

RUBINSTEIN:

THE MAN AND THE MUSICIAN.



WITH the death of Anton Rubinstein has been broken one of the last and strongest links binding us to the musical history of the middle and early parts of this century. As a child in Paris, Rubinstein met and played to Chopin. As a youth in Berlin he knew personally Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. Liszt and Glinka were his intimate friends all through manhood. Tschaikowsky may be said to have studied under him at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. And in the sixties and seventies, when Rubinstein traveled from city to city like a conquering hero, here producing his operas, there enthraling the hearts of thousands by his unparalleled playing, he was living and working through the same years that saw the recognition of Wagner's extraordinary genius.

Rubinstein's fascinating personality was welcomed on all sides. In the court life of Russia he played a prominent part, directing the amateur forces of the brilliant and gifted Russian aristocracy that formed a coterie surrounding the Grand Duchess Helen; and in the art life of St. Petersburg he was one of the governing spirits. Outside of Russia, in every city of Europe his genius quickly won him recognition, and with the exception of Liszt no other musician of the century was so surrounded by men and women of brains and position.

Notwithstanding this, and the consequent catholicity and broadness of ideas which one would imagine should follow, as a musician, or perhaps it is better to say as a musical thinker, Rubinstein was singularly old-fashioned and non-progressive in his ideas.

His veneration for the classics was almost fanatical, and for him the last word had been said in music when Chopin laid down his pen. In the genius of his contemporaries he had absolutely no belief. The compositions of Berlioz he considered wild and unsatisfactory; Wagner he disliked; Liszt as a composer had no place in his respect; and he looked askance at Tschaikowsky.

Remembering Rubinstein's position as a composer, at first glance a certain sequence of ideas would lead one to suspect that the inevitable jealousy commonly supposed to exist between "two of a trade" was at the bottom

of this. But any such suspicion wrongs Rubinstein. He was not a man of that sort. For four years I studied his modes of thought and character minutely. I saw him in many trying positions, and was often surprised to find how little outside things, especially personal crosses, disturbed the serenity of his convictions, and how free he was from those petty jealousies and weaknesses too often found in the character of artists, great or small.

In his incapability to appreciate the compositions of his contemporaries Rubinstein was absolutely sincere. The mere fact of his acknowledging this incapability actually shows the honesty of his character and convictions, since it was a brave thing for a man of his position to fly in the face of the acknowledged and cherished ideas of his contemporaries, if for no other reason than for fear of ridicule; and Rubinstein was not a man to brave ridicule if he could by any means honorably escape it.

Rubinstein himself was sometimes puzzled, even more than were others, by his antipathy to the music of his contemporaries; and once, when discussing this question, he said to me: "I cannot understand it or myself. I can seemingly explain it only by supposing I was born too soon or too late."

The real explanation lies, however, in the fact that Rubinstein's genius was essentially lyrical and subjective. He never tried to paint the human emotions in tone-colors, as Wagner did. He invariably sang about them, and of them, without ever thinking of creating their musical prototypes. With him it was song first and song last and song always. Therefore he differed from Wagner, and failed to understand him.

It was a subject Rubinstein's intimate friends frequently discussed with him, and many were the battles fought in the cause. On one occasion he grew positively angry, and cried out, with his usual impatient toss of the head:

"You find it good; I do not. Wagner has sent music to the devil and to chaos. He has been original at the expense of true art, and all who follow him—since not one in a thousand will have his cleverness—will find themselves in the end only doomed to wander in a wilderness of barrenness and darkness. Their labors will produce nothing that can live. As for this motive business you all rave over, what

is it? Where is its beauty? Can one call it art? Must a singer come on the boards with his photograph pinned on his breast in the shape of a motive? No, and again no. It is false, and so I can only regard it."

When it comes to a matter of opinion emphatically expressed by a great man, all argument must cease, since of all things a great man's rooted opinion is most difficult to remove; the more one works at it, the closer it seems to stick. This was certainly so in Rubinstein's case. He disliked Wagner intensely, and was sincere in his dislike. It was a positive pain for him to see his pupils or those who surrounded him become Wagner enthusiasts; and enthusiasts all who admire Wagner are bound to become. I have many times seen him sit at the symphony concerts in perplexed wonder, listening to the thundering applause that followed a Wagner number. He seemed unable to grasp the reason, and surely there was absolutely no sham in his dislike: it came from his very soul.

It must, however, be remembered that against Wagner the man and Wagner the composer—even when half Europe was abusing him—Rubinstein never uttered a word. He was utterly above this. He was one of the few artists whose personal dislikes were limited. It was against Wagner the innovator and teacher that he spoke.

To Rubinstein art was essentially a cause, and genius was great only when it laid a stepping-stone for those who followed. A great name had no attractions for him. He thought it greater to be the founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory than to be Rubinstein the pianist-composer. In this he was essentially unselfish and lacking in egotism. Therefore, when he waxed wroth against Wagner, it was simply because he believed Wagner's influence pernicious for the future of art.

For the famous composers of the latter half of the last century and the beginning of this,—Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Glinka, Schumann, and Chopin, including the father and forerunner of all, the immortal Johann Sebastian Bach,—Rubinstein had a positive adoration. It was a lovely thing to see him enjoy their music. His intense pleasure was really rare to witness. He seemed to enjoy with every nerve and fiber of his being. His whole body vibrated, as it were, to the rhythm of the piece. Throughout the playing his exclamations of joy were accompanied with a brightening of the eyes, a breathing enthusiasm; and it was often difficult for those beside him to respond to the exuberant force of his delight, so great and continuous was it.

The famous C Major Symphony of Schubert, the greatest of the Beethoven symphonies, with some pieces of Mozart and Schumann, were to

him never-failing sources of pure delight. In contradistinction to this, it was really a study to watch him sit out a piece of Wagner's with head bent, immovable, remaining indifferent to the excitement of those around him.

It was strange that, like Chopin, Rubinstein had an antipathy to Liszt.

"Liszt!" said Rubinstein to me once, with a shrug of contempt. "He is a comedian."

In Rubinstein's eyes, to be a comedian was the greatest of all sins. Of all men he hated deeply anything insincere or false. Time and time again he spoiled his own artistic success by reason of his bluntness and outspokenness. Anything that Rubinstein ever said to you—provided always you were not a woman, and the speech a compliment—you could rely upon as coming straight from his heart, and as being absolutely the mirror of his feelings. He could not lie or prevaricate, nor could he even utter the conventional falsehoods of every-day social life.

Liszt, a brilliant man of the world and a born courtier, was the direct antithesis of this. No human being, even his most intimate friends, could ever be sure of Liszt's real feelings. Only when he made sacrifices, great and noble sacrifices,—such sacrifices as only Liszt could make,—could one be sure of them. But the real Liszt was an enigma and a puzzle. He never forgot the world; therefore his words and actions were more or less all spoken and arranged for the gallery. All his life he posed, and posed excellently; and it was this marked characteristic of his personality that made Rubinstein, near as were the relations of the two great artists at one time, distrust him.

Antipathy is one of the most curious and inexplicable attributes of the human character. When it arises from nationality, it is stronger than reason and stronger than will—it defies explanation; but very often we can trace the beginning of an antipathy in one great man toward another to some careless or thoughtless action in youth, and such I think was the case in that of Rubinstein.

As a boy Liszt was Rubinstein's ideal. In his manner of using his hands, sitting at the piano-forte, and tossing back his hair, Rubinstein imitated enthusiastically the great Hungarian pianist; and when he found himself next to penniless in Berlin on the death of his father, and forced to shift for himself to gain daily bread, he hastened to Vienna to find Liszt, believing that the latter would acknowledge the kinship of art between them, and put him on the highway to recognition and fortune. As it happened, Rubinstein must have arrived at an inopportune moment; for Liszt dismissed the young artist with the assurance that he must make his way unaided, which was certainly

cold comfort to one whom very hunger had driven to seek protection, especially as Liszt himself had received hospitality at the hands of the Rubinsteins in Moscow. Of course Liszt did not mean to act cruelly, and later, when he found Rubinstein living in an attic in dire poverty, he atoned for all this; but youthful impressions are strong, and the young Russian's sensitive feelings had been wounded too deeply for cure. Hence, probably, his antipathy. Later in life all proofs of friendship on Liszt's part were unavailing. In dire necessity Liszt had failed him, and Rubinstein did not forget it, nor could anything make him believe in the sincerity of the great Hungarian artist.

There is no doubt, also, that at times Liszt was capable of great hauteur in his dealings with his brother artists; and it was this, undoubtedly, that caused the split in the Chopin-Liszt friendship. Chopin could not stand Liszt's meddling with his compositions, and Liszt was unpardonably egotistical in this. It displayed itself in another form toward Rubinstein—that of criticism. Liszt probably meant well toward the young Russian composer, and his advice was at all times excellent; but the noticeable hauteur of tone throughout keenly annoyed Rubinstein: all the more so, as he had little faith in Liszt's criticism. Of course the result was inevitable.

Nearly every biographical notice of Rubinstein contains the error of asserting that he was a pupil of Liszt. This he never was. His mother, Villoing, and the contrapuntist Dehn of Berlin, were Rubinstein's only teachers, and these only while he was a mere child. It was his own great gifts and tireless industry that brought him to the top of the ladder.

Of course, to have the chance of hearing Mendelssohn and Liszt was an education in itself for a pianoforte student; but Rubinstein's playing was not formed after that of either of these great artists. He had his own individual ideas—ideas which he worked out for himself in long hours of thought and study when a mere youth. He laid great stress on rhythm and touch, and it was particularly in the latter that his own great charm of playing lay. No one has ever drawn from the pianoforte the sounds that Rubinstein did. His legato was unrivaled, and his power of singing on the pianoforte extraordinary. The world at large—probably those who never heard him—wrongly considered him merely a pianist of muscle and force, whose thundering fortissimo and passionate treatment of the keyboard made him famous; but these were the least of his gifts. His fortissimo was certainly a revelation, but not even the velvet-fingered Pachmann has ever produced a pianissimo like that of Rubinstein. It was the soft-

est, sweetest, most delicate breath of sound imaginable; yet, soft as it was, it reached the farthest corner of the largest concert-hall he played in. There are pianists who paw the keyboard in soft passages, and look knowing, leaving much, if not all, to the imagination of the audience, especially those far off; but not so Rubinstein. His power of tone and control of tone were phenomenal, and some of his effects magical. The vulgar crowd and the vulgar critics noted and wondered over his playing of the "Marche des Ruines d'Athènes" and the "Funeral March" of the Chopin Sonata; but this was mere child's play in comparison with what he did in certain passages of Schumann's works. Here he produced effects of astonishing beauty, absolute caviar to the multitude, in compensation for which he fed the latter with picturesque imitation of "the band passing."

Some of Rubinstein's most extraordinary effects were produced by a masterly use of the pedals. It was an education in itself to watch his feet as he played, and when he created some unaccountable beauty of tone-color, you were sure to find the secret in his pedaling.

Over his audience Rubinstein exercised great control, his personal magnetism being in this a strong factor; but the principal secret lay in the fact that Rubinstein himself felt and seemed to live in every note he played. There was complete absence of the mechanical in his playing; he was deeply in earnest, and in love with his work. In this way his audience at once felt that he had something to say, and he soon convinced them that what he had to say would be said with the charm and divination of a poet.

Much has been said and written about Rubinstein's caprice, and it is true that he could never be counted upon; but even when he gave one a hash of wrong notes, there were always his beautiful touch, his charm of interpretation, and his unequaled pedaling to compensate. For this reason, it has been truly said, his "wrong notes were better than the right notes of others," which may seem an extravagant saying, but certainly only to those who never heard him.

Although a Jew by birth, Rubinstein was baptized when a mere infant, and, as religion is a necessity in Russia, was forced, when residing there, to follow the prescribed forms once a year at least. But in reality he had little sympathy with the religion of the priest. The question of the hereafter had for him a fascination and a certain awe; but although he went so far at times as to profess a belief in annihilation after death, yet it is to be doubted if Rubinstein himself really knew what he did believe. He certainly had his full share of Jewish skepticism, but at the same time was

full of superstition—a sure sign, at least, that he could not have believed in nothing, since he feared something. He would never set out on a journey on Friday, neither would he, unless forced by circumstances, mention any of his undertakings before they were accomplished—a superstition which I encountered only the other day in Paderewski.

In his physiognomy Rubinstein had nothing whatever of the Israelite. He resembled Beethoven strangely, and for this was laughingly dubbed "Van the II," by Liszt. It is worthy of notice, and stands greatly to his credit, that in Russia, where it is better to be born a dog than a Jew, Rubinstein, despite his baptism, never sought to deny his Jewish origin. In a certain way he was even proud of it, and always boldly acknowledged it.

He was an ardent patriot, and loved Russia with heart and soul, working unceasingly for the musical future of his country, having devoted the best part of his life to this cause. Without doubt he did for musical Russia more than any other man; and the best conservatory in the world to-day—that of St. Petersburg—owes its existence to his enthusiasm, and the lavish gifts of money he made from time to time. He was curiously proud of this work, and he said once to me: "When I am dead, all that I care men should remember me by is this conservatory—that they should say it was Anton Rubinstein's work."

For years Rubinstein was director of the conservatory, undertaking the duties a second time from 1887 till 1891. During that time he worked harder than any other person in the institution, devoting his entire time and energy to its service. When we recall that fifty years ago Russia was musical chaos, and that to-day it is foremost in the van of musical culture, we find that Rubinstein has indeed reared himself a monument worthy of his years of self-sacrifice.

As a composer Rubinstein had two great faults and one great virtue. He had a wonderful gift of beautiful and unfailing melody, but he never knew when he became tedious, and he was totally incapable of self-criticism. He never went over his work; in fact, he was altogether wanting in the necessary patience for this. That which he had written remained as first written, and undoubtedly it is this failing that will spoil his fame with posterity. It arose from want of control in his youth, for when a mere boy of thirteen he was left to his own devices. Consequently he wrote for years without direction, and at a period when it was most necessary; therefore he failed to learn that all-important lesson of all artists—a lesson to be learned only in youth, and difficult even then—self-criticism. His nature

was of itself impatient. He rushed along, pen in hand, eager to give utterance to the thoughts crowding his brain, and there was none to stop him in his mad career. In moods of extraordinary exaltation he wrote masterpieces almost without effort, exquisite tone-poems over which the world went mad, and he grew to believe, and tried to convince others, that so all great work should be done.

This was the great mistake of his art life—a mistake all the more to be regretted for himself and musicians, since with only ordinary care he had undoubtedly the power to do great work. However, we may well be content with what he has given us. His "Demon," "Maccabees," the "Ocean" and "Dramatic" Symphonies, his splendid piano concertos and string music, with dozens of songs that are gems of beauty, replete with the intense expression of his truly poetic muse, are all masterpieces, and will keep his memory green forever. Ten operas, six sacred operas, six symphonies, six piano concertos, orchestral and stringed numbers without end, hundreds of songs, hundreds of piano pieces, as well as concertos for violin and violoncello, make up a list appalling in its dimensions when we remember that Rubinstein was the greatest pianoforte virtuoso of his time, that the best part of his life was spent in traveling, and that most of his leisure was devoted to the work of the conservatory.

Rubinstein was never idle; he could not remain so half an hour. From the moment he rose till the moment he retired he was doing something. When not traveling he had his day's work mapped out with methodical regularity. From just such an hour till just such another he might be found day after day at the same occupation. After this fashion he was able to accomplish in his lifetime what was really the work of three men, and he never tired of preaching this regularity of work to young artists and students.

Rubinstein's idea of "sacred opera" has already been too thoroughly discussed to deal with it here in detail, but few knew how dear it was to him. Like the conservatory, it was one of the passions of his artistic life, and he always hoped one day to find it usurp entirely the place of oratorio, a musical form which he disliked intensely as non-dramatic and feeble. He could not listen, he said, and feel satisfied to watch a gentleman in orthodox evening dress, or a lady in extravagant Parisian toilet, singing the parts of biblical characters. His eye and his sense of fitness were too much offended to allow him to enjoy the music; and it was because he felt that the music would gain thereby that he modeled his "Paradise Lost" for the stage.

He had a profound love for the Bible, and

the grand old biblical personages appealed vividly to his fancy. I have frequently found him poring intently over its pages, absorbed in the beauty of the language, the far-seeing truth of its moral philosophy, and the wisdom of its conclusions. He might deny at times his belief in religion, but his interest in the Bible was sincere.

What he urged and wished was a theater, or *ein Kirche der Kunst*, expressly reserved for sacred works, where the music would be of the severe and polyphonic order, and where the chief events of the Old and New Testaments could be represented in chronological order. He was very much in earnest over this idea. With it in mind, he wrote six sacred operas, and was at work on a seventh ("Cain and Abel") when death overtook him. It was almost, too, in the moment of victory; for it is said that some enthusiasts in Germany are about to give reality to his idea.

Rubinstein had a great love of the mysterious. All that was strange or outside human knowledge interested him intensely. Goethe's romanticism pleased him especially, and he loved to quote long passages from "Faust." He was an extremely well read and cultivated man. He spoke many languages perfectly, and was particularly versed in all literature that partook of history. He was an omnivorous reader of Renan's writings, and undoubtedly Renan had much to do with his religious skepticism. But Rubinstein's skepticism was at best a feeble thing, and was chiefly used as a means whereby he could utter his favorite witty saying with regard to the priest — that there were only two sorts: those who deceived themselves, and those who deceived others. Further than this it seldom went; and in all cases he was certainly no materialist. He believed in the existence of beauty, its reality and power; and if at no other shrine, he certainly worshiped devoutly at this.

Though his life was full of work, and he was ever faithful to duty, Rubinstein was not a happy man. With each succeeding year he grew more and more pessimistic. Life failed to give him the amount of enjoyment he craved outside of his art; and except in the society of women he did not seem even commonly happy. But for the fair sex he had ever a joke and a smile. It amused him to shock their feelings, and when they opened their eyes widely at his audacity, he never failed to enjoy it. He believed that a knowledge of woman was necessary to an artist; and if a young aspirant to any artistic calling asked his advice, his first question was,

"Have you loved yet?" For he believed that a man who could not love was incapable of becoming an artist. He himself could not be accused of any failing in this case; for his loves were almost as many and various as his days. He had all the faults and all the virtues of his artistic calling, and in every sense of the word lived for his art and his fancy, regardless of all things. His was a true Bohemian nature.

There was a certain roughness, want of tact, and even brutality in his nature that made itself disagreeably felt at times. His was not a temper to be tried. Up to a certain point he could hold it in check admirably; but anything beyond this caused an explosion of wrath that was terrible. As in his physiognomy, so in his temper there was much of the lion. Those who did not know him consequently feared him, for his personality was one that awed, especially in the latter years of his life.

As a teacher, although never brutal or bad-tempered, as has been asserted, Rubinstein was severe. He hated the amateur in art; for to him art was a mission and a calling, and the only way to success in it lay through suffering. But in spite of this, he was ever ready with encouragement for those who did their best, and deserved it for their talents. He regarded suffering as the sad price all artists must pay for knowledge; but the effect of his early experience of this sort was to give him a warm and ready sympathy for all who tried to achieve anything,—and that not a sympathy of words, but of help and action.

If, when conducting, his temper was roused,—and it must be confessed that with his own works this nearly always happened,—it was impossible for any orchestra or any singer to satisfy him. He became a hundred times more violent than even Hans von Bülow in his worst fits of anger or dissatisfaction; and under such circumstances it was absolutely painful to have anything to do with him. He was more "impossible" than a dozen madmen let loose. But to his character there was happily another and better side. As a friend there was none more fascinating than he. Warm-hearted, tender, sincere, full of sympathy and affection, to those he loved he became like a child in his charm and endearing openness of heart.

His charity was unceasing. No one gave more freely or more kindly, or cared so little for the trouble he gave himself, provided he could do good. His life was one long series of acts of kindness and unselfishness; his loss to the world and to art is far-reaching and irreparable.

Alexander McArthur.



DRAWN BY ERIC PAPE.

AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY GANZ, BRUSSELS.

Ant. Rubinstein