand and grim which is suddenly seen to reflect the sky.

The earlier performance with Krips and the RCA SO was more 'dramatic', more hectic, rushed and hustled into life. Now nothing is forced or ungainly. In this new performance there is no crude thudding at the start of the coda of the first movement; the piano semiquavers which follow now flow across the musical horizon like light across the night sky whereas before they were jumbled, submerged, chopped around in the drama of the moment. True, Rubinstein does not strike the first low forte A (bar 11) as resoundingly here as he did before and those who, like Lady Bracknell's daughter, are convinced that their first impressions are never wrong will probably conclude that the octogenarian pianist is losing his grip. It would be a bizarre conclusion to arrive at: what he has done in effect is purge his reading of all unnecessary rhetoric, producing instead chording that even by Rubinstein's own standards is shaped, tempered and varied with marvellous sensibility.

Clearly the sessions caught Rubinstein very much on an 'on' day, the pianist relaxed and in love again with the music: rarely can the second movement, for instance, have flowed more persuasively out of the first, part of a living continuum. All too often it sticks in the gullet, awkward and posturing. Yet this flow is typical of the whole performance. Where Rubinstein has modified a tempo it is invariably for the better — the marginally slower pace in the Finale, for instance. It is still clipped in manner and phrasing (none of Backhaus's tumbling warmth) but at a marginally easier pace we are properly able to savour the rare, characteristic mixture of Gallic grace and southern ease which Rubinstein brings to the music.

Recently I was full of praise for the new Gilels/Jochum, a performance which in the sum of its parts outshines even those by pianists like Serkin, Solomon and Backhaus. Am I now saying that the Rubinstein is as good, or better even? The short answer is, no. For here direct comparison is out of order. Gilels, Jochum and the Berlin Philharmonic give us a marvellously complete rendering of the Concerto, complete in all its aspects; Rubinstein gives us a beguiling solo performance, lovingly accompanied. Some will argue that this is questionable in a concerto once dubbed (quite as questionably) as a symphony with piano obbligato. In no sense, though, does Rubinstein attempt to steal the orchestral thunder (nor is the sound of the piano spotlighted in any special way: the recording is beautifully balanced). When the piano sings out, as it does in the Andante, Rubinstein tempering the sorrowing, nostalgic mood with an extraordinary elegance, the moment is always apt. Throughout the performance in fact the Philadelphia players cushion Rubinstein's playing with remarkable tact and intelligence; their tone is warm and finely adjusted, free (with the help of the RCA recording) of all abrasive edges, their rhythms relaxed but, some slightly 'lazy' cello phrasing at the start of the Andante apart, never slack. As with Rubinstein's own playing, which Ormandy mirrors so well, the strength of the orchestral playing is not in accents, gestures and sudden fortissimos but in the flow of the music and the steadiness of its course.

The performance, beautifully accompanied and recorded, offers in sum a special memento of Rubinstein's art. That the music is the music of Brahms makes for a still rarer alchemy.