Rubinstein Now, Horowitz Then

By HOWARD KLEIN

CHOPIN'S nineteen Nocturnes do for a pianist's soul what the Etudes do for his fingers and what the Waltzes, Polonaises and Mazurkas do for his sense of rhythm. Artur Rubinstein, who had recorded all the Nocturnes for RCA Victor in mono in the nineteen-fifties, has now recorded the set anew in stereo and, well, he's done it again.

The new versions are close parallels to the earlier ones and the differences in some cases are so subtle as to seem illusory. But different they are: a more reflective atmosphere prevails and where the pianist formerly sailed into a climax with full momentum, now a pulling back stretches the sense of tension even more.

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Rubinstein's masterly musicianship exerts its power in understanding melodies which other pianists might kill with misplaced eloquence and sensitivity. The noble outlining of themes so typical of Rubinstein has a special importance in the Nocturnes where there are no peppy rhythms to sustain vitality. His control of tone always focuses the attention squarely on the music, too, for while there is dynamic variety and nuance, one is always more conscious of the music than of the piano—a happy fact that has always separated Rubinstein's kind of virtuosity from the more flamboyant and purely pianistic giants of this century.

The Nocturnes are available in at least two RCA Victor formats, on disk (two disks, LM-7050; stereo LSC-7050) and on reel to reel tape (4-track stereo tape, speed of 3¾ inches per second, TR 3-5023) and while there is a loss of fidelity from the disks to the slow speed tape, both sound quite good. The piano tone is somewhat blunted but attractive. The tape's natural long-playing advantage over the disks might seem superfluous in the case of these short pieces, but the contrary is true.

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These short essays span Chopin's creative output and listening to them in series makes musical sense. Chopin took the form from John Field, an Irish composer who was under the spell of bel canto opera, as was Chopin. Try playing "Una furtiva lagrima" from Donizetti's "Elisir d'Amore" or "Casta diva" from Bellini's "Norma" as piano solos and see how much the cavatina of romantic opera touched the creative spirit of Chopin. But Chopin developed his own "cavatinas" into far more complex works, as he matured, than his bel canto counterparts ever did. And by the time one reaches the great Nocturnes in C minor, E flat (Op. 55, not the early one every student used to play) and B, one has reached an apotheosis of the Nocturne — little wonder the form died out, Chopin did it all!

The pure bel canto melodies, couched in rich harmonies and suffused with strong emotional states, became in the later works complex contrapuntal works in which counter themes interweave in a masterly way. Were these works pointing toward an even greater complexity such as is found in the closing pages of the great Barcarolle?

Hearing the set in entirety is like traveling through Chopin's life, and with Rubinstein as guide one keenly feels the increasing introspection which accompanied the growing mastery of counterpoint. The fact that the last work played (E minor, Op. posthumous) was actually written before the so-called No. 1, adds a poignant touch, for we are returned to the simplicity and classical austerity of Chopin's youth. And if the technical aspects of the writing are several decades removed from his late Nocturnes, the musicality and content are just as precious. It may no longer be true, as it was once believed, that a pianist is only as good as his Chopin, for we have indeed moved away from that kind of limited thinking. But it remains true that the piano itself may never sound better than when Chopin is being played—a case so clearly made by this new recording of Rubinstein's.

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To balance this "old Rubinstein" release, Victor has brought forth a disk called The Young Horowitz in which the dazzling Vladimir Horowitz who took New York by storm in 1928 is heard in performances dating from then as well as some late ones, all on LP for the first time (RCA Victor, mono only, LM-2993).

What an incandescence we hear in the little Scarlatti Capriccio, (arranged by Tausig), the Chopin Marzurka in C sharp-minor (Op. 30, No. 4) and Dohnanyi Capriccio in F minor! (Does anyone play Dohnanyi anymore?) These were recorded in 1928 as was Debussy's "Serenade to the Doll." It is fascinating to compare these old performances with recordings of the Scarlatti, Chopin and Debussy, for we see that the young master was quite a solid musician with an extraordinary sense of rhythm and already a pianist of great pyrotechnical accomplishment. There seems to have been more devilishness and humor then, for the latest recording of "Serenade to the Doll" (Columbia's "Historic Return" Carnegie Hall recital of a few years ago) shows more poetry and simplicity. And of course, now Horowitz plays from scholarly editions of Scarlatti instead of the Tausig school of arranging in this 1928 performance.

Horowitz arriving in New York in 1929
"What an incandescence we hear!"

The most interesting work is what must be the premiere on disks of Horowitz's own perky, quasi-ragtime "Danse Excentrique," recorded in 1930. This short trifle indicates no great compositional talent, perhaps, but a cleverness and pianistic resourcefulness that some more pretentious composers might have envied. The Paganini - Liszt Etude in E flat, recorded in 1930, is slower than one might think, and the tempo is so precisely controlled one is surprised that the effect is nevertheless so exciting. The 1946 recording of Chopin's C sharp-minor Waltz is, only in this rich context, ordinary.

All the above are on side two of the disk while side one is a reissue of the 78 rpm recordings of Kabalevsky's Sonata No. 3, a work which Horowitz made enormously popular in the nineteen-forties, and Tchaikowsky's tone poem of Russian life, "Dumka." Both have been sorely missed and it's good to have them on LP. Now what about other Horowitz 78 recordings, such as Czerny's "La Ricordanza" Variations and the concertos?