Rubinstein Recalls 50 Years of Music

By JAY S. HARRISON

Some musicians talk the way they play; some don't. Artur Rubinstein does. The same combination of intensity, warmth and sensitivity that has made him one of the world's most famous pianists also peppers his conversation and makes it shimmer with meaning. Currently celebrating his fiftieth anniversary as a performing artist, with a series of five difficult concerto programs in Carnegie Hall, Mr. Rubinstein might, on the grounds of natural harassment, find visitors a trial. But to him they are not.

Last Wednesday this writer had no sooner arrived in Mr. Rubinstein's Park Ave. apartment than the pianist sprang to his side and undertook a guided tour of an art collection so fabulous and extensive that it spills over into every room of the house. Dufys, Rouaults, Courbets, Kislings, Chagalls, Pissarros, Vuillards are jammed together so tightly that hardly an inch of bare wall space remains. The collection is Mr. Rubinstein's treasure. Next to his wife and children—whose presence makes him light up like a Roman candle—it is his greatest joy.

"I Belong Here"

"And there were other pictures," Mr. Rubinstein explained, "in my Paris home, but the Germans made off with my Picassos and Derains and my rare first editions of Dostoievsky, Gogol and Turgenev. But even then, I'm lucky; I'm able to buy so many others. I would be a horrible character if I complained. This country has given me so much, so much success that I would not think of complaining. And now I feel that I belong here, belong to America. When some one doubts that, I become furious.

"I will tell you. Some years ago I went to one of our State Department bureaus—I was going on a tour of Europe and I didn't want to stay away so long that my citizenship would be lost. What else could I do? I made inquiries. The man I spoke to asked me if, in Europe, I would be loyal to America. 'All of you are alike,' he said. 'In Europe, you're just a Polish pianist, not an American.' That did it!

"Quietly, though bitterly, I spoke my mind. When I swore loyalty to this country, I *swore*, and I don't swear easily. In fact, I assured him, I'm a better American than you. You can't help that you're an American, but I've chosen to be one. I could have become a Paraguayan or Venezuelan, but I didn't. Besides, my two youngest children were born in Los Angeles. You can't be more American than that. No, I concluded, damn it all, when I leave here I'm not going to be unloyal to my country. I go to Europe as a citizen of the United States, and a useful one. I think."

Mr. Rubinstein was quick to admit, however, that he does not play American works abroad. And why? His answer was simple. "I've looked, but I haven't hit on a piece that I think I can do anything with. I can only play well what I love to play, and, frankly, I haven't found that kind of American piece. You know that's true. If I find a work I like, I'll play it.

In Brazil

"Remember, in 1918 when I first went to Brazil, people told me about a musical savage who had turned up, a fiend. He had been thrown out of all kinds of conservatories. Where is he now, I asked? In a cinema, I was informed, playing the piano for Charlie Chaplin and scenes in which mothers lost their children and drunken husbands fell into a river. And so I went out of my way to hear some of this savage's music. It excited me, thrilled me. And so I played it—this music by Villa-Lobos—and I was hissed."

As he further explained, Mr. Rubinstein's trip to South America was the direct result of his success in Spain in 1916. He was called there to replace a pianist scheduled to perform the Brahms D minor concerto, and the event, though sparsely attended, in effect began his flight to musical stardom. Over 100 engagements followed and the whole populace took him up. As he put it, "even shopkeepers refused to take my money. I was like a god."

At approximately the same time, Mr. Rubinstein discovered and fell in love with Ravel's "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales." "It was," he declared, "a difficult piece—difficult for audiences, that is. When I played it in Spain the first time I asked my friends Fernandez Arbos and Manuel de Falla to applaud at the right moment—the work ends silently, you see, and I wanted the audience to realize that it was over.

"Well, no sooner had I begun than there were nasty murmurs in the orchestra. The Spanish are essentially a bullfight public and when they are displeased they let you know. They hated the Ravel, they were incensed. When the 'Valses' were over, Arbos and de Falla began to clap, but they were shushed down. I bit my lip, played my final number and again the bullfight public screamed its approval. They wanted an encore, but I was mad, insulted. At first I refused, but then I walked onto the stage and turned to the audience. 'You want some more, do you?' I inquired. 'Yes,' they shouted. 'Fine, then I shall play you Ravel's 'Valses Nobles et Sentimentales.'" In a second the whole hall began to riot and fist fights broke out. And because of this demonstration no one was able to play Ravel in Spain for three years."

Mr. Rubinstein stopped short and puffed wildly on his cold cigar. It was clear that he was through talking. He puffed wildly again. "Damn it," he said, "cigars are more jealous than women. If they feel you're losing interest in them they stop burning."

Sandra Warfield sings Marcellina in tomorrow night's "Figaro," at the Met.