

Artur Rubinstein: Keyed Up For 91 Years

by ANTHONY MORRIS

ARTUR RUBINSTEIN, one of the greatest pianists of our time, is 91 years old, deaf in one ear, and going blind. Yet he enjoys interviews, dresses immaculately, and loves to chat about his own life and those of the other great men he has known from Pablo Picasso to Albert Einstein.

"The company about me is thinning out," he smiles a bit ruefully as he sits in his Paris apartment on a side street off the elegant Avenue Foch. "As for myself, I don't really miss the applause, the crowds, and the travels of my concert life. I have lived in heaven, and now I am quite content to hear the little bell of Paradise from time to time."

One of the most remarkable aspects of Rubinstein's musical life is that, although he began playing the piano as a child, it wasn't until he reached the age of 50 that he became a success in the United States.

Critical pans

Actually, Rubinstein, after achieving a considerable reputation as a young man, first decided to conquer America in 1906, when he was 19 years old. When he made his debut at New York's Carnegie Hall, the *New York Times* dourly commented: "His talent at present seems to reside chiefly in his fingers ... [with] no thought of any deeper significance that lies behind the notes."

Rubinstein made a second try at America when he was 35 years old, but again the critics and public were slow to respond. He might never have come here again had it not been for the urgings of impresario Sol Hurok, (no spring chicken himself) who believed in still trying at the half-century mark. In 1937 Rubinstein returned, and this time everybody was ready, including the *Times*, which suddenly discovered that

he was "a brilliant pianist and musician who should have been heard oftener on this side of the ocean."

Rubinstein gave his last concert in London in November 1978. "I said to my family then," he recalls, "that if I should ever get the crazy notion to continue performing in public, I would deserve to be shot. Look, when I was a young man I heard the great violin virtuoso Eugene Ysaie in Berlin. I waited for hours in the freezing cold outside the artists' entrance to kiss his hand. I went to almost any length not to miss the great pianist Alfred Cortot when he was in town—and then I had to watch how they were literally carried onto the platform. They were so old ... they were past it ... they had no idea of what they were playing ... They had allowed themselves to go on 10 years too long. I swore then I wasn't going to end like that."

So although you can still hear Artur Rubinstein's art on the many recordings he has made—more than 125 are readily available on the RCA label—you are not likely again to be privileged to attend a recital by him in the concert hall.

But although he has given up playing in public, he has not given up music. In fact, he's catching up on his listening.

"It took me 90 years to recognize truly divine music," he says. "During my active career I simply had no time to listen and relax. But now, it's different. Yesterday, for instance, I heard the most wonderful concerto by Mozart for oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon. I listened to three different recordings of it! Nowadays I even have time to go to the opera—at last!"

Rubinstein was born in Lodz, Poland. His father, a Jewish textile merchant, had six other children. "I was the last," he says. "By the time I arrived my eldest

Master pianist Artur Rubinstein is in highly select company among nonagenarian musicians, but he ruefully adds, "Until now I've had no time to relax."

was already 20. My family nick-named me 'little accident.'"

Rubinstein has recounted some of his career in a best-selling autobiography entitled *My Young Years*, published in 1973. It's a lively book filled with many fascinating episodes, for Rubinstein makes no secret of having been a lusty young man interested in wine and women as well as song. He still likes to recall one of the most unusual performances he was ever called upon to give:

"When I was a young fellow I was once asked to give a Chopin recital for a duchess in Rome. I was to play for 90 minutes in what I thought was going to be some private musical soiree. The grand piano was positioned in front of a heavy brocade curtain which was drawn. A flunkie kept on filling my glass of champagne, and while I played I could hear strange exultant noises coming from behind the closed curtain. A novel way of appreciating Chopin, I thought.

"After my recital a footman drew back the curtain and there was the duchess in bed with a handsome young lover! I couldn't make up my mind whether to feel insulted or honored to have been of assistance to the lady in achieving ultimate bliss."

Proud of his family

Rubinstein, who still enjoys a daily cigar, loves to show off pictures of his two sons (one of them is Broadway and TV actor John Rubinstein), his two daughters, and his six grandchildren. He is also candid about many of the musical figures of today, although he insists, "I'm not a critic, merely an old pianist." Among conductors he admires: Herbert von Karajan and Karl Böhm. Asked about Leonard Bernstein, he says: "Pretty good, but a bit of a clown. Too

much dancing about on the podium."

If he were to appear on the concert stage just one more, final time, what sort of program could we expect to hear?

"Sometimes I dream about playing in public again, but then I know that I would be tempted to go on for another five years without stopping. It isn't easy to give up something you really love. No, I'd better stick to listening to my records.

"If I could start all over again I would do many things differently. I would try to be better, more mature. I'm not always happy when I listen to my own recordings. I think my last concert was probably my best—not just because of the nostalgia I felt at the time, but because I had finally reached maturity."

Next: memoirs, part two

Right now Rubinstein is busy writing the second part of his memoirs, and after that he would like to write a book on Chopin, whose piano music has always had a special place in his repertoire.

Has he any advice for younger people, specifically younger pianists? "Well," he has said, "you sometimes talk to a 20-year-old boy and he is bitter because he is not on top already. I do think a young pianist should try to develop culturally as a person. They practice and practice and play and play, but in music people feel the whole impact of your personality, not just your playing.

"My own life proves this. I'm lazy and always was. But that doesn't mean I sat around and twiddled my thumbs. I read. I went to museums and the theater. I met people. I developed my personality."

Today, at 91, Artur Rubinstein is still doing just that. □



Rubinstein, with wife Aniela, loves attending Paris concerts now more than ever.

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Arthur Rubinstein's not playing John's song



After-dinner recitals by precocious offspring are trial enough for guests, but in the salon of piano virtuoso Arthur Rubinstein they were agony for the kids too. "We were on the front lines," recalls composer and actor John Rubinstein, 32, about the impromptu concerts he and his older sister, Lolly, were required to deliver. "My father hung out with people like Stravinsky. Dinner didn't mean chicken and noodles. It meant who did we have to play for this time."

Despite those evenings, John was a staunch promoter of his dad's career. In music shops he often slyly moved Rubinstein albums into the front of the racks. Arthur performed as many as 100 concerts a year and was constantly off in some foreign city. "I am very guilty," admits Rubinstein, 92. "I didn't find much time for the children, unfortunately." Moreover, there was what John calls the "European" distance between his Polish-born parents and the children. "If I were to sit down and pour my heart

out, they would be uncomfortable."

Still, the family was close. "My parents bestowed enormous love on us," says John, the youngest of four. In return, Arthur found he had sired his severest critics. "I heard him play one piece maybe 800 times," John reports. "So when people were raving, I might come and tell him that he had done it too slowly—and he would know it too."

Young John gradually shifted his interests to acting. After dropping out of UCLA, he starred in the movie *Zachariah*, played the title role in the Broadway musical *Pippin* and appeared often on TV's *Family*. (Arthur tries never to miss any of his son's performances.) In recent years John—now married to actress Judi West and the father of two—has also begun writing orchestral music—for movies like *The Candidate* and *Jeremiah Johnson* and for TV in *The Ordeal of Patty Hearst*. Would he consider dashing off something for the old man? Arthur answers for his son with a shrug: "He doesn't write my kind of music." □