RFH CONCERT

Neville Cardus

Artur Rubinstein

LONDON at present is fortunate to hear two great pianists, Claudio Arrau and Artur Rubinstein, each a master entirely different from the other in musical approach and aesthetic, and, consequently, different in style, technique and tonal palette. We are, all of us, either Platonists or Aristoteleans—if we have brains and sensibilities at all. There is an old canvas which depicts Plato pointing upwards, Aristotle indicating the material and analytical earth. Arrau bends low over the keyboard, as though searching beyond the notes for the music behind the notes. Often Rubinstein looks upwards, as if he were listening not to the sounds he is awakening from the piano, but to some overtones to be overheard only by himself. We need not compare these two artists, set one against the other. There is a glory of the sun and another glory of the moon.

Rubinstein, of course, is old enough to be Arrau's father, but at his recital last night, in the Royal Festival Hall, this amazing octogenarian tripped up the steps of the platform leaving panting time in his rear, several lengths, I should say. He played the "Appassionata" sonata of Beethoven without a single heavily austere touch. He might well have been reminding us that Beethoven himself was a virtuoso pianist ready, at times, to explore and exhibit the keyboard for its own sake, for the dynamic power of hammers and strings, for the piano's marvellous ability to transform hammers and strings into floating lines of song, hammers and strings dematerialised. This was a romantic Beethoven, classically nurtured. Every classic, said Stendhal, was a romantic in his own time. Rubinstein cast a beautiful evocative veil over the opening bars of the "Appassionata"; and as he stirred into audibility the flickering music at the end of the movement, his fingers apparently moved by instinct, and could well have been stained by the rich pianistic dyes they were working in. The slow movement had no burden of introspection, yet there were subtle foreshadowings of the arietta of op. 111.

"Carnaval," of Schumann, is the sort of composition Rubinstein conceivably would compose himself, a kaleidoscope of poetic and picturesque images, seen instantaneously by the eye of music. Rubinstein did not allow the changing pieces to lapse into the miscellaneous. There was a close and nicely-judged sequence, with a recurrent nobility of harmony, which retained the true stature of Schumann. Joachim said of "Carnaval" that it had been written "with a golden pen"; in this enchanting interpretation by Rubinstein we could remember the force of this remark. And it was all so freshly-minted. It is difficult to think of a Rubinstein interpretation as a matter planned and worked-out in the abstract, then expounded at the keyboard. He causes the music to seem created and born on the spot, so to say; yet we can feel always that the experience of a long lifetime is directing every phrase.

His Chopin playing is nowadays incomparable. On this occasion his programme contained the F minor Ballade, the Berceuse, two of the waltzes, and the impromptu in G flat. He has the secret of evoking the sentiment of Chopin free of sentimentality. Indulgent languor is foreign to the purity of Chopin's melodic curve and flight. With Rubinstein, Chopin is always aristocratic; he never allows the wing of a Chopin melody to droop or get broken. His experiences with the "moderns," with Stravinsky in particular, and Bartók, have given a permanent astringency to his essentially romantic art. A harvest of culture is in his playing, and consistently he observes artistic fidelity to his medium; that is to say, he remains, through all his ranging musical insight, the glorying pianist, in love with the instrument and, at the same time, objectively surveying his own subjective reactions. He is a perfect example of the "disinterested spectator" who, according to Diderot, must reside at the back of every artists mind, watching critically, taking note of every expressive aim and *nuance*. I confess that I was as much moved as enchanted by this recital. To see Rubinstein's inscrutable face as he sits almost immobile on the piano stool, without superfluous physical activity, to look on a face that reveals nothing except, maybe, some private satisfaction—this in itself is an artistic experience. Rubinstein is already legendary, historical. More remarkable, he is contemporary, swaying the latest generations. When he was calling up for us Schumann's Pierrot, Estrella, Paganini, and Coquette, as though new-born, I could only conclude that in music and the piano, and in his way of living, he has indeed discovered the elixir of life. The congested hall apparently was spellbound.