

REMINISCENCES OF ANTON RUBINSTEIN

By VICTOR WALTER

TWENTY years have passed since the death of Anton Rubinstein,¹ but the memory of this master musician and his playing is as vivid in the minds of those who had ever heard him as if he had died but yesterday. In the course of these twenty years I have heard the greatest artists of our time, but none of the strongest musical impressions could dim the recollection of the playing of Anton Rubinstein. The one thing in his playing that stands out in my memory with especial clearness and positiveness is the transcendental quality of the music, the very essence of interpretative art which distinguishes music from every other art save that of acting. In the case of painting, sculpture, or poetry we have before us something which is a finished product. The artist or author who has created the particular thing has disappeared, and the effect of his picture or novel takes place quite frequently after its creator has ceased to be. To be sure, to everyone who considers a work of art as something having a life of its own, the presence in it of the soul of its departed creator is a fact not open to question. But such an embodiment of a creator's soul in his production differs infinitely from the part played in its effect produced upon us by the performing actor or musician at the time of its actual performance. At that moment our attitude, our mood, is entirely in the hands of the particular musician or actor. This mood, the whole gamut of our spiritual experiences, attaining sometimes extraordinary intensity, is the result of this very process of re-creation which goes on just at the time of performance.

But there is an exceedingly important difference, at that, between the recreative art of the musician and that of the actor. In the actor's case the meaning of the words he utters, the varying voice inflections, and all his gestures combine with his actions to make one whole; and the strength of our impression depends upon the degree in which the actor succeeds in creating this artistic whole, the meaning of which is quite comprehensible to the spectator.

¹These reminiscences, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Rubinstein's death, were written 1914 and published in *Vissnii Yevropy*, a leading Russian monthly. —*Trans.*

Something entirely different occurs when we listen to the playing of a musician. Before us sits a person who (assuming him to be a pianist) executes a multiplicity of movements on the keyboard, the meaning of which is utterly unintelligible to us, but which fill the air with such sounds as grip our souls with a direct force unknown to any other art. And it is noteworthy, too, that this power over us the musician attains, not in accordance with the movements he executes before us—movements which have no meaning for us—but, as it were, in spite of these movements. The power of music over us is such that it masters us despite our visual impressions.¹

It is given to but very few artists, artists whose performance makes us forget that they are playing upon an instrument, to cast such a spell over us. To such rare geniuses belonged Anton Rubinstein. When he played the piano the auditor would forget that skill and special technique are necessary in order to play this instrument. To speak of Rubinstein's "technique" were the grossest sacrilege to those who had ever heard him.² In his playing one heard the joys and the sorrows of the human heart—felt the tempest of rage and the tenderest caresses, the pious admiration induced by a clear sky and the mystic horror we are overcome by the sight of an open grave. This artist, leaning over the keyboard with his characteristic head and lion's *chevelure*, made one go through every spiritual human experience. In the outward appearance of Rubinstein there was something that impressed everyone, without exception, in an unusual degree. Especially striking was his resemblance to Beethoven, in consequence of which Liszt fondly called him "Van the Second."

I had the good fortune not only to hear Rubinstein, but to play in an orchestra under his leadership for three and a half years while studying at the Petrograd Conservatory. This was more than twenty-five years ago, and I have since heard and played under conductors much greater than Rubinstein. But I can still repeat that it was happiness itself to play under his baton—a great joy, coupled with much fear and trembling, both of which we experienced when before us stood the severe but revered Anton Grigorievitch.³ In 1887 Rubinstein, after twenty

¹Substantiation of this statement may be found in the comical impression produced upon us by one who plays with spirit on a silent piano.

²In his posthumous book, *Gedankenkorb*, Rubinstein wrote: "Playing on the piano consists in moving the fingers, but performing on the piano ('Klavervortrag') consists in moving hearts. Nowadays one most commonly witnesses the former."

³Rubinstein's patronymic. Russians commonly use patronymics to express intimacy, admiration, or respect.—*Translator*.

years' wandering over Western Europe, again headed the Petrograd Conservatory. He was its director and conducted, besides, (without remuneration, as usual) classes in pianoforte, ensemble, and orchestra. It was in these classes that I had the opportunity to observe and delight in the striking spiritual and artistic beauty of this great man.

When Rubinstein undertook anything he always applied himself to it with all the energy and enthusiasm his strength permitted—and of that, despite his advanced years, he had much more than the average run of men. And he expected just such an attitude toward the particular business in hand from everyone who participated in it. Moreover, in his ardor for the task, he would sometimes fail to notice that his co-workers were completely exhausted and that his demands were altogether beyond their powers. When we studied the program of a particular concert or were preparing an opera, Rubinstein could rehearse for six or more hours at a stretch, and still retained a lot of reserve energy when all the rest of us were completely fagged out.

To trip up at such rehearsals was a terrible thing indeed, for Rubinstein very quickly became infuriated, and it was dangerous at such times to get in his way. I shall cite but two instances.

Once, at a rehearsal, the first of the second violins—a certain Mr. Fidelman—chatted and joked with his neighbor without noticing the angry glances of Rubinstein, standing at the conductor's desk. The finale of this violinist's merriment was a sad one. With a stroke of the baton, the conductor almost knocked the violin out of Fidelman's hands, and the terrified pupil only saved himself from Rubinstein's wrath by precipitate flight. The other instance occurred during a rehearsal of a Mozart opera. A certain procession on the stage would not turn out well. Rubinstein shouted, raged, and finally demanded that Professor Samuss, who was acting as a prompter, tell him how many bars there were in the first part of the march. The latter crawled out from the prompter's booth and, sitting down by it, began to count. "Nine bars, Anton Grigorievitch," he replied. (He had included both the *prima* and the *secunda* volta). "Impossible," answered Rubinstein with amazement. "One, two, three—why, there are but eight bars here! Hand me the score." Samuss handed him an unbound music book, which came flying at the head of the professor, who barely had time to dive into his booth again.

Rubinstein's quick temper really made him a terror at work, but none took any offense even at his rudest acts, so sincerely and unreservedly did everyone worship him. Everyone knew

that Rubinstein was always controlled by a single feeling—the love of music, to which he devoted his whole life—and that he was always ready to make all possible amends for whatever offence he might have given.

As a conductor Rubinstein had serious shortcomings, which prevented his taking among the wielders of the baton the high rank he held as a pianist.¹ The chief of these shortcomings was the lack of the indispensable psychological bond between Rubinstein and every member of the orchestra. For him performing music was such a natural thing, that he could hardly realize that there may be tasks beyond the powers of a given player. Even if he did bear such “trifles” in mind during rehearsals and try to put himself in the musicians’ place, he would become too much wrought up at concert-time to think of any ill-starred violinist or flautist. The absence of such a psychological bond between conductor and orchestra sometimes proved really disastrous—as happened, for instance, at a performance of the opera *The Merchant Kalashnikov*, given under Rubinstein’s direction, when the chorus and the orchestra strayed so far apart that the performance had to be stopped.²

Nevertheless, I will say again that under Rubinstein’s baton we played with truly artistic expressiveness. Never again in all my life did I experience such a performance of Schumann’s fourth Symphony as we gave under Rubinstein. Before us stood an artistic genius who loved music more than anything else in the world and who taught us, too, to love it with all our heart and soul.

The musical artist is one who creates under the eyes of the public and who experiences the results of his creative art during the process of creation. Creative art, in general, is a form of activity which brings to an artist the highest kind of satisfaction known to man.

But in order to experience it, the poet or the painter must sometimes wait all his life (frequently dying without having experienced it), because it takes time for the people to appreciate

¹Next to Liszt, Rubinstein was unquestionably the greatest pianist, and he knew it. But to Liszt he always gave the palm of priority. In 1885, at a banquet at Pressburg, following a concert given by Rubinstein for the benefit of the Hummel monument fund, the toastmaster said: “Pressburg has seen some great days when Liszt played for the benefit of the Hummel fund, but to-day it harbors within its walls both of the greatest masters of pianoforte playing.” To this Rubinstein replied: “I must beg leave to differ. I and the like of me are but ordinary soldiers beside that field-marshal, Franz Liszt.”

²This catastrophe occurred at the Maryinsky Theatre, where Rubinstein conducted his own operas on various occasions.

his works. The musical artist is quite differently situated. To him this experience comes during the very act of creation, and therefore there is no happier lot than that of the musical artist.

The power exercised by a music-master over an audience is one of the most wonderful phenomena in the world. A large crowd of people, composed of all sorts and conditions of men, all in diverse moods, have gathered together; and a certain individual whom they see for the first time perhaps, makes them all feel as he chooses. "Can we permit," asks Pozdnyshev in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, "anyone who chooses to hypnotize another or others and to do then what he pleases with his subject or subjects?" It is this extraordinary power over people that brings the musical artist a kind of happiness that is beyond the reach of other men. Just such an artist was Anton Rubinstein, who was, besides, also a rare idealist.

Two great failings most commonly mar the artist's ideal: the lust for money and vanity. With such a power over crowds as was just alluded to, the music-master's opportunity to reap huge pecuniary harvests for the pleasure he gives his audiences, comes as a matter of course. But it lies in the very nature of money to make us crave for more and more, and even the most famous artists are unable to resist such a temptation. Becoming abject slaves to this lust for lucre, they commence to commercialize their art.

This failing Anton Rubinstein never had in the slightest degree. His first concert, as a boy of ten, he gave for the benefit of the poor, and his last (in 1893, when he was already a man of sixty-four) was given for the benefit of the blind. Between these two concerts, Rubinstein played innumerable times for charity and the proceeds from these performances exceeded many times the sum he earned for himself. "Giving is to me a greater satisfaction than having," he would say, "and if I still strive for the latter, it is only in order to have the pleasure of doing the former. . . . I should like to have just enough money to satisfy my own normal needs. For a surplus I have no stomach at all; and amassing a fortune, even with the view of leaving it to one's heirs, I consider ignoble." These words of Rubinstein, quoted from his book *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, we can believe implicitly, for I know of no other great man who spoke so truthfully about himself.

The other failing of artists is vanity, and as a result of this petty passion, common to even the greatest geniuses, come jealousy

of one's rivals and self-adulation. If the public but knew to what means musical artists resort, especially the older ones, in order to uphold their reputations and to obscure those of their younger rivals, happy in their very youth; if the public but knew how these artists humiliate themselves before their critics, whom they despise as judges of art,—then such artists would lose much of their prestige with the public.

From such vanity Rubinstein's character was as free as from the lust for money. As an artist and community worker—it was he who created our conservatories—Rubinstein had many enemies, and among them were persons who played a prominent rôle in the musical world—such as Serov and the circle of Balakirev. But no one who knew Rubinstein and the musical life of his times would ever think of attributing to Anton Rubinstein the slightest act calculated to raise his artistic prestige [by illegitimate means]. It is true that as a pianist Rubinstein had no rivals, and Serov's attacks on his playing could not disturb him. But as a conductor, and especially as a composer, Rubinstein was very vulnerable to [adverse] criticism, and Wagner, Brahms, and our own Tchaikovsky might easily have aroused the envy of Rubinstein the composer.

Did Rubinstein know this feeling of envy that so degrades artists?

As a composer, Rubinstein had from his youth (his first composition, the piano piece "Undina," was published in 1843, when he was but fourteen) been most fortunately situated. The publishers not only published all his compositions, but paid him for them, which was a rare distinction in those days. His compositions were eagerly performed in public, and Rubinstein was the first Russian composer whose compositions took a permanent place in the concert-halls and the operatic repertoires of Germany and Austria. With the musicians, Rubinstein enjoyed a very high reputation as a composer, while with the public a few of his compositions (*The Demon*, his piano pieces, and his songs) became exceedingly popular. With all that, Rubinstein's creative work was the source of his keenest spiritual suffering, because he realized that in this field he had not triumphed; and this realization became clearer and clearer toward the end of his life.

Wagner's unmistakable triumph evoked only a good-natured smile on Rubinstein's face. Brought up on the German classics and being extremely conservative by nature, Rubinstein viewed the innovators (Liszt, Wagner, and our own Balakirev circle) with undisguised derision. While recognizing their talents and

the sincerity of their aims, he had absolutely no faith in their future. For Wagner personally—as a man and as an artist—Rubinstein felt a positive antipathy; and their personalities were indeed totally different.

Much nearer to Rubinstein by his tendency as a composer was Brahms. Of him Rubinstein wrote in his *Thoughts and Aphorisms*: "I regard Brahms as the successor of Schumann, and myself as the successor of Schubert and Chopin—we two conclude the third epoch of musical art." "With the death of Schumann and Chopin, *finis musica!*"—(*A. Rubinstein's Music and Its Representatives*).

Now as to Tchaikovsky, whose popularity in Russia has certainly eclipsed Rubinstein's. The latter's relations with Tchaikovsky, his foremost pupil in composition, were quite puzzling. For Tchaikovsky's music he had a dislike, bordering on abhorrence—which is the more strange because Tchaikovsky did not belong to the innovators at all and enjoyed, as a man, the friendly regard of his teacher. Nevertheless, owing to his straightforwardness, Rubinstein could not conceal his attitude toward Tchaikovsky's music; and the latter suffered from it inexpressibly. Tchaikovsky in 1892 (six months before his death) wrote to Rubinstein's biographer, E. Tsabel:

In my younger days I very impatiently blazed my way—tried to acquire a name and fame as a composer—and hoped that Rubinstein, who then already occupied a prominent place in the musical world, would help me in my quest for laurels. But I must confess with grief that Anton Rubinstein did nothing, *absolutely nothing*, to further my desires and projects. He never, to be sure, did me any harm—he is too high-minded and good-hearted ever to harm a colleague—but his bearing toward me always remained reserved and benevolently indifferent. The most plausible explanation for this humiliating condescension is a *dislike for my music and an antipathy for my musical personality*. I now see him at times, and always with pleasure, for this extraordinary man has but to hold out his hand and talk to you with a smile to make you ready to fall at his feet.

In commenting on this letter of Tchaikovsky, the composer's biographer says:

The legend about Anton Grigorievitch's jealousy, which was entirely unconfirmed by any act or deed, perturbed and angered Peter Ilyitch. . . . It was simply a feeling, entertained also by the latter toward the compositions of Chopin and Brahms, of unreasoning and

¹In 1888 Rubinstein was asked to write a cantata for the coronation of Alexander III. He declined because he had other work in hand and the time was too short, but suggested Tchaikovsky, who composed "The Coronation Cantata."

irrepressible antipathy. (Modest Tchaikovsky: *The Life of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky*.)

The ideal traits of Rubinstein's character were fully reflected also in his educational activities. He was twice director and professor of the Petrograd Conservatory—the first time on its establishment, which was largely the result of his own efforts and in which he was greatly aided by the Grand Duchess Yeliena Pavlovna. “A most excellent woman she was, the like of whom, in her sphere of life, I have never met before or since,” says Rubinstein in his *Autobiographical Reminiscences*.

It was at the court of this Grand Duchess in 1859 that these music classes were instituted which resulted in the Petrograd Conservatory three years later. Recalling those days, Rubinstein wrote:

The present times are, of course, better in many ways (I am speaking of the musical world) than those of 1859–1860. Art has become quite wide-spread in society; it has illumined and drawn within its sphere a multitude of people. But of such a passionate love as we were inspired by, there is none, alas! The best musical forces of those days, residing at Petrograd, gave their time and labor almost for nothing, only to lay a foundation for the excellent work. . . . I appointed myself director of the budding conservatory.

Five years (1862–1867) Rubinstein labored over his foundation, devoting to it all his time and energy. He was director, conductor, professor of piano and composition, and represented the ideal embodiment of a musical artist, all in one. This impression of Rubinstein's entire personality was so enchanting that such a man as Tchaikovsky, a person of much egotism and pride, and one who never knew of subordination, was ready, thirty years after studying at the conservatory under Rubinstein's direction, to fall at the feet of this great music-master.

With good-natured irony does Anton Rubinstein write about the enemies created by his conservatory:

Ultimately, when we had come to understand the underlying cause of their attacks, we began to create rôles for the antagonizers of our undertaking. We formed various committees within the Russian Musical Society, and invited the fault-finders to become their members. We thus gradually appeased their longings and personal vanities.

It was probably such personal vanities in Rubinstein's co-workers that caused his withdrawal from the conservatory in 1867. He himself says:

In September, of 1867, I left the conservatory, as I differed with certain professors in my views upon the very essence and aim of [musical] instruction. Besides, I am really a man of a fiery temperament

and stern besides; I take everything much to heart because I passionately love the work itself. (*Autobiography*).

The final clash came over the final examinations of the conservatory's second graduating class, which the professors had made too inexact. "To avoid the multiplication of mediocrities in [musical] art, diplomas should be awarded only to those of exceptional talent. In all other cases, certificates should be substituted."

Twenty years later Rubinstein again assumed the duties of director at the conservatory, and served in this capacity three years and a half (from January of 1887 to the summer of 1890). This time the great artist endured the struggle against petty vanities even a shorter period than in the sixties. His view that a conservatory should turn out only exceptional musicians met with little favor among the teaching staff.

Rubinstein's Jubilee, celebrated in 1889 with unprecedented solemnity, showed how sincerely and infinitely this genius was loved and adored by the tens of thousands who had heard him play.

One would think that the life of such a master musician must have been a continuous hymn of joy. But this is what Rubinstein wrote to his Berlin publisher, Senff, in 1889 (this letter became public only in 1912):

I confess to you frankly and honestly that complete disappointment is the sum total of all my artistic activity!

That to which I have attached special importance all my life, and to which I have devoted all my knowledge and built all my hopes upon—my work as a composer—has met with failure. Neither the musicians (on whom my hopes always rested) nor the public (whom I gladly forgive) would recognize me as a composer. Still, there is enough human weakness left in me to be confident that neither the former nor the latter are right and that I am myself to blame for my failures, because I always kept aloof from any partisanship, because I always expressed myself frankly as to what pleased me or displeased me in music, and especially because as a composer I wearied the people so little. One must tell the people that he is a God, you know. Some will be crucified for this, but, ultimately, someone will be taken at his word.

Mohammed had to tell people that he was a prophet; Wagner, that he was the savior of art; etc. But my philosophic turn of mind or a sense of irony always restrained me from such a course, to no good purpose, as I now see. At the Devil's behest, I still do not go to the mountain when the mountain would not come to me. My whole life is but a mockery!

My present activity, too, is but an absurdity; for I, who am convinced that musical art is absolutely dead, that not even eight measures are composed nowadays which are worth anything, and that the singing and instrumental playing, of whatever kind, heard these days cannot

even be compared with the state of these arts in former times,—I am devoting all my time to the preparation of young composers and performers, well aware that these efforts are absolutely wasted. After all this, you can imagine how much irony I shall have to endure during the approaching so-called Jubilee celebration planned in my honor.

What a tragic confession! And we must trust the sincerity of it unequivocally, for of all the great men, Anton Rubinstein was the most veracious. How much the bitterness of this confession would be intensified now, when the name of Rubinstein the composer has suffered ever so much more (and justly, alas!) in the eyes of the public and, especially, of the musicians. And yet, this tragic confession does not call forth in us even a bit of pity for its author. Excellent and happy was the life of this man. Let his personality serve us as the ideal of an artist who devoted all his life to the greatest of the arts—music!

(Translated by D. A. Modell from Vlastnic Yevropy.)