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# Rubinstein's unflagging freshness

By Edward Greenfield

Artur Rubinstein often complains of being confused with the composer of the Melody in F, and likes to retaliate by pointing out that had the composer lived he would by now be over 120. It comes as a surprise, nevertheless, to find that Artur Rubinstein is himself in his seventieth year. One would never realise it from his performances. In an age when the Conservatories are turning out a daunting procession of muscular young steamhammers, Rubinstein can still rival any in technique, but to sheer brilliance and power he adds poetry in a way which few of his younger rivals will ever begin to understand.

R.C.A.'s series of concerto recordings with Rubinstein is most timely. Some of these were previously available on H.M.V., but all are worth investigating. I remember going to some of the Festival Hall concerts the other year, when in six or seven sessions Rubinstein polished off some two dozen concertos. It seemed like a stunt, and one went expecting perfunctory performances. But not at all. Disagree as one might with points of interpretation, the freshness in the playing was unmistakable. So in the records. Technically the recording is often transatlantically hard, and in a work like Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto (coupled with Liszt's No. 1 on RB 16036) Rubinstein misses the sense of mystery. But instead of mystery there is a strength and confidence which makes the Rachmaninov seem more tautly conceived than it is —a welcome point.

One of the completely new recordings is of the Schumann concerto, and here Rubinstein understands that the forceful treatment right in the Rachmaninov would have been fatal. His speeds for the outer movements are unexpectedly slowish, and there is a surprising similarity to Wilhelm Kempff's recording in which the conductor is also Josef Krips) in his long-breathed playing of the romantic paragraphs. But while finding the poetry equally with Kempff Rubinstein is more weighty in the bravura passages, and this adds to the stature of the work. Of all existing recordings of this concerto it is the one I prefer, but it is expensive in format. In both mono (RB 16145) and stereo (SB 2033) it spreads over two 12-inch sides. The Kempff is only half the price, and still sounds remarkably well (Decca LW 5337). Among one-sided versions I prefer Solomon's (coupled with the Grieg Concerto on H.M.V. ALP 1643), which is fresh and clean if not so spacious as Rubinstein's performance.

## Chopin selection

"Kempff plays Chopin" is the title of a series on Decca in which the German pianist makes a generous selection from the Chopin piano works. At first one feels disappointed when the technical smudges prevent the playing from sounding easy and confident, as it should. But for me at least this was only a temporary stage. The third disc, containing the Second and Third Piano Sonatas (mono LXT 5452 : stereo SXL 2025), helped me to realise the merits of the earlier two. In the sonatas the scale of the works somehow inspires Kempff to give the impression of command he always brings to his Beethoven playing. The smudges no longer matter. These are poetic, thoughtful readings, just such performances as Clara Schumann might have given to a close circle of friends. Kempff here represents a similar tradition to that of Askenase, but comparison with Askenase's D.G.G. record of the same two sonatas shows that Kempff, even more than Askenase, has a feeling for subtle shaping and shading that seems a natural part of the music.

The second disc of the series (mono LXT 5451 : stereo SXL 2024), containing the four Impromptus—the Berceuse, the Barcarolle, the Nocturne No. 3, and the Scherzo No. 3,—should also be sampled by anyone prepared for an individual approach to Chopin, thoughtful rather than brilliant. Kempff on a stereophonic D.G.G. disc plays Brahms's Piano Sonata, opus 5, and the E flat minor Scherzo, opus 4 (SLPM 138010). Again there are smudges, but a feeling for the warmth of the music which defies criticism. The waltz-like middle movement of the sonata has a delicious lilt to it; in lesser hands it can seem all too sentimentally