ARTUR RUBINSTEIN ON CHOPIN—GEORGE SZELL ON SCHUMANN

Two Eminent Musicians Reveal New Facets Of the Composers

By ARTUR RUBINSTEIN

THOUGH it might be more dramatic to say that my discovery of Chopin took place in infancy and that once hearing his music I vowed in my crib to devote myself to his cause for eternity, the truth, as always, is more interesting. The awakening came relatively late—after I had been performing in public for ten years, as a matter of fact.

I wasn't introduced to Chopin by my first piano teacher because teachers in those days didn't give little children Chopin to play as they do now. This, I feel, was wise. No child, even a precocious one, has the kind of emotional maturity it takes to comprehend Chopin. In place of Chopin, I was given pieces by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Mendelssohn—all of whom I loved.

As you can imagine, however, I heard quite a bit of Chopin during my childhood in Poland—mazurkas, polonaises, nocturnes, the whole beloved repertory. All of it was played interminably, and most of it badly.

Why badly?

In those days both musicians and the public believed in the Chopin myth, as do many people today. That myth was a destructive one.

Chopin, the man, was seen as weak and ineffectual; Chopin the artist, as an irrepressible romantic—effeminate if appealing, dreaming around, dipping his pen in moonlight to compose nocturnes for sentimental young women.

Pianists whose heads were filled with such nonsense had to play Chopin badly.

From the age of 8 to 15 I studied with the famous Prof. Heinrich Barth in Berlin. This was a time when academicians ruled the arts. They knew a lot about the technical aspects of music, but couldn't care less about music itself.

I should add that they were terribly nationalistic and jealous. The German pedagogues laughed at Italian opera, despised French music (Debussy they described as "dirty"), and though they recognized Chopin's genius, referred to him condescendingly as a "salon composer."

The Chopin performances they heard gave them no reason to think they might be mistaken. So I was not involved with Chopin seriously. In the milieu in which I was studying, he was a great "embroiderer," and I and my fellow-students were happily immersed in the more "profound" music of Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner.

Then at fifteen I met a nineteen-year-old composer-pianist who had just won the Chopin Gold Medal Award in Poland. This boy was formidably intelligent and "modern." Despite the fact that I had been traveling and concertizing in Europe from early childhood, meeting many talented older people, I was in some ways quite sheltered. I'd had very little contact with anyone so close to my own age who was as musically sophisticated as this boy. He played Chopin as no one else I have ever heard before or since. He had an approach that for its time was absolutely original and right. He *knew*. He *knew* how Chopin should sound. In one afternoon he played all twenty-four preludes for me. I wouldn't let him stop. I was utterly demolished by the performance.

That was it. I immediately started intense work on the mazur-

Continued on Page 2

By GEORGE SZELL

ROBERT SCHUMANN has not been faring too well at his recent anniversaries. In 1956 the centenary of his death was overshadowed by the bicentenary of Mozart's birth. This year he has to share his 150th birthday with Chopin, who, as the only great composer of his nation, has a whole country and its government behind him.

Schumann deserves better. For me he is the greatest purely romantic composer and his music the exponent of the more affecting traits of German character, nobly representative of a people of "Dichter und Denker," before their fatal unification and their ominous entry in the arena of world politics. The originality of his musical thought and design, his imagination and his warmth, his tenderness and his fire, his solemnity, and also his frolicsome boisterousness, the infinite variety of characters populating his musical stage, have secured Schumann a place in the heart of every sensitive musician and music lover.

But it might be appropriate to ask today the question: What does Schumann mean to us and what is his significance in the history of music? While his position as a composer of piano music, of songs and also of chamber music seems established beyond doubt, I find Schumann's merits and his influence as symphonic composer sadly underrated. I see in him the originator of the Romantic symphony, the inventor not just of lovely tunes, but of interesting, novel designs of harmony and formal structure which have influenced and stimulated great composers after him.

Berlioz' device, prompted by a poetical idea, to link the various movements of a symphony by the red thread of a "leitmotiv" was taken over by Schumann, transformed and enriched and given purely musical motivation. In this, as in certain turns of phase, Schumann's influence on Brahms is too obvious to need further elaboration.

Less obvious, but equally provable, is Schumann's influence on Tchaikovsky—for better or worse. I could never help feeling that the device of sequential repetition, and the trend to rhythmical stereotype in some of Tchaikovsky's development sections, are due to the influence of Schumann, who for this mannerism has come in for severe strictures from pundits and ped-

Continued on Page 2

RUBINSTEIN: CHOPIN

Continued from Page 1

kas, pieces I had only read through disinterestedly before. I wouldn't permit myself the indulgence of going on to other Chopin repertory until I had mastered them to my satisfaction.

Several months later, I happened to be at the home of a cultivated woman who was revered for her musical talent and taste as well as her connection with the musical past. She had been a pupil of Clara Schumann and Brahms himself had dedicated a string quartet to her.

That evening, she asked me to play for her. I wanted to play some of the mazurkas, but hesitated. Criticism from someone so knowledgeable could be crushing. But her reassurances overcame my shyness; I played. When I had finished playing she said, simply—"You have understood."

Then I began to play Chopin in earnest, and only Chopin. And the better to know the music I studied the man and the tradition that had bred him. What I found strengthened my convictions about his music.

Undeniably Chopin expressed his age in his art. To a great degree the surface facts of his life did satisfy the Romantic myth—his ascetic face, his dandyism, his affair with the leading novelist of the day, George Sand, his disease, tuberculosis, which was the fashionable disease of the nineteenth century. But these facts tend to obscure Chopin's lack of self-consciousness about Romanticism. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he could take or leave the Romantic Age.

Literary Age

The Romantic Age was primarily a literary one (more poetry, I believe, than music was written). The cry of the day was: "I may not be better than you but I am different. What I feel and think must therefore be worthy of expression." Any minor incident could provide the inspiration for a composition, and where composers had once used only opus numbers to classify their works, they now began to add evocative literary titles. Even Beethoven actually did name a few of his own compositions and some of his scores contain verbal utterances recording his emotional states at the time of composition.

Chopin would have blushed to assign titles to his pieces. Of English publisher later added fanciful names to his compositions, he was furious.

Too, the Romantic Age demanded variety from its creators. A composer was expected to defy his limitations by turning out orchestral pieces, operas, quartets, sonatas. Many tried, often with disastrous consequences. But Chopin had no need to conform. He wanted to write only for the piano, knowing very well that his special daemon was best expressed by that instrument.

As a matter of fact, Chopin's approach to music was more closely allied to the classicists than to his contemporaries. To the intense subjectivity of the ego-permeated people surrounding him, writers who gave literary content to music, he opposed a scrupulous self-discipline, and purely musical content.

Mozart and Bach

It is no wonder, then, that Mozart was his master. He had an incredible love for Mozart. Bach, too, inspired in him an almost religious reverence. He played Bach as one recites prayers, and it was a lifelong fantasy of his that his own work might have been judged by Bach.

Above all, Chopin was a private person, shy and secretive. He rarely spoke about the composing of his music in correspondence. In letters to his best friend he would bemoan the two-hundred francs he was getting for a piece of music that was ten pages longer than another for which he had received the same amount—almost as if he were discussing the price of yard goods. Always what he was getting paid, never what it cost him personally to write a piece of music.

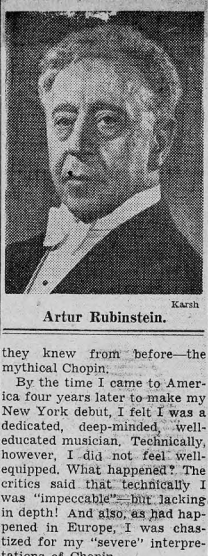
This was the very antithesis of "the Romantic personality."

In studying Chopin in Berlin, these were some of the things I discovered for myself. And the things I learned I put to immediate use.

Without Sentimentality

At my next recital, I included Chopin and presented him nobly. I hoped, without sentimentality (sentiment, yes!), without affectation, without the swan dive into the keyboard with which pianists customarily alerted the audience to the fact that they were listening to the music of Chopin.

What was the result of what I considered conscientious [illegible] was



Karsh

Artur Rubinstein.

they knew from before—the mythical Chopin.

By the time I came to America four years later to make my New York debut, I felt I was a dedicated, deep-minded, well-educated musician. Technically, however, I did not feel well-equipped. What happened? The critics said that technically I was "impeccable"—but lacking in depth! And also, as had happened in Europe, I was chastized for my "severe" interpretations of Chopin.

Stubbornly I continued programming Chopin in my concerts. And stubbornly the critics continued to criticize. Oh yes, it was admitted subsequently, I could play Spanish music, and I certainly could play Ravel and Debussy. But Chopin? No.

Only very much later was the validity of my interpretation granted. Only then was I permitted to have my Chopin and to give him to audiences. For me, it has been one of the great rewards of my career.

Understood Everywhere

It is extraordinary to see how the most diverse audiences are conquered by the music of Chopin. I have met with lack of understanding of Bach in some places, slight enthusiasm for Mozart in Italy, a curious antipathy to Brahms in Latin countries, distaste for Tchaikovsky in France—but Chopin has a hold on the hearts of men everywhere.

When the first few notes of a Chopin ballade sound through the hall after a varied program, there is an audible sigh of both relief and recognition from the audience. They know this music. They welcome it. It's as if each one had said to himself: "At last, here is something for me." Even in our abstract age, which doesn't accept emotion, when pianists have ten times more technique than we ever had (Lizst included) but play without a trace of real emotion,