BRAHMS: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, No. 2, in B flat, Op. 83. Artur Rubinstein, piano; Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, cond. RCA Red Seal LSC 3253, $5.98. Tape: R8S 1243, $6.95; RK 1243, $6.95.

Selected comparisons:

Backhaus, Böhm	Lon. 6550
Rubinstein, Krips	RCA 2296
Serkin, Szell	Col. 6967

The Brahms B flat Concerto has been recorded with great frequency over the years, but I wonder how many collectors recall who made the first one. None other than the pianist listed above, Artur Rubinstein! His 1930 HMV shellac set with Albert Coates and the London Symphony Orchestra was issued here as RCA orthophonic album M 80. Without Rubinstein's blessing, I might add: He is said to have loathed the performance and withheld approval (his bargaining power then wasn't what it is today).

Until recently, it seemed unthinkable that an octogenarian could summon the strength needed for this burly opus, surely one of the most demanding hurdles in the entire repertory. Then, lo and behold, the eighty-year-old

Explanation of symbols

Classical:

- B — Budget
- H — Historical
- R — Reissue

Recorded tape:

- Open Reel
- 8-Track Cartridge
- Cassette

Wilhelm Backhaus re-recorded his performance for stereo and went on to confound the skeptics by performing it just as effectively at a live concert in Salzburg a year later. Rubinstein at eight-five went his late colleague one better by playing the piece in concert with the New York Philharmonic and then going to Philadelphia for recording sessions, taping the Brahms and the Rachmaninoff Second as well in the space of two days.

Backhaus' performance was impressive enough from a geriatrics standpoint. But for all its magnificent authority, the playing was patently that of an old man, and one gratefully accepted the flaws in the face of the many overwhelming strengths. Rubinstein's work here is simply unbelievable. It is not an old man we hear on this record, but the voice of an eternal youth, full of energy, rhapsody, and romance. There are no fluffs, no tiny hesitations, no passages even slightly lacking in suppleness or fluidity. All the technical problems are met head on and conquered; everything sounds rock solid and completely limpid and spontaneous. From a musician of fifty an accomplishment such as this would be magnificent; from an eighty-five-year-old veteran it is . . . well, *impossible.*

Indeed, Rubinstein has given the finest Brahms No. 2 I have ever heard from him, and there are reasonable grounds for preferring it to even so memorable an achievement as the Serkin/Szell/Columbia of a few years ago. I heard M 80 only once, nearly twenty years ago. It was terrifically exciting, as I remember, but a complete mess technically. The 1953 Rubinstein/Munch, while better controlled, was still rather erratic and flamboyant. By 1958 when he recorded the concerto for a third time (with Krips and the Symphony of the Air), Rubinstein had toned down his reading considerably. But even there the pianist did not seem to have the real measure of Brahms in his bloodstream: There were too many fancy rubatos and nuances, episodes of inspired lyricism alternating with finicky overphrasing and even a remnant or two of the old slovenliness. It seemed at the time that Rubinstein had come as close as he could to a work whose essential qualities nevertheless still eluded him.

In preparing this review, I reheard the Krips and Munch performances. Plainly, it is Rubinstein who has changed, not I! The new edition, for all its élan and poetry, is in the firm *echt*-Brahms tradition. The style is bass-oriented—planned from the bottom up. Phrases have superb solidity and simplicity. Everything fits together in a kind of grand arching momentum. It's a bit gruff, but full of humor when that ingredient is called for. Ormandy gives firmly delineated, richly inflected support. He is an old hand at this music and has no less than five recorded performances of it to his credit (equaling, incidentally, the record held by the late George Szell in the D minor Concerto). The orchestral work, even by Philadelphia standards, is first-rate, with especially splendid contributions from first cellist Samuel Mayes and the French horn (an RCA spokesman tells me that Mason Jones was out sick that day and that his assistant pinch-hit for him). RCA's sound is also euphonious and spacious. The piano is very close (which flatters Rubinstein's newly found impact) and yet everything in the ensemble comes through with ideal audibility. You must of course accept the fact that the Rubinstein/Ormandy approach is more blended and generalized than, say, the Serkin/Szell. In sum, this recording does everyone proud. H.G.