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THE MUSICAL TIMES

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FEBRUARY 1, 1885.

MODERN SONG-WRITERS

III.—ANTON RUBINSTEIN.

By FR. NIECKS.

THE subject of the present article differs no less from those of the preceding ones than these differ from each other. Sweet pensiveness we found to be the most prominent feature in Robert Franz's artistic character, and quick reflectiveness in Franz Liszt's; in Rubinstein's we shall find it to be fresh impulsiveness.

Anton Gregory Rubinstein was born on November 30, 1829, at the Moldavian village of Wechotynez, in the neighbourhood of Jassy, near the frontier of the Russian province Bessarabia. Soon after his birth the family settled at Moscow, where his father established a pencil manufactory. The boy's love for music began to show itself at an early age, for whenever his mother, who was a good pianist, played, the little fellow took up a position near the instrument and watched and listened unweariedly. From his sixth year he received musical instruction from his mother, and in two years had made such progress that he was placed under Alexander Villoing, a pupil of Field's, and the best pianoforte teacher of the town.* Already in 1838—that is, in his ninth year—he made in Moscow his first public appearance as a pianist. A year later he went with his master to Paris. At a concert which he gave there in 1840, the boy of ten played compositions by Bach, Beethoven, Hummel, Chopin, and Liszt, and won the applause not only of the general public, but also of the many distinguished pianists that had come to hear him. Among these latter was Liszt, who congratulated the young prodigy, and encouraged him to study diligently, advising his master to take him to Germany, the most favourable ground for the development of musical talent. On leaving France, Anton Rubinstein visited first England, and then travelled very slowly homeward, stopping and playing here and there, by way of Holland, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Moscheles, who then lived in London, and heard him, mentions the "Russian boy whose fingers are as light as feathers and yet as strong as a man's" in his diary (1842), and does not hesitate to call him "a rival of Thalberg." Schumann, reviewing, in 1843, in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Anton Rubinstein's (Op. 1) "Undine,"† a study for pianoforte, speaks of the young composer as "the talented boy who has already acquired a high reputation as a player." Let us see what the elder composer has to say about the youngest of his *confrères*. "Whether he has productive talent can neither be affirmed nor denied from the present achievement. That in the little piece the melodic element—without being exactly a beautiful melody—predominates, gives hope that he has begun to understand the true nature of music, and will develop in this sense more and more felicitously." Rubinstein returned to Russia in 1843, and played during the year's stay he made there at several concerts. After this he went with his mother and younger brother, Nicholas, to Berlin, as Moscow did not offer the advantages needful for the proper and full development of their talents. Meyerbeer advised Madame Rubinstein to place her sons under Professor Dehn. The advice was

taken, and both Anton and Nicholas studied for two years harmony and counterpoint most assiduously under this learned theorist. Fétis relates that Anton Rubinstein told him one day that no sign of talent showed itself in him. "I had the will to write great things, and indeed undertook pianoforte concertos, operas, cantatas, and symphonies; but all this was only smirched paper." This is a startling revelation, not only because Nicholas never distinguished himself as a composer, but even more because one of the most striking qualities of Anton as a composer is his easy and copious productivity. A severe illness of her husband, soon followed by death (1846), recalled Madame Rubinstein to Moscow, whither her younger son accompanied her. Anton Rubinstein went to Vienna, and there made a livelihood by teaching. In the following year he undertook, with the flautist Heindl, a concert tour in Hungary. He then intended to go to America, but was persuaded to stay in Berlin, and there he remained, chiefly occupied with composition, till the outbreak of the revolution in 1848 induced him to betake himself to Russia. He chose St. Petersburg for his residence, and there for some years gave lessons and an annual concert. Of course, he was not idle as a composer. One of the works he then wrote, the Opera "Dmitri of the Don," composed in 1849 and performed in 1852, drew upon him the attention of the Grand Duchess Helen, who invited him to take up his abode in her palace of Kamenoi Ostrov. In 1854 he went once more abroad, and remained absent from Russia for four years. The Counts Wielhorski advised him, and their and the Grand Duchess's liberality enabled him to do this, their wish being that he should make himself known and perfect himself. Till the middle of 1855 he stayed in Germany, and then proceeded to Paris. England saw and heard him again in 1857. Rubinstein had ceased to be merely a promising youth, he now presented himself as a mature artist. On his reappearance in Western Europe he was at once, and unanimously, acknowledged a *virtuoso* of the first rank. "His prodigious execution," wrote a Parisian critic in 1857, "combines the force and impetuosity of Liszt and the delicacy of touch which characterised the playing of Chopin. No difficulty arrests Rubinstein. He masters his instrument as a Cossack of the Don masters his full-maned, long-tailed horse, whose savage ardour he bridles at will." But, as the same critic remarked, he was not content with this, he aimed also at the reputation of a composer, and his ambition was of the highest. Rubinstein's activity as a composer was then, as it is now, truly prodigious. According to Fétis, he wrote between the years 1848-1857 fifty works, most of them of large dimensions, including four operas, the oratorio, "Paradise Lost," four symphonies (among which is the Ocean Symphony, one of his *chefs-d'œuvre*), six quartets, one octet, five fantasias, three trios, and three sonatas. On his return to Russia, in 1858, Rubinstein was appointed Court pianist, and soon after concert conductor. The Russian Musical Society, founded in 1859, chose him for director, and the St. Petersburg Conservatorio opened in 1862 with him as principal. In 1867, however, he gave up these posts, and made a concert tour, which resembled a triumphal procession; Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and London vieing with each other in their admiration of the great artist. This is not the time and place to describe Rubinstein's repeated concert tours in Europe, or that in America (1872-73), where he is said to have played in eight months at 215 concerts, and earned 351,000 dollars. Nor shall I attempt to give a detailed account of his subsequent public achievements in Russia. His private life too—he

* Heugel, of Paris, published a "Méthode de Piano" by Villoing.

† This is one of the ten compositions subsequently cancelled by Rubinstein, who then began to count anew with Op. 1.

married in 1865, and has his home at Peterhof, near St. Petersburg—shall not be made a subject of discussion. But, besides his occasional appearances as conductor, more especially of his own works, outside of his own country, I must not omit to mention his brilliant generalship of the concerts of the Vienna Gesellschafts-Concerte during the season 1871-72. The Parisian critic quoted by me said that Rubinstein mastered the piano as the Cossack masters his horse, in the same way Rubinstein masters the orchestra. Indeed, there is only one thing he cannot master, and that one thing is his inmost self with its passionate impulses. However, let it not be thought that Rubinstein is a man all impulse and no reflection, all heart and no brain. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I found him, as, I think, all must find him who come in contact with him, one of the most thoughtful and best read musicians it is possible to meet. That his opinions and judgment are far above the common, those who have not enjoyed his conversation may gather, for instance, from his contribution to Joseph Lewinsky's "Vor den Coullissen," reprinted in the *Signale* (June, 1882, No. 38), in which paper (April, 1883, No. 32) may also be read some interesting notes on the difficulties of the execution of works of bygone times. The first-mentioned of these writings, I may say in passing, is a protest against oratorio and a plea for sacred opera.

The quantity of Rubinstein's compositions is enormous; this, however, is better shown by the titles than by the number of his works. To take only the most important of his operas, sacred and profane, tragic and comic (most of which do not bear an *opus* number), we have "Paradise Lost," "The Tower of Babel," "Dmitri of the Don," "The Children of the Heath," "Feramors," "The Demon," "The Macabees," "Nero," "Kalashnikov, the Merchant of Moscow," "The Sulamite," and "The Parrot." And what a long list of symphonies, quartets, trios, sonatas, and the like extensive instrumental works! And then the almost innumerable pianoforte pieces and songs, single and in sets! Here we are chiefly concerned with the songs, and they alone shall be enumerated. The figures in parentheses indicate the number contained in the set. The first songs which Rubinstein published are the five single ones, Op. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, of the ten compositions which he afterwards cancelled. Since his new start in counting he had published the following sets of songs: Op. 1 (6), 8 (6), 27 (9), 32 (6), 33 (6), 34 (12), 36 (12), 57 (6), 72 (6), 76 (6), 78 (12), 83 (10), 101 (12), and 105 (a series of Russian songs). Along with these songs, for a single voice with pianoforte accompaniment, may be grouped the beautiful two-part songs Op. 48 and 67.

Of Rubinstein it has been said that he is "the greatest pianist of living composers, the greatest composer of living pianists." This is pretty juggling with words. But, it will be asked, What about Liszt? Moreover, whether true or false, this epigrammatic judgment does not help us to see more clearly in the difficult question with which it plays, but rather complicates it unnecessarily. What position does Anton Rubinstein occupy among the great composers of our and of all time? That is the question one would like to have an answer to. I think he occupies a higher position in reality than in the opinion of the musical world, although this is by no means low. Some of the inadequateness of appreciation is attributable to the antipathy that exists between him and the Wagnerites (in connection with which his Hebrew origin has to be kept in mind), but for the most part it is owing to the inequality of his work, the mass of relatively inferior compositions swamping,

as it were, the unquestionably superior ones. In short, Rubinstein's case may be summed up in the paradox: Less would be more. Ambros thought that the future historians would find it more embarrassing to draw Rubinstein's portrait than their predecessors found it to draw the portraits of Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. For not only does the totality of the work of any one of these masters enable us to form in our minds a firmly outlined picture of his character, but even each single composition of theirs confirms the truthfulness of any intelligent picturing of this kind. But, he asks, how is it with Rubinstein? "Can a work like the 'Ocean Symphony' and the opera 'Feramors' have sprung from the same source?" Rubinstein reminds him of King Purmentor in a legendary tale of Kotzebue's, the august personage in question being a mighty giant up to midnight, but from the striking of that hour till sunrise a shrunken pigmy. If genius is the capacity of taking infinite pains, then Rubinstein is not a genius. Of course, this capacity of taking infinite pains is not genius, but it certainly is one of the constituents of genius, one without which the highest development of the artist and the noblest ideal of the art cannot be attained. Here we are touching a weak point in Rubinstein's artistic constitution. He seems to be always impatient to finish a thing. Hence the limited number of larger works that give unmixed pleasure. And what is the character of Rubinstein's style? One tells us that it is an offspring of Mendelssohn's, a second that it is related to Schumann's, and a third that it resembles Beethoven's. In fact, there is some kind of connection with each of these masters. Mendelssohn's straightforwardness in melody, harmony, and form, Schumann's warmth of feeling and colouring, and Beethoven's grandeur and vigour, may in turn and simultaneously all be found more or less in Rubinstein. Still it cannot be said that he is a follower of any one of them. He is an independent personality, one that rests on the broad basis of universality. In this respect he is the very opposite of self-contained individualities of the Chopin type. Narrowness, exclusiveness, and littleness of any kind are indeed foreign to his nature. Years ago I made elsewhere the attempt to sketch the artistic character of this remarkable artist. As I do not think I could do it better were I to do it over again, I shall transcribe a part of what I then wrote, not, however, without making some slight alterations:—

"What strikes one first in Rubinstein's playing and in his compositions is an all-pervading freshness and air of inartificiality, which tell us at once that the outcome of the musician is a faithful reflection of the man. All is healthy and strong. The health seems to be indestructible, and the strength is so exuberant as at times to burst out irrepressibly and tumultuously with a Titanic animality. Passages in his works, and moments in his pianoforte performances, will no doubt suggest themselves to the reader. But the Titan who now ejaculates words of command or imprecation, who raises or hurls colossal rocks with superhuman strength, who grasps his enemy with iron hands, breathes out in the next moment his love in tender whispers, and caresses with more gentleness than hands of woman ever did. In short, a healthy manliness is the chief feature of his character. With the morbid, the vague, the dreamy, the transcendently sensuous, he has nothing to do. He shows a predilection for great canvases and grand and simple subjects. He is less successful in miniature-painting, and in things that require much attention to detail. This is not said in ignorance of his short pianoforte pieces and songs, many of which are very beautiful, but in which it is

impossible to overlook his *penchant* for grandeur and breadth. Then he rather walks the broad highways than explores the narrow by-paths of feeling. . . . Rubinstein belongs to no school, he is too independent for that; neither, I think, will he found a school, to do that he would require to have greater originality than he has (although that is considerable), or to be more of a mannerist. As the form of his countenance shows some similarity with that of Beethoven, so also does his character as expressed by his music. He has something of Beethoven's sweep, grandeur, and massiveness; but he lacks Beethoven's power of digesting, sifting, evolving, and ordering. He is not fastidious enough in the choice of his thoughts—he does not know how to wait for the happy moment, and hence we find in many of his works common-places side by side with noble thoughts. Indeed, he has published much that is unworthy of him, and only a few of his larger works attain that perfection of contents and form which satisfies all claims that may justly be made on a work of art.*

Some of the above remarks seem to me to stand in need of explanation. Let me see if I can bring out my meaning with a little more precision. Delicate workmanship is not Rubinstein's specialty—he prefers fresco-painting to miniature painting†—still he has written many delicate little things, in which, however, sweet simplicity, rather than elaborate minuteness, prevails. And then with regard to his *penchant* for grandeur, it shows itself much more in the pianoforte pieces than in the songs. Indeed, these latter present themselves, for the most part, with a modesty and naïveté that contrast curiously with the bold heroism of most of the master's works, but are in accord with the nature of the artist who combines in his playing “the impetuosity of Liszt and the delicacy of Chopin.” Breadth, rightly understood, is a quality which is nowhere out of place, and with this composer is noticeable in great and little things.

Rubinstein's songs are songs in the strict sense of the word. They have what Hauptmann said every song ought to have—namely, something of the nature of the folk-song. They are songs that can really be sung; whereas most modern songs can only be declaimed. I imagine the master sang them when he conceived them. They must have come welling up from the rich bourne of melody within him. In form they are sometimes strophic, sometimes through-composed; the composer evidences a preference for the former structure even where he employs the latter, for he generally respects the poet's formal disposition. But in the songs, as elsewhere, Rubinstein is unequal. In these short works the inequality does not of course show itself in one and the same composition. Every one, or almost every one, of the songs is melodious; not all, however, have that distinction which impresses the hearer; that flavour, that fragrance, that indescribable something which charms him. This circumstance makes a selection very desirable, and Messrs. Novello, Ewer and Co.'s “Album of German Song,” No. III., which contains twenty-five of the composer's best songs, is therefore a most welcome publication.‡ The editor, Mr. Hueffer, who has also furnished the translations, may be unreservedly congratulated on the happy accomplishment of his task of sifting; his selection is a real anthology.

In the early *opus* numbers—for instance, in Op. 1 and in Op. 8—there is a vein of melody that is flowing and natural, but, at the same time, commonplace.

* And even of scene-painting there is enough and to spare in his works. I say enough and to spare because it is to be found in what we may call easel-pieces, where it is out of place, being indeed rather the result of negligence than of judicious calculation.

† Perhaps it will be asked: How is it that Rubinstein is numbered with the German song-writers? The answer to this question will be: Because he wrote most of his songs to German words.

The accompaniments, too, are of a simplicity that is dangerously akin to baldness. This, however, soon changes; for whilst always remaining subordinate to the voice part, and, for the most part, unpretentious, the accompaniments become interesting and, in the noblest sense, effective. My favourite sets of Rubinstein's songs are three in number, and of these comes first and foremost Op. 72, six songs, the original German words of which are by G. von Boddien, Th. Storm, and C. Lemcke. Mr. Hueffer inserted no less than five of the six songs in his selection, and I, for one, shall not blame him for it. Another very fine set is Op. 34, the music of which Rubinstein composed to twelve of Bodenstedt's “Songs of Mirza Schaffy.” These Persian songs (see “Album,” pp. 29, 32, 34, 36, 38, 42, and 44) have a character of their own, and are of great piquancy. The third of my favourite sets is Op. 32, six songs of Heine's (see “Album,” pp. 16, 18, 23, and 26), among which is the magic “The Asra.” To come wholly under the spell of this composition, which, if one analyses it, seems insignificant, you must have the original German words, with their vague, romantic suggestiveness and exquisite perfectness of form. The specimens culled by the editor of the “Album” from Op. 33, 57, and 76, show that the beautiful songs of Rubinstein are not all contained in Op. 72, 34, and 32. Indeed, the selection might easily have been enlarged without weakening it. One song I missed with regret—namely, No. 7 (“Vernehmst ihr”) of Op. 36, twelve songs translated into German by Bodenstedt, from the Russian of Lermontov, Poushkin, and the Countess Rostopchin. Among those songs of Rubinstein's I care least for I reckon foremost his settings of poems by Musset and Lamartine, Part I. of Op. 83. If I were to indulge in minute criticism I should not want interesting matter for discussion, in the Persian songs more especially—for instance, the long introductory and concluding symphonies of No. 10 (“The golden sun is shining”), which are respectively in E flat major and G major, whilst the song itself is in G minor; and the curious prelude, which forms the introductory symphony to No. 8 (“Bend, fairest blossom”). And how enthusiastically might I not expatiate on the beauty of my favourite songs—on the bewitching suavity of “The dewdrops shine” (Op. 72, No. 1), the piquant naiveness of “Like to a lark” (Op. 72, No. 2), the touchingly expressive simplicity of “Budding stands the Queen of Roses” (Op. 33, No. 2), and so on. Very interesting, too, would be a comparison of the settings of the same words by several composers; for instance Liszt's and Rubinstein's settings of Heine's “Du bist wie eine Blume” (“A flower thou resemblest”), and of Goethe's “Freudvoll und leidvoll” (“Clara's Song”). However, I shall spare the reader all this, and only say one word in conclusion. Before a final judgment can be pronounced on the composer Rubinstein, we shall yet for a long time have to flounder between the Charybdis of momentary impressions and the Scylla of chronic hallucinations; but even now I venture to assert confidently, without fear of contradiction from those acquainted with the matter, that the best of this composer's songs belong to the best that has been created in this *genre*.

HANDEL MYTHS

By WILLIAM H. CUMMINGS.

II.

In February, 1835, the *New Monthly Magazine* printed the following letter which was subsequently reproduced in the *Times*, April 17, 1835.

“An inquiry was made through the medium of a late musical periodical if any information could be given by its correspondents concerning the origin of