

## Rubinštejn meets Chopin

Few people know that Anton Rubinštejn was introduced to Chopin. It was most likely a very formal meeting, of which there is no trace in the correspondence of Chopin. In its issue of January 10, 1841 “Le Ménestrel”, p. 4, writes:

“There is much talk now of a young Russian pianist, Mr Rubinstein, who has just arrived in Paris with his teacher, Mr Villoing, a distinguished composer. The young Rubinstein, still a child, has—it is said—a most remarkable talent (*On parle beaucoup en ce moment d’un jeune pianiste russe, M. Rubinstein, qui vien d’arriver à Paris avec son professeur, M. Villoing, compositeur distingué. Le jeune Rubinstein, encore enfant, possède, dit-on, un talent des plus remarquables.*)”

Rubinštejn himself writes in his *Autobiography* the following:<sup>1</sup>

“For a whole year I remained in Paris, but had no lessons, except in music with Villoing, who jealously guarded me from all approach; not a being could gain access to me! I gave several concerts, generally in the piano rooms of some famous factory, such as Erards’s and others. At one of these concerts Liszt, Chopin, Leopold Meyer, and other musical celebrities were present. This concert was given toward the end of the year 1841, before a large audience, and although many other artists besides myself sang and played on the occasion, the proceeds were to be used for my benefit only. It was then that I played with the Belgian violinist Vieuxtemps. I cannot remember the programme. One of the programmes of these child-concerts is still in existence, and I lately saw it in Holland (Ein rundes Jahr blieb ich in Paris, wurde aber nach wie vor nur von Villoing unterrichtet, der mich fast eiferfüchtig hütete. Diesen feinen Schüler sollte Niemand anrühren. Mehrmals gab ich Concerte, gewöhnlich im Saal einer der berühmtesten Fortepiano-Fabrikanten, z. B. bei Erard u. a. Eines dieser Concerte besuchten auch Liszt, Chopin, Leopold von Meyer und andere Musikgrößen; das Concert stand zu Ende des Jahres 1841 vor einem großen Auditorium statt und war zu meinen Gunsten veranstaltet. Außer mir wirkten noch andere Künstler mit. Ich spielte damals schon oft mit einem Geiger, dem Belgier Vieuxtemps zusammen. Des Programms entsinne ich mich nicht mehr. Ein Concert-Programm aus dem Jahre 1841 existirt noch in Holland, wo es mir noch unlängst gezeigt wurde).

“Villoing was highly gratified with my success; as for myself, I looked upon all this, as I have said before, in the light of an amusement. And I must confess that although my tutor was strict, I myself was a great rogue. (Villoing war durch meine Erfolge tief befriedigt, ich dagegen betrachtete die Sache, wie schon bemerkt, wie ein Spiel, ein Vergnügen. Trotz der Strenge meines Erziehers war ich ein großer Schelm, ein Thunichtgut).

“How many famous people I met at that time! I received many invitations and made many acquaintances, but I was too young at the time to remember very much about it. I have not however forgotten my first visit to Chopin, which has already been described in my historical lectures. Nine years later Chopin died (Wie viele und wie berühmte Leute sah ich damals! Bekanntschaften machte ich in Menge, man lud mich aus einer Familie zur andern, doch viele Momente blieben mir meiner großen Jugend wegen nicht im Gedächtnis. Deutlich erinnere mich noch meiner ersten Visite bei Chopin. Das Nähere darüber erzählte ich in meinen historischen Vorträgen. Neune Jahre nach unserer Begegnung starb Chopin).”

The quote of Liszt, Chopin and von Mayer allows us to establish that the concert, which Rubinštejn is hinting at, did not take place “toward the end of the year 1841” but on March 23. Both “Le Ménestrel” in the issue of March 21, 1841, p. 3, announces it:

“On March 23, the narrow and decidedly uncomfortable Pleyel’s halls will receive the amateur public. The young Rubinstein, excellent pianist, a pupil of Mr A. Villoing, will give a concert with the cooperation of Miss Villès, Mr Grard and Mr Arnaud for the vocals, and Mr Haumann, Mr Franchomme and Mr Godefroid for the instrumental part (*Le 23 mars, les étroits et forts incommo-*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Autobiography of Anton Rubinstein - 1829-1889*, translated from the Russian by Aline Delano, Boston (Little, Brown, and Company) 1890, p. 13f. To allow a comparison of the translations, we add the German one too (cf. *Anton Rubinstein, Erinnerungen aus fünfzig Jahren 1839-1889*, aus dem Russischen von Eduard Kretschmann, Leipzig [Verlag von Bartholf Senff] 1893, p. 15f.).

*des salons de Pleyel se permettront de recevoir le public dilettante. Le jeune Rubinstein, pianiste distingué, élève de M. A. Villoing, y donnera concert en compagnie de M<sup>lle</sup> Villès, M<sup>me</sup> [sic] Grard et Arnaud pour la partie vocale, et de MM. Haumann, Franchomme et Geoffroy [sic!] pour la partie instrumentale);”*

and the “Revue et Gazette Musicale” of March 21, 1841, p. 184:

“A big concert will be given by the young Anthony Rubinstein from Moscow, pupil of Mr A. Villoing, on March 23, in the halls of Mr Pleyel et C<sup>e</sup>, 20, rue Rochechouart. You will hear for the vocals Miss Willez et Mr Grard and Mr Arnaud; and for the instrumental part: Mr Haumann, Mr Franchomme, Mr Godefroid; Anthony Rubinstein (*Un grand concert sera donné par le jeune Antoine Rubinstein, de Moscou, élève de M. A. Villoing, le 23 mars, dans les salons de M. Pleyel et C<sup>e</sup>, 20, rue Rochechouart. On entendra pour la partie vocale : mademoiselle Willez et MM. Grard et Arnaud, et pour la partie instrumentale : MM. Haumann, Franchomme, Godefroy [sic !]; Antoine Rubinstein*).

That is what “La France Musicale” reports in the issue of March 28, 1841, p. 106:

“A very young pianist—a ten years old boy—, Mr Anthony Rubinstein, convened this week in the halls of Mr Pleyel quite a number of fans and artists. This wonder pianist performs the most difficult music with ease, agility and a feeling that he could serve as an example to many pianists who have passed the age of majority. Mr Adam Cramer, Mr Kalkbrenner, Mr Liszt, Mr Chopin, Mr E. Wolff and Mr Léopold Mayer, recently arrived from St. Petersburg, attending the evening of the young Rubinstein, applauded from time to time together with the audience a delightful concert composed by Mr A. Villoing, his teacher, the *Fantaisie* on two Russian themes of Thalberg and the *Galop chromatique* of Liszt, which is a true model of technical difficulties. Various artists contributed to this concert: among others, Mr Arnaud, who sang with much success some melodies of Clapisson and Schubert (*Un pianiste, tout jeune enfant de dix ans, M. Antoine Rubinstein, avait convoqué cette semaine dans les salons de M. Pleyel, une brillante réunion d’amateurs et d’artistes. Ce pianiste-prodige exécute la musique la plus difficile avec une aisance, une agilité, un sentiment qui pourraient servir d’exemple à beaucoup de pianistes qui ont dépassé leur majorité. MM. Adam, Cramer, Kalkbrenner, Liszt, Chopin, E. Wolff, Léopold Mayer, arrivé depuis peu de St-Petersbourg, assisteraient à la soirée du jeune Rubinstein, et ils ont applaudi tour-à-tour avec le public, un délicieux concert composé par M. A. Villoing, son maître, la fantaisie sur deux thèmes russes de Thalberg, et le galop chromatique de Liszt, qui est un vrai modèle de difficulté de mécanisme. Divers artistes concourraient à ce concert, entr’autres M. Arnaud qui a chanté avec beaucoup de succès des mélodies de Clapisson et de Schubert*).

The same day, even the “Revue et Gazette Musicale” reviews the event:

“Equipped with a small program we went to the small halls of Mr Pleyel, last Tuesday, to hear a little pianist ten years old, whom probably one means to proclaim a famous child, prodigy of precocity, at last a budding great man, qualities reminiscent of tasteless asparagus of the month of January, that is grown in a greenhouse. However the young Anthony Rubinstein, a pupil of Mr Villoing, has no pretensions like precocious children have: he seats at the piano without ceremony, as a child, and plays both with clarity and artlessness. A concert of his teacher and a *fantasy* of Thalberg on two Russian themes offered him the opportunity to show an already remarkable talent at such a tender age. If he was not up to the task of conveying the intimate and mystical expression required by the beautiful elegy of Beethoven’s *Adelaide* arranged for piano, the lightness of his childlike hand has served in the performance of the ‘galop chromatique’ of Liszt. Mr Franchomme and Mr Godefroid contributed—the former with his sweet cello, and the latter with the harp—to make interesting and enjoyable the concert of the little Anthony Rubinstein, whom you can certainly forgive for being a famous baby, since it does not last too long (*Muni d’un petit programme, nous nous sommes transportés dans les petits salons de M. Pleyel, mardi passé, pour entendre un petit pianiste âgé de dix ans, qu’on a, sans doute, la prétention de proclamer enfant célèbre, prodige de précocité, enfin, grand homme en herbe, qualités qui rappellent les asperges sans saveur du mois de janvier qu’on fait pousser en serre chaude. Cependant le jeune Antoine Rubinstein, élève de M. Villoing, n’a*

*pas la prétention des enfants précoces ; il se met au piano sans façon, en enfant, et joue aussi nettement que naïvement. Un concerto de son maître, une fantaisie de Thalberg sur deux thèmes russes lui ont offert l'occasion de montrer un talent d'exécution déjà fort remarquable dans un âge si tendre. S'il n'a pas été à la hauteur de l'expression intime et mystique que réclame la belle élégie d'Adélaïde de Beethoven arrangée pour le piano, la légèreté de sa main enfantine l'a servi dans l'exécution du galop chromatique de Liszt [sic !]. M. Franchomme et M. Godfroy [sic !] ont contribué, le premier, sur son suave violoncelle, et le second sur la harpe à rendre intéressant et agréable le concert du petit Antoine Rubinstein, à qui l'on peut décidément pardonner d'être un enfant célèbre, pourvu que cela ne dure pas trop long-temps)."*<sup>2</sup>

"La Sylphide" too, in the issue of March 28, p. 208, devotes some lines to the concert:

"We heard at Pleyel a little pianist of ten years, Anthony Rubinstein, from Moscow, for whom the fantasies of Thalberg and the 'galop chromatique' of Liszt are nothing but a piece of cake. This little musical prodigy does the greatest honour to his teacher, Mr. Villoing. In this same concert, Haumann, whose violin pines with so much melancholy, was all the rage, and Miss Marie Willes sang some melodies of Berlioz with a perfect feeling (*Nous avons entendu chez Pleyel un petit pianiste de dix ans, Antoine Rubinstein, de Moscou, pour lequel les fantaisies de Thalberg, et le galop chromatique de Liszt [sic !], ne sont que jeux d'enfant. Ce petit prodige musical fait le plus grand honneur à son maître, M. Villoing. Dans ce même concert, Hauman, dont le violon soupire avec tant de mélancolie, a fait fureur, et Mlle Marie Willès a chanté des mélodies de M. Berlioz avec un sentiment parfait.*)"

The press speaks again on a matinee where Rubiňštejn took part:<sup>3</sup>

"Mr Jacques Offenbach is a young musician, a talented cellist, who, for all we know, has not yet appeared on the platform of our concert rooms. Last Sunday, in the musical matinee at Mr de la Corbière, he performed on his instrument: the minuet and the finale of a Beethoven sonata for piano and cello with the young pianist Rubinstein were very well executed [...]. Although during the concert the piano was played in turn by Mr Shimon, Mr Colignon, Mr Burgmuller, Mr Kaufmann, Mr Rubinstein and many others that it is useless to mention, the piano solo did not monopolized too much the session, so this little chamber concert was very pleasant (*M. Jacques Offenbach est aussi un jeune musicien, un violoncelliste de talent qui n'a pas encore monté, que nous sachions, sur l'estrade de nos salles ou salons de concerts. Il a donné dimanche passé chez M. de La Corbière une matinée musicale dans laquelle il s'est fait entendre sur son instrument ; il a fort bien dit le menuet et le final d'une sonate de Beethoven pour piano et violoncelle avec le jeune pianiste Rubinstein [...]. Quoique le piano fut tenu dans cette matinée musicale par MM. Schimon, Colignon, Burgmuller, Kaufmann, Rubinstein et une foule d'autres qu'il est inutile de citer, le solo de piano n'a pas trop envahi la séance, et ce petit concert de chambre a été fort agréable.*)"

Therefore, in May, Rubiňštejn was still in Paris, and then moved to Holland, where he played at court. "It was he [*scil.* Liszt] who advised Villoing to take me to Germany (*Aus Holland brachte mich Villoing auf Liszt's Rath nach Deutschland*)."<sup>4</sup> The "Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung" of October 19, 1841, p. 524, gives the following news item:

"Frankfurt. The opera "La Favorita" by Donizetti was not at all successful. The pianist Rubinstein from Moscow, ten years, got a broad consensus (*Frankfurt. Der Erfolg der Donizetti'schen Oper „die Favoritin“, war eben kein glänzender. Der zehnjährige Pianist Rubinstein aus Moskau hat vielen Beifall erhalten.*)"

<sup>2</sup> The subtle sarcasm that is rife in this short statement (note, at the beginning, *small program, small rooms, little pianist*, then the *asparagus* grown in a *greenhouse* and, in the end, *it does not last too long*) will certainly have a cause that, however, we cannot quite make out.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Revue et Gazette Musicale" of May 2, 1841, p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Autobiography* cit., p. 15.

So, in October 1841 the little Rubińštejn was already in Germany; this means that he did not spend a whole year in Paris, but only the first half.

As for the ‘description’ which Rubińštejn is getting at (*v. supra*)—quite lacking in details indeed—there is a particular, which is not known from other sources, as far as we know. In *The Masters of Piano*<sup>5</sup> he writes:

“The *Impromptu* in F sharp major, Op. 36, evokes personal memories connected with Chopin. It was the year 1841, and I was in my eleventh year of life when in Paris I was introduced to Chopin. He made such an impression on me boy, that I retained an indelible memory of him with all details for the entire life. Not only I remember the person of Chopin, but also the room, the furniture and the environment. It was in Rue Tronchet No. 5, not far from the Madeleine. In the middle of the room there was a grand piano of Pleyel covered with a green cloth, on which there was written ‘gift of Louis Philippe to Mr Chopin.’ It is this *Impromptu* in F sharp major that I was allowed to play for the first time facing him (Das *Impromptu* Fis-dur op. 36 hat für mich persönliche Erinnerungen, die sich an Chopin knüpfen. Es war im Jahre 1841, ich stand in meinem elften Lebensjahre, als ich in Paris Chopin vorgestellt wurde. Dieser Eindruck meiner Kindheit war so stark, daß er sich mit allen Details fürs ganze Leben mit eingepägt hat. Ich entsinne mich nicht nur der Person Chopins, sondern auch seines Zimmers, der Möbel und der ganzen Umgebung. Es war in der Rue Grouchet [*sic!*] Nr. 5, nicht weit von der Madeleine. Mitten im Zimmer stand der Flügel von Pleyel mit grünem Tuch bedeckt und der Inschrift: „ein Geschenk von Louis Philippe an Herrn Chopin.“ Dies *Impromptu* Fis-dur, das durfte ich ihm zum ersten mal vorspielen.)”

Chopin had been summoned to court twice already: on February 16, 1838,<sup>6</sup> and, together with Moscheles, on October 29, 1839 (he will be called a third and last time on December 1, 1841<sup>7</sup>). Moscheles said that he was offered, as a reward, the ‘légion d’honneur’ or something different, and he preferred something different: thus he received an expensive travel bag (*eine kostbare Reise-Chatulle*), on which was engraved ‘donné par le Roi Louis-Philippe’,<sup>8</sup> while Chopin got the green cloth mentioned by Rubińštejn.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Die Meister des Klaviers. Musikalische Vorträge über die Entwicklung der Klavier-Komposition gehalten zu St. Petersburg im Saal des Konservatoriums [1888-1889] von Anton Rubinstein. Übersetzt von M. Bessmertny, Berlin [“Harmonie”] s.d., p. 77.*

<sup>6</sup> The date cannot be on February 25, 1838, as it is said in *CFC* II p. 234 n. 254, since the “RGM” of February 25, 1838, p. 96, writes that “Chopin... had lately (*dernièrement*) been summoned to Court to be heard there in a private capacity (*en cercle intime*). Of this young composer [...] were particularly admired his inexhaustible improvisations, which almost made up the whole of the evening’s entertainment and won him unanimous appreciation”. However, a short article published by the “Journal des débats” of February 19, 1838 specifies the date: “Mr Schopin [*sic!*]... had the honour of playing before Their Majesties last Friday, [...]», which was the 16<sup>th</sup>. Again according to *CFC*, *ibid.*, Chopin would have played a concert of his at court, because in the letter addressed to Baron de Trémont we read: «Dear Mr de Trémont, I shall be with you the day after tomorrow at three to rehearse my *concert*. [...] F.F. Chopin / Wednesday 14», to which an anonymous hand added “February 1838” (see also J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin âme des salons parisiens*, Paris [Fayard] 2013, p. 176). Now, the paragraph quoted above continues as follows: «[...] (Chopin played) many of his compositions, which he executed with a remarkable naturalness and ability. Some *variations* which he improvised on a theme suggested by H. R. H. the Princess Adélaïde had great success, and the gifted artist was repeatedly congratulated by the Queen and the princess»; then it adds: «The same day Miss Bazin, a young singer with a most beautiful voice, sang several French arias before the royal family with all the skill and all the success, which this genre implies.” So, to all appearances, Chopin did not perform any concert. Nevertheless, it is true that the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1838 was Wednesday. At this point, the letter to Trémont becomes enigmatic. Chopin may have performed the *Adagio* of the *Concert* in E major without accompaniment, but why rehearse? One possible explanation might be that at the last moment, for some reason, the contribution of the violin of Trémont was judged awkward.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. in this site the page [www.audacter.it/AudChopinposi-A9.8.html](http://www.audacter.it/AudChopinposi-A9.8.html).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Aus Moscheles’ Leben nach Briefen und Tagebüchern*, hg. von seiner Frau, II, Leipzig [Verlag von Duncker & Humblot] 1873, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> The first time Chopin received a silver tea service embellished in gold and inscribed “Louis-Philippe, Roi des Français à Frédéric Chopin”, cf. WILLIAM G. ATWOOD, *Fryderyk Chopin Pianist from Warsaw*, New York (Columbia University Press) 1987, p. 117, who, however, does not quote his source.

The testimony of Rubińštejn is singular for what is not said. In spite of his memory there is no mention of Chopin as a pianist. Although you find references to the technique of Liszt, Thalberg, Tausig, and Henselt here and there, the only express appreciation of Chopin is in the following account: “One must have heard Chopin, Liszt, Thalberg and Henselt, in order to know what properly piano playing is!”<sup>10</sup> where the inclusion of Chopin next to the other four virtuosos is to be considered both a tribute to the composer and a proof of confidence in indirect evidence. On April 26, 1841, in the halls of Pleyel, Chopin had given a concert,<sup>11</sup> which Rubińštejn, owing to his silence, did not attend, nor he had the opportunity to listen anywhere else to the most exclusive of the pianists. Instead, here is what he says of Liszt:

“At that time I was a devoted imitator of Liszt, of his manners and movements, his trick of tossing back his hair, his way of holding his hands, of all the peculiar movements of his playing, which naturally called forth a smile from those who had heard Liszt, and perhaps also increased the interest felt in the boy-virtuoso (Mein Vorbild beim Vortrag war damals Franz Liszt. Wie er sich benahm, sich bewegte, die Hände hielt, die Haare zurückwarf, hatte ich ihm überraschend genau abgesehen und ahmte seine phantastische Art und Weise beim Vortrag mit großer Treue nach. Wer Liszt gesehen und gehört, lächelte freilich über mich, doch andererseits mag meine Haltung à la Liszt das Interesse an dem kleinen Virtuosen gesteigert haben). [...]

“I spoke of imitating Liszt. I had often heard him in Paris, when he was at the zenith of his glory (1839-1848), and had been deeply impressed by his playing. Rubini too made a very similar impression on me. (Liszt, dem ich nachahmte, hörte ich vordem häufig in Paris. Er hatte – es war in den Jahren 1839 bis 1848 – den Höhepunkt seines Ruhmes erreicht. Auf mich Knaben machte sein Spiel einen außerordentlich tiefen Eindruck. Eine nicht weniger tiefe Wirkung, wenn auch anderer Art, übte auf mich der Sänger Rubini).”<sup>12</sup>

From these observations, we can infer almost certainly that, if Rubińštejn had listened to Chopin, he would surely have spoken something about.

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We conclude this short note offering some opinions on Rubińštejn as a pianist.

The English translator of the *Autobiography* adds in a *Supplement*<sup>13</sup> two chapters, one devoted to the composer, the other one to the pianist. We propose here the latter:

“We must devote a brief space to the consideration of Rubinstein as a pianist.

“His first appearance on the concert platform is contemporary with the birth of musical criticism. There can be no simpler means of introducing the reader to the characteristics of Rubinstein as a pianist, than to quote the opinions of several well-known musical critics.

“This is what Brachvogel has written concerning him: —

“*No artist has ever before shown to his audience so merciless a front. Both his programmes and his attitude are absolutely uncompromising. At first sight one is conscious of something stern, even inimical in his bearing toward his audience, as though a chasm were fixed between them, and he stood ready to plunge single-handed into the conflict; but gradually the sense of hostility vanishes, and the great artist conquers once and forever. Rubinstein has no idea of descending to the level of popular taste, he can only raise his audience to his own plane. It is enough to look in his face to understand what it all means. He has the head of an inspired sphinx, upon whose face not even the paroxysms of enthusiasm call forth a smile. Did not the colour of life illumine it, it might be of stone. Those who have heard his playing will never forget it.*”

“Hanslick thus characterizes Rubinstein’s playing: —

“*We always follow Rubinstein’s playing with a sense of infinite delight. His youthful and untiring vigour, his incomparable power of bringing out the melody, his perfection of touch in the*

<sup>10</sup> A. RUBINSTEIN, *Music and its Masters. A Conversation*, Translated for the Author by Mrs. John P. Morgan, Second Edition, London (Augener & Company) s.d. (but after 1892), p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> See in this site the notes *d*, *e*, *g* and *h* to the chapter XXV of the Niecks’ biography, where you will find the link referring to the reviews (cf. [www.audacter.it/AudChopinpo5i-AN.25.html](http://www.audacter.it/AudChopinpo5i-AN.25.html)).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Autobiography* cit., pp. 19f.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Autobiography* cit., pp. 163÷171.

stormy torrents of passion, as well as in the tender long-drawn notes of pathos, his wonderful memory, and his energy that knows no fatigue, —these are the qualities which amaze us in Rubinstein's playing. His rendering of Chopin's B <flat> minor Sonata is indeed wonderful; he plays the first movement tempestuously, giving to it the atmosphere of passionate gloom; the funeral march is stern and sustained; the mighty crescendo at the beginning of the trio, and the gradual decrescendo after it, is a brilliant innovation of his own. But in the finale he takes such an astounding prestissimo that all accents are lost, and only a grey cloud of dust seems to hover before the dazed listener, who simply waits for the last note that he may open his eyes and draw a long breath of relief. Therefore young virtuosi must beware of imitating the excesses of Rubinstein's playing, rather learning from him to play with expression, keeping all the while strict watch over the tempo. The sentimental fluctuations of the measure by which young pianists, and lady pianists in particular, disfigure the noblest inspirations of Chopin, is [sic!] unendurable to Rubinstein. One finds no vestige of this caricature of tempo rubato, or any affectation whatsoever in Rubinstein's playing. It is a delight to listen to him, in the highest and most sincere sense of the word. A vigorous and wholesome current of feeling flows so refreshingly over the hearer that he receives the impression of having been in a musical symposium, to the unspeakable delectation of his ear.

“The merits of Rubinstein's playing are sought principally in his elementary power, and from this same source spring likewise many of his faults. With years, however, his playing has become more equal. The bewitching beauty of his tones, the power and delicacy of his touch have now reached their climax. One seldom finds in contemporary pianists that genuine, spontaneous inward fervour which in the heat of passion dares all things, even to indiscretion, rather than pause to reason and reflect. Where reflection is absent there may be heard the overwhelming voice of the passions and the heart-strings echoing in response. Rubinstein's temperament is of such compelling force that exhausted Europe yields submission to his will.”

“The following is taken from the criticism of the well-known Russian critic Levensohn, who wrote it a few years ago under the immediate influence of Rubinstein's concerts in Moscow: —

“Many years ago the famous historian Thomas Carlyle, in his lecture on ‘Hero-Worship,’ says in effect: Nothing so elevates mankind as the worship of men of genius. However much the eternal cavillers may strive to pick flaws, the enthusiasm of those who have truly learned to love great men with all the strength of their souls will suffer no loss. This is the kind of feeling inspired by Rubinstein. Can there be a higher delight for the man who loves and appreciates music than to see and hear the man of genius? In listening to Anton Rubinstein, one receives an impression not unlike that produced by some magnificent display of the elements. His creations at the piano are as spontaneous as those of Nature herself, and this is the secret of his personal influence. His répertoire embraces the entire range of compositions, beginning with the works of Handel and ending with his own. His passionate temperament often carries him beyond the lawful boundaries; for instance, he takes too rapid a tempo in the prestissimo of Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 109, hindering the listener from following in detail this desperate soul-shriek; he also plays Chopin's F major Ballad too rapidly. On the other hand, the beauty of certain compositions is never fully appreciated until we hear them interpreted by Rubinstein. Thus in Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 37 <no. 1>, the heart-rending wail is interrupted by a succession of Palestrina-like chords. In Rubinstein's rendering, it is as if these chords were played on the organ. We feel, however, that these religious strains fail to soothe the suffering soul. The desperate cry is renewed and grief resumes its sway. This soul-picture of a lonely sufferer, who seeks consolation in religion and fails to find it, —such is the theme of this nocturne, which becomes intelligible in Rubinstein's rendering. For another example take the last variation in Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 109, with that never ending trill, which passes through several octaves; you feel yourself in the presence of a sphinx. But lo! Beneath the fingers of Rubinstein this labyrinth of sounds becomes an almost indistinguishable murmur, and through this murmur, penetrating it like a sunbeam, comes the E major theme; then you see the necessity of the preceding chaos.

“From out the numberless proofs of genius of which his playing gives evidence, we will select his rendering of Handel's theme, with its beaded ornamentations (known in the old times under the name of agréments), the second variation of this air executed by octaves in the bass, and the wonderful transition from the lower to the higher register in the second theme of Beethoven's C major Sonata, Op. 53; indeed the grandeur of his rendering of that sonata cannot be too highly praised. His daintiness of execution in Schumann's ‘Traumes-Wirren’ and ‘Vogel als Prophet,’ as well as the ‘singing’ of the second theme in Chopin's B minor scherzo, reminds one of his own far-away childhood and the happy days of youth, now gone forever, that visited us ere we plunged into the turmoil of life. Were we to recall all the moments wherein Rubinstein stirs the soul of his hearer, we should never have done.

“Why allude to the technique of this man of genius? Here also he differs from all others, and sets at defiance formerly accepted methods. How is one to play the rapid octave accompaniment of the Schubert-Liszt ‘Erl-König’? Any professor will tell you to do it with a light wrist, and the middle fingers extended. And what does Rubinstein do? He curves the middle fingers and raises the wrist,<sup>14</sup> so that the fingers that play the octaves instead of falling sideways on the keys strike with their tips as with a hammer. By this method the octaves are played with ease and freedom, whereas in the rendering of other pianists one is always sensible of the effort. There is no living pianist who could imitate him in this. It is his own invention and a manner peculiar to himself. An Oriental on meeting a man of genius says a special prayer for the occasion. We too have our own way of expressing our enthusiasm. One can realize the excitement of the public at each appearance of Rubinstein only in witnessing it.”

“In January 1889 Rubinstein played in Moscow for the last time; and as he came upon the stage at the close of the performance to make his final bow of acknowledgement, the lid of the grand piano was locked. He made one pathetic gesture of farewell, and disappeared from the concert room forever.”

At last, let us read what Antoine Marmontel, who knew everything and everybody concerning piano, wrote about Liszt and Rubinstein:<sup>15</sup>

“In spite of his immense talent Liszt has remained a bit prone to charlatanism. Adored by the public that he has delighted and made fanatical by the prestige of his prodigious virtuosity, by the sparkling charm of his wit, by his nature eminently distinguished, by his Dantesque appearance, F. Liszt, whose life is a long poem full of romances and dramas, aims not only to interest and move, he also wants to strike with surprise, to astonish, even to stun. We again repeat, Liszt has always played preferably Erard pianos, the only tough enough to translate, following his desires and aspirations, all sound nuances and accents, from the barely perceptible pianissimos until the bursts of energy and power taken to extremes, unlike the (simple) virtuoso, who, overexcited, just wants to compete in power with orchestral masses.

“A. Rubinstein and his regretted brother, too, belong to this school of colourists, who, proceeding by contrast, get the more strident sounds. We have many times heard the illustrious artist, although he has a habit of forgetting to invite his Parisian fellows, myself included, who make regularly study his works. In Rubinstein we find many transcendental qualities of Liszt and also some of his flaws: the sun too has got some spots. Like his great model, the Moscow pianist is uneven: he has his days and hours of triumph. Weber or Mendelssohn’s concerts, admirably interpreted in a happy vein, at different times will be sprinkled with false notes. But these rare accidents, which show the extent of nerve influences acting on the valiant artist, do not diminish an atom his immense virtuoso talent and do not scratch the high personality of the composer. Rubinstein—as his brilliant emulators and compatriots, Mrs Menter and Mrs Essipova—plays preferably Erard grand pianos.”

*Dorno, September 2015*

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. LHEVINNE, *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing*, repr. New York (Dover Publications), 1972, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. MARMONTEL, *Histoire du piano et de ses origines*, Paris (Heugel & Fils) 1885, p. 319s.