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TV-Radio

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A Delightful Disaster

LAST YEAR, after CBS had presented Vladimir Horowitz in a special, televised concert, an NBC executive was heard to remark that the program was a "disaster" because it was viewed by "only nine million people." How odd then (considering the fact that the executive's comment probably reflected prevailing opinion at his network) that this season NBC should turn up with a ninety-minute special of its own, *NBC News Presents Arthur Rubinstein.* Either the competing networks copycat disasters of this sort—for the sake of making cultural points with minority audiences—or they suffer from some suicidal contagion.

In any case, the Rubinstein program, like the Horowitz concert, was a beneficent disaster. Viewers not only enjoyed the Rubinstein art at the piano (he played Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Prokofiev, and Villa-Lobos); they also were afforded a close-up of a man who is successful personally as well as professionally, who has known pain but has transcended it—a man of candor, humility, and good humor, a romanticist, an elitist of the old school.

The title *NBC News Presents Arthur Rubinstein* is essentially inaccurate. The pianist presented himself in this program—an innovation in the handling of noted musicians on film. In the past there have been two kinds of options: 1) let the cameras and microphones report a concert "objectively" with no interview or comment—as in the Horowitz program; 2) let a narrator interpose himself between performer and audience and arrange impressions so that the artist is seen comprehensively from a special angle (as, for example, in past programs featuring Van Cliburn and George Szell).

The idea of presenting Rubinstein on Rubinstein was originally conceived for a film now playing in French cinemas, directed by François Reichenbach, produced by Bernard Chevry. It won great praise last May at the Cannes International Film Festival for its vitality and beautiful color photography. NBC bought the rights, and George A. Vicas, a network producer, edited the film to its television form. He lengthened the music, added on-camera talk, eliminated foreign languages, but essentially he placed much of the Rubinstein commentary under the film, thus heightening the first-person narrator impact.

How accurately a man can report himself—or is willing to do so in public—is a difficult question. The artist's self-criticism in this case was informative and entertaining. All artists are capable of self-criticism, in varying degree, but how many are capable of turning in an acceptable performance of their self-criticism? Like a good performer who makes the difficult seem simple, Rubinstein made his confessions seem effortless and enjoyable. He told of his prodigal musical talent as a child, of his early success as a pianist who was "a swindler," a performer who got away with bad playing because he played quickly, with emotion and temperament. His marriage, late in life, to a young woman who was a fine musician impelled him to get down to serious practice, which he still loathes. He revealed that certain passages are chronic obstacles, and he played one of them several times to show which version was the right one. We saw him accepting the adulation of audiences with good grace but without the contamination of blind egotism, relishing the dry-eyed criticism of his wife and daughters, who tell him the truth about his performances.

He told students in Tel Aviv that he could make no judgment about modern music, which he does not play because he does not understand it. He struck somber notes with memories of pogroms that he witnessed as a child in Poland, and with a terse mention of the deaths of close kin in Nazi concentration camps. He talked of his love for Chopin, of festive parties in the past at his home in Montmartre, of life in airplanes, of his summer home in Spain, and of how he always plays to one person in his audience, an ideal listener who appreciates all the subtleties which others may miss. He played, of course—informally at his own piano, at pianos in the Steinway basement, at rehearsals and concerts—and the vivid colors of the settings, the superb sounds, and the rapt audiences all testified to the happy union of music and its spirit with the technology of television. If this was another "disaster" in the syntax of the ratings system, it was the grammar of winning friends and influencing people for NBC, and a powerful rhetoric pleading for a plenitude of such disasters in the future.