THE CHOPIN ANNIVERSARY By Artur Rubinstein • Jan Holcman

Saturday Review

FEBRUARY 27, 1960 / 25¢

Chopin, drawn from life, by Luigi Calamatta (1840)

SR/ RECORDINGS

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MONOLOGUE ON CHOPIN

By ARTUR RUBINSTEIN

(Overheard by Irving Kolodin)

Artur Rubinstein is now in Poland, where he is being heard in eight solo recitals as well as in orchestral appearances to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Frederic Chopin's birth (February 22, 1810). The following observations on the music of his great compatriot were made shortly before his departure as guest of the Chopin commemoration.

Rubinstein

"YOU WANT to talk about Chopin? Gladly. It is remarkable to think that this man who wrote only piano music, and had such a superb sense of his limitations—no small thing in itself—has such an outpouring of affection on an anniversary. Take the Schumann year, 1956. Here was a man who wrote the greatest songs after Schubert, marvelous chamber music, four symphonies that are played all the time (and when they are rightly played by such a man as George Szell, who really has made a study of them, how well they can sound) and all his remarkable piano music. With all that, there wasn't nearly the appeal to the public that Chopin had on the hundredth anniversary of his death in 1949. Right here in New York, it was unbelievable: three Chopin recitals on the same day at the same time and all three completely sold out; Volodya Horowitz in Hunter College; I in the

Metropolitan; and the American pianist Frank Sheridan in Carnegie Hall.

"But that should hardly be too surprising. In playing all over the world, I have found Chopin the composer most *beloved* by audiences everywhere. Bach is appreciated for intellectual reasons; Beethoven admired for the tremendous musical thinker that he is; but Chopin is loved. You can play Chopin in China and see the faces of the audience light up with understanding. Once, after playing in Hong Kong, I was invited to play at Canton University, for an audience of Chinese university students. This interested me very much, and I arranged a program of Bach, Chopin, Liszt, and a variety of other things. I must say that the greatest *success* was with a Bach toccata—tremendous—but I felt the strongest contact with the audience, the most absorption in the Chopin (Liszt not so much). Afterwards, at a reception, I mentioned this to one of the dons, an elderly man with a serene face who had been educated at Oxford and was a marvelous specimen of the Chinese, whom I love dearly. He said, 'You know, my dear chap, we Chinese are very adept with our hands—juggling, you know, all sorts of intricate art work—so when you perform miraculous feats on the keyboard, and your hands flash about, we take it quite calmly. But we can feel the elevation' (mind you, the el-e-vation) 'in the great music of Chopin you play.' That made a deep impression on me.

"Pianists should be eternally grateful to this great Pole for what he did for their instrument. Of course there was no piano in Mozart's time, which accounts for the sparseness in his bass writing, the rather thin sound altogether. He preferred to lavish his brilliant imagination on the orchestra, where he could write the most intricate, interrelated parts and be sure that they would be heard, because the orchestra *existed*. Beethoven was more of a researcher, and after a certain time, there was the "Hammerklavier" for him to use. But still he was never satisfied. I share his feeling that the piano should be improved to the extent that with one powerful chord, *fortissimo*, you could completely subdue an audience. Probably that will never come. But Beethoven must have been a prodigious pianist to write something like the fugue finale of the "Hammerklavier," Opus 106. Speaking only of his instrumental writing, and without respect to the tremendous musical ideas that are embodied, I must say that as with his writing for voices, Beethoven's piano writing is often *gauche*. Not right for the fingers, and it doesn't *sound* as it should. With Schumann there is a different problem. He was a strange fellow. His was a rich palette, a marvelous combination of color and eloquent ideas, and such melodic invention. But there is an odd thing about Schumann. For the piano he wrote very often orchestrally—those figures jumping about, thick chords, cello-like bass, and so on. But for the orchestra, he wrote pianistically—as in the scherzo of the "Spring" symphony.

"Coming to Chopin, you have a divine combination of inspiration, instrumental imagination, and classic sense of proportion. Does this surprise you, for this 'romantic' figure? In his music, Chopin was all *against* the 'romantic' idea. Bach and Mozart were his love and passion; Beethoven he didn't care much about at all. He didn't like Schumann, really, although he appreciated what Schumann did for him, and thought he was a lovely fellow. But even in that great salute in which Schumann elevated Chopin to heaven as a very young man, there were literary allusions—the Florestan, Eusebius kind of thing—which didn't appeal to Chopin. Berlioz he didn't enthuse about either.

"One hundred and fifty years after his birth, Chopin remains the most modern-sounding composer of his century, with a remarkable sense of harmonic color, modulation especially, which keeps his music fresh and undated in sound. It is only in recent times that one really understands what Chopin was doing, as in the G minor Ballade, just at the end of the introduction, where he has an E flat in the G minor chord, creating a polytonal effect of G minor and E flat—which are, of course, the two keys in which the Ballade is written. This is a typical instance of Chopin *anticipating* the harmony, something he loved to do.

"This kind of logical reason for what sounds, at first, very impulsive, is a characteristic trait of Chopin, for with all his impulsive temperament and his melodic genius, Chopin was essentially a very pedantic fellow. What composer before him wrote out every note and figuration, embellishment and filigree? Without them, we might have lost the true essence of what he was trying to convey. As, for example, in Mozart, where so much is left to the player because Mozart had no time to write out everything in his short life, there was always something new he had to work on.

"But with Chopin, nothing—absolutely nothing—is left to chance. Another instance of Chopin's pedantic nature is in the Preludes, written in all the tonalities, major and minor, as Bach did in the Well Tempered Clavier. He began to write the Etudes in the same way, in all the tonalities, but after a while he got tired of it, and reverted to some of

Chopin—a daguerreotype (by Bisson) made the year of his death (1849).

his favorite keys—B minor, F minor, A flat—of whose sound he was particularly fond. He was pedantic in his way of life too—the little clock next to him, which had to be just so, and his clothes. You know the three letters he wrote to his friend Fontana with instructions to a tailor who was making some suits for him? He explained just how he wanted the checks in his trousers, just so big, with just so much color. Chopin was afraid he might not have understood from the first letter, so he wrote him another . . . and still another.

"Sometimes you find a harsh combination or a progression in the bass versus the treble that isn't quite what you would expect. But it shows, if you think about it, that Chopin couldn't bear to write consecutive fifths or octaves, that even in such moments he was conscious of pedantic considerations. Unlike some composers, whose manuscripts show what they added to their thinking, Chopin was constantly taking out. Sometimes he wrote more notes in the first version of something, but when he had finished taking out, the result was that beautiful clarity and transparency in which every note counts: the tenths in the bass against the octaves or thirds in the treble, mar-

(*Continued on page* 59)

Rubinstein

Continued from page 43

velous combination of sounds for the piano. And they sound better now than they did in his time because the instruments have been improved so much. It is amazing that in spite of the instrument he wrote for, his music anticipates so much of what later became possible. Don't forget that he was, after all, a great pianist, the best of his time, certainly, for his own music. Liszt, Moscheles, and others said so.

"Later in life it was different, which has led to a legend of 'effeminacy' in the playing of Chopin. This related to his weakened state of health and his lack of pianistic power. He had to make *his* dynamic effects all on the lower end of the scale, between *mezzo piano* and *pppp*, but he admired, most, the power in the playing that *others* brought to his music. He regarded Liszt, who was a thunderer, as the best performer of his études, and he kissed the hand of his German disciple, to whom the third scherzo is dedicated—what was his name? Oh yes, Gutmann—for his performance of the scherzo, and Gutmann was a Titan, a man who smashed pianos, and usually ended a recital with two or three strings broken.

"The mixture of elements in Chopin is a fascinating one. For us Poles he is a great national symbol, but don't forget that his father was Frenchman, a captain in the Polish National Guard, and earned a living as a French tutor in noble households. Chopin was Polish in his fierce patriotism, his feeling for the folklore of the people, the mazurkas, polonaises, ballades, etc. But there was Frenchness in his aristocracy, his meticulous manners, the way he dressed and carried himself, the workmanship on which he prided himself.

"Of all the great composers who reflected national spirit, Chopin took the least, actually, from the folk music itself. Not like Liszt and the Hungarian rhapsodies, or Brahms and the Hungarian dances, or Tchaikovsky, who was always lifting folk tunes, or Falla, whose almost every theme is derived. In all his music that I know, Chopin used a folk melody only once—in the chorale of the B minor Scherzo, which is a carol about "Jezuniu" sung at Christmas time. If you know the words,* you will never make the mistake of dropping the one note in the middle as some pianists do; you must play it so, the three, equally articulated.

"Piano writing was never the same after Chopin as before. He gave it en-

*They may be found in the Opienski collection of the Letters (Alfred A. Knopf) on page 264: "Lu-laj-ze Je-zu-niu, lu-laj-ze lu-laz" ("Lully, baby Jesus, lullaby lully.")

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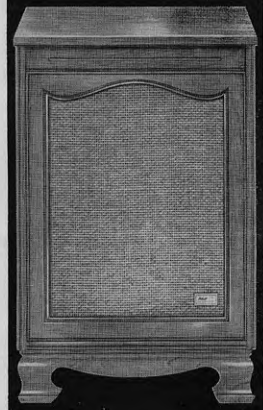

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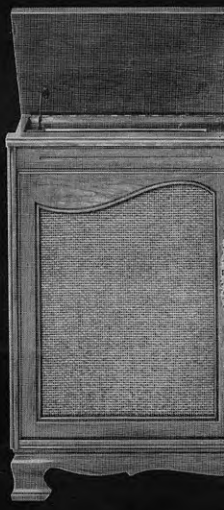
tirely new dimensions, potentialities, resources. Why is it, I have often thought since I was quite young and first got to know Chopin, that you can hear Beethoven beautifully played by Backhaus, or Bach by a chap like Busoni, or the marvelous Debussy of Gieseking, or Schumann out of this world by Serkin or Casadesus, but when it comes to Chopin, the magic isn't there, at least for me? And I don't consider myself a Chopinze. Is it something in the affinity of the player for the composer and how he used the instrument? To me, playing Chopin is as comfortable for the fingers as sitting in a chair is for the body.

"Debussy, I would say, derived more from the study of Chopin than any other composer did. He has much of the same exquisite sense of sound, of perfection in detail, of the hazy, magical quality a piano can produce. And he must have loved Chopin dearly, to take three years out of his busy composer's life to edit the edition of the *complete* works for Durand. But with all the colors and the sonorities, there is not the substance, for me at least. It's a kind of delightful *salade,* but not much meat in it.

"At the same time, if you ask me frankly, I don't think I really would have loved Chopin, as a personality, as I would have Schubert. I think sometimes we would have had disagreements, that I would have gone away from his house angry, and resolved never to talk to that fellow again. With Schubert, it would have been like the love I felt for my little son. His music is my daily bread. I play his sonatas all the time, because they are so full of *music* and sympathetic feeling. But it doesn't go as well in the concert hall (too long, or repetitious) so rather than have people receive it with patronizing indulgence—'Delightful, but too long'—I would rather not play it in public at all. There is so much of Chopin, after all.

"And now if you will pardon me I must dress for my recital this afternoon in Newark . . . like a debut. After all these years, I still feel an uncertainty, because in my profession it is only what you do today that counts; yesterday is gone. Often I think of a story I learned in Germany as a boy in Berlin, studying Latin. It was about a great athlete who went to compete in Rhodense (Rhodes, you know), where he jumped higher than he ever jumped before. When he returned to Rome, he expected a great triumph to greet him, with a procession to the Forum and so forth. When nothing happened, he expressed surprise, to which one old Senator replied: "Hic Rhodas. Hic salta"—meaning "Here is (your) Rhodes. *Here* jump."

NOT FOR THE TIMID



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Saturday Review

FEBRUARY 27, 1960 / 25¢

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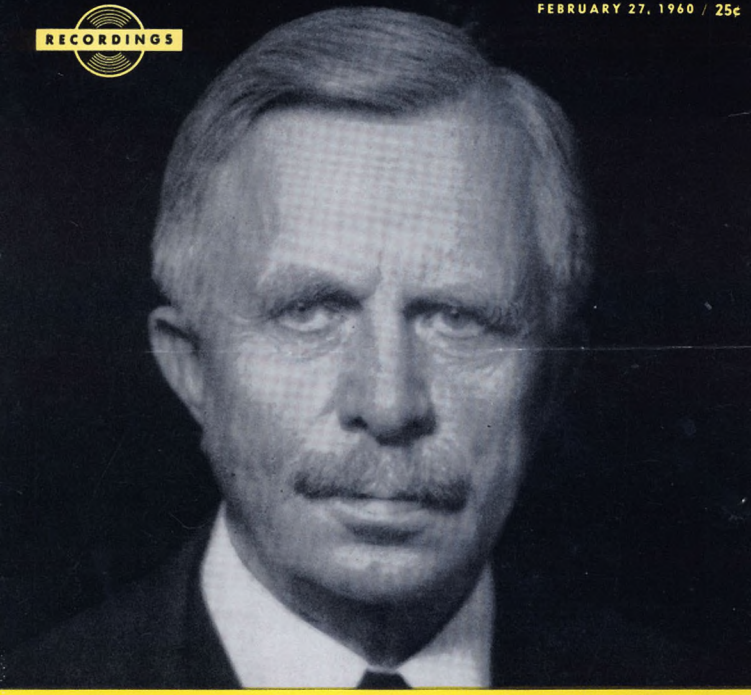

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