

The Young Arthur Rubinstein

Ensemble for the Romantic Century

Text by Eve Wolf, based on Rubinstein's memoirs, interviews and tapes.

Thursday, 30 January 2003, 8:00 PM
The Kosciuszko Foundation
15 East 65 Street, New York

Ole Akahoshi, cello
Max Barros, piano
Nai-Yuan Hu, violin
Richard O'Neill, viola
Robert White, tenor and narrator
Eve Wolf, piano

Donald T. Sanders, stage director and interviewer
Alina Rubinstein, special guest

Ms. Eve Wolf's dress was designed by Conte Fabio Zingaro Lazzarotto

Please join us for a special reception after the concert, featuring recipes from Nela Rubinstein's cookbook.

We would like to extend our appreciation to our Benefit Committee:

Susanne Hess, co-chair
Michele Mestman, co-chair
Dr. Jonathan Lampert
Ruth Widder
Eve Wolf
Max Barros

We would like to extend our special thanks to

Dott. Virgilio Boccardi, for granting access to his radio interview tape of Arthur Rubinstein.
Thomas J. Pniewski, Director of Cultural Affairs at the Kosciuszko Foundation, for making this series possible.

PROGRAM

- K. SZYMANOWSKI
Labedz, op. 7
Nademna leci w szafir morza, op. 11, no. 3
- C. SAINT-SAËNS
Piano Trio no. 1 in F major, op. 18
- Allegro vivace
- M. RAVEL
Tout gai!
Chanson à boire
- M. RAVEL
Piano Trio (1914)
- Modéré

INTERMISSION

- K. SZYMANOWSKI
Violin Sonata, op. 9
- Allegro moderato. Patetico.
- G. FAURÉ
Spleen, op. 51, no. 3
- M. DE FALLA
Ritual Fire Dance (from El Amor Brujo)
- I. STRAVINSKY
Danse Russe (from Petroushka)
- A. SCRIABIN
Poème, op. 32, no. 1 (trans. Piatigorsky)
- G. FAURÉ
Piano Quartet no. 1 in C minor, op. 15
- Allegro molto moderato
- Allegro molto

PROGRAM NOTES

In his survey of the great pianists of the 19th and 20th centuries, the critic Harold C. Schonberg summarized the artistry of Arthur Rubinstein as follows:

He was the romantic player *par excellence*, but the modern kind of romantic pianist. More than any contemporary player, Rubinstein's playing reflected a culture, an exuberance, a sheer masculinity and sinewy athleticism, that made him unique. Romantic as it was, it was nevertheless entirely unmannered and almost always true to the text. And it was expressed in a gorgeous tone, directness and emotional clarity... Rubinstein developed into a romantic pianist who consistently avoided the meretricious aspects of romanticism and retained all that was good. He never broke a line and seldom bent a rhythm. He used little rubato and relatively little fluctuation of tempo. His playing represented sentiment without sentimentality, brilliance without nonsensical virtuosity, logic without pedantry, tension without neurosis. He could be dramatic without being affected or excessively emotional. (Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, p. 441).

Rubinstein's career coincided with that of another myth among modern pianists, Vladimir Horowitz. They represented two distinct approaches to the piano. Rubinstein himself, in his autobiography, commented that Horowitz was a better pianist, but considered himself to be a better musician. Tonight's program focuses on the early phase of Rubinstein's career--the years he lived in Paris in the early 20th century--and during which he had the opportunity to interact with many of the most prominent composers of the time. It was during this period that he developed a lifetime commitment to bringing new works to the attention of the public, having premiered innovative compositions that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Rubinstein was born in Lodz, Poland, on January 28, 1886. Like any young aspiring musician, he tried different places, teachers, and schools in the initial phase of his apprenticeship. As a child, he played with the renowned violinist Joseph Joachim in Berlin, made his piano debut at age seven, took some lessons with the legendary Paderewski, and soon began to form the philosophy that would direct his career for the rest of his life: a constant search for the harmony between the demands of his profession and the claims of a life which he was determined to live to the fullest. He was fond of saying that no one should practice more than three or four hours a day, in order to have time to appreciate all the richness that life and culture had to offer. Otherwise, he argued, what would one be able to express in music, if one's life were devoid of meaningful experiences? This viewpoint also influenced his perception of other pianists. In his memoirs, for instance, he compared his approach to preparing for a recital with that of Godowsky:

I couldn't sit eight, ten hours a day at the piano. I lived for every second. Take Godowsky. I was awed. It would take me five hundred years to get that kind of mechanism. But what did it get him? He was an unhappy, compulsive man,

miserable away from the keyboard. Did he enjoy life? It made me think a bit.

Rubinstein's sweeping musical conceptions were nurtured by what a reviewer of his memoirs called his "gargantuan love of life." Indeed, a perusal of the index for the memoirs reveals the kaleidoscopic nature of Rubinstein's social circle, which naturally offered him many occasions for exploring a great variety of interests and for acquainting himself with the most current trends in music, literature, and the arts. Rubinstein's openness to life's enticements was also the motivation for his continuous curiosity about new music. Already in 1904 he was playing Debussy to a mostly unsympathetic audience, and in the next decades he revealed an interest in composers as diverse as Ravel, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Dukas, and Villa-Lobos, among others. His approach to the traditional repertory was also informed by a directness and naturalness that transformed the current perceptions about a particular composer. This was the case, for instance, with his interpretations of Chopin, which elicited this comment from Schonberg:

His Chopin playing unfolded with suavity, poetry and aristocracy, and above all with ardor. It was all the more poetic because Rubinstein never felt the need to prove something to himself or his audiences or to counterfeit an emotion he did not feel. In his Chopin were none of the artificialities, stresses, underlining, emotional frigidity or hysteria that make so much contemporary Chopin playing unsettling (*ibid.*, p. 443).

Time and again, critical appreciation of Rubinstein's artistry emphasizes the elegant harmony between technique and musicianship, the humanistic dimension behind his memorable interpretations not only of Chopin, but also of Beethoven, Brahms, and Schumann. When he died in 1982, he left an impressive recorded legacy that stands as a vivid testimony for the transmutation of his philosophy of life into music.

The Paris where Rubinstein's early career unfolded was one of the avant-garde centers of Europe, together with Vienna. Paris was by far the most cosmopolitan, a city that welcomed every conceivable novelty, no matter how fleeting, elusive, or controversial. The diversity fostered by such an environment is well represented in tonight's program.

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) was arguably the most important Polish composer in the first half of the 20th century. His highly varied output comprises only 62 published works, two thirds of which consists of settings of poetry or instrumental works composed in response to a literary text. His interest in literature was only a part of his overall aesthetic conception, since he viewed artistic creation as a synthesis of human culture. In this, he shared the same artistic philosophy as Rubinstein, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship. Rubinstein's friendship with Szymanowski was strengthened by their participation in the group known as "Young Poland in Music", which was active from 1906 to 1912. The group was devoted to the publication and dissemination of Polish music, and had branches in Warsaw, Kraków, Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, and Dresden.

Szymanowski had a profound interest in exotic musical traditions, not only the ones outside the European context but also the neglected folk music of Poland and other European countries. Unusual scales and intervals are dispersed throughout his music, melded to a varied treatment of compositional techniques derived from European Romanticism. His chameleon-like flexibility has made it difficult to pinpoint the elements of his style, but scholars have divided his output into four stylistic phases. The *Violin Sonata*, composed in 1904 and published in Warsaw in 1909, clearly belongs to his early style. It is his only work in this genre. In it, scholars have discerned influences as diverse as Chopin, Schumann, Scriabin, Fauré, Brahms, and César Franck. The work is a highly crafted example of the classical genre, and the sonata form of the first movement could almost be taken as a textbook example of this form, except that the first theme, rather than being dramatic, is characterized by yearning, tenderness, and great introspection. The sonata was premiered by Rubinstein.

The two songs in the program (*Labeledz*, op. 7, and *Nademna leci w szafir morza*, op. 11, no. 3) were composed in the same year as the *Violin Sonata*. In the first song, Szymanowski opted for a compound meter that resembles the swaying rhythm of a barcarole, thus capturing the image of a swan as it glides over the water, but this picture is then overcast by ominous thoughts, longing for the homeland, and the swan becomes a symbol of death and unfulfilled destiny. The sea imagery depicted in the second song is also tainted by apprehension, as the protagonist realizes the poison that lurks in his inner self. The song is a simple A-B-A structure, with the central section containing the most extensive setting of the poem in an almost declamatory style that offsets it from the lively texture of the outer sections.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was one of the greatest piano virtuosos in history. His works for the instrument reflect his great technical prowess, and naturally attracted the attention of young pianists intent on adding a showpiece to their repertory. In his chamber music, Saint-Saëns followed the directives established by César Franck in the late 19th century, which in turn derived from the chamber music tradition established by Schubert, Brahms, and Mendelssohn. He composed the *Piano Trio in F major*, op. 18, in 1863, a particularly productive period in his life. In the first movement, the influence of Mendelssohn is palpable, although the harmonic vocabulary is quintessentially French. The movement is structured around an important musical figure first introduced by the cello as part of the main theme, and which is then subject to a series of transformations among the three instruments. The piano writing is of particular brilliance.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Ravel and Fauré represent two highly distinct lines of evolution in French music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While Fauré continued the Romantic tradition of Chopin and Schumann, Ravel turned to the ebullient environment of turn-of-the-century Paris, and was especially attracted to musical traditions outside Europe.

In their approach to song, these differences are reflected not only in the texts they chose, but also in the musical treatment of the poems. In his songs, Fauré tended to subordinate the internal nuances of the poem to a unifying musical vision (often carried by the melody), as can be seen distinctly in *Spleen*, *op. 51, no. 3*, a setting of a poem by Verlaine that was also set by Debussy. In his setting, which eschews any dramatic gestures, Fauré opted for a melody of relatively narrow range, supported by a persistently alternating rhythm in the piano texture.

Ravel's contribution to the French *mélodie* was less extensive than that of Fauré, but his songs show great variety both in their subjects and the media for which they were written. His rich harmonic palette, coupled with a melodic inspiration that often revealed his fascination with exotic lands, give some of his *mélodies* the veneer of distant lands seen through the diaphanous veil of memory. In *Tout gai!*, the mood of joy and celebration is unmistakable, evoking as it does the festivities of a village. The set of *Mélodies Populaires Grecques*, to which the song belongs, was composed as part of several harmonizations of traditional melodies from different countries and regions, which Ravel completed between 1904 and 1914. The joy expressed in *Chanson à boire* is of a different kind. The song belongs to an important group of three songs entitled *Don Quichotte a Dulcinée*. The writing is far more sophisticated than that of *Tout gai!* And the range of expression more subtly colored.

Stylistic differences between the two composers are also evident in the chamber music, a genre that had a more prominent place in Fauré's output than in Ravel's. But while Fauré's chamber music is more extensive, Ravel's is more unusual both in form and instrumentation.

Ravel's *Piano Trio* dates from the summer of 1914, thus coinciding with the onset of the First World War. At the time of its composition, Ravel was at the height of his creative powers, and the inventiveness of its musical language is a vivid testimony of the composer's exploration of new resources and techniques. Although Ravel had studied with Fauré, little can be heard of his master's aesthetic influence in this work. The elegance of the opening, based on musical gestures of great melodic and harmonic originality, soon gives way to a virtuoso writing that places formidable demands on all the instruments. The *Trio*, which premiered in 1915, eventually became one of Ravel's most beloved compositions.

Fauré's *Piano Quartet in C minor, op. 15*, was written in 1877, when Fauré was at the later stages of a troubled relationship with Marianne Viardot, the daughter of the renowned singer Pauline Viardot. Fauré's passion was not reciprocated, and one would expect the composer to pour his grief in the work. But there is no sense of personal tragedy in the *Quartet*, but rather a masterful balance between formal clarity and elegance of expression. This was an aesthetic goal to which Fauré adhered throughout his career, as he expressed it to the composer Florent Schmidt: "To express that which is within you with sincerity, in the clearest and most perfect manner, would seem to me the ultimate goal of art." In the first movement, Fauré opted for a conventional sonata form, but treats it with flowing lyricism instead of the dramatic approach favored by the

Viennese Classical composers. The original last movement was completely revised in 1883, three years after the *Quartet's* premiere. Even though it has a furious energy and relentless drive, Fauré's concern for melodic continuity is still noticeable. This *Quartet* was one of Rubinstein's signature chamber music pieces, and he recorded it many times.

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

The remaining three works in the program are by foreign composers who lived in Paris in the early 20th century and had strong ties to Rubinstein. It was during his first tour of Spain in 1916-17 that Rubinstein met Manuel de Falla, and had the opportunity to witness the composition of some of Falla's ballets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Rubinstein fell in love with Falla's music, and eventually made a piano arrangement of the *Ritual Fire Dance* from the ballet *El Amor Brujo*. Even though Falla had doubts about the success of a piano reduction, he eventually approved Rubinstein's transcription, which sparkles in its sonorities, thrills, and swaying melodies, closely suggesting the varied colors of the original orchestral score.

Stravinsky composed the ballet *Petroushka* in 1911 for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and it soon became one of the most popular works in the company. It consists of four tableaux or scenes, the last one divided into several sections. The *Danse Russe*, which closes the first tableaux, is one of the most famous numbers from the ballet. Stravinsky viewed the piano primarily as a percussion instrument, and often expressed misgivings about the possibility of writing beautiful music for the piano. Rubinstein's sound and musicianship, however, contributed to changing his perception. And it was to Rubinstein that he dedicated his own piano transcription of three movements from *Petroushka*, which he completed in 1921. Later, he made a second arrangement, for piano four-hands.

Scriabin was a fascinating composer who strove to achieve in music a comprehensive synthesis of human perception, experimenting with the blending of sound, color, and other sensations as part of a single artistic event. Few of these projects were actually carried out. The mysticism that informed his aesthetic ideals, however, filtered down to the style of his compositions, the overwhelming majority of which are for piano solo. Scriabin wrote almost no chamber music, and so songs (a rather unusual fact for a composer so much concerned with the relationship between music and the other arts). The *Poème, op. 32, no. 1* was originally written for piano solo and published with its companion piece in 1903. In the transcription by Piatigorsky, the lyricism of Scriabin's original writing is given a warmer color through the blooming sonorities of the cello.

James Melo

Musicologist in Residence