MY YOUNG YEARS, by Arthur Rubinstein

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Arthur Rubinstein's written "Polonaise" is often as enchanting and always as intensely personal as his performance of a Chopin "Polonaise." Actually, "Polonaise" might have been more fitting a title of his memoirs. "I love my country of birth, and my love has nothing to do with patriotism or chauvinism," he writes. It is often an unhappy but always a true love: Rubinstein is also a deeply sensitive Jew and painfully aware of the terrible things the Poles have done to the Jews in the past hundred years. It is a life-long complex love affair. Chopin means Poland to Rubinstein, and so do Paderewski and Karol Szymanowski, the composer. In the first thirty years of his life which this book is about, his Polish friends have given much to Rubinstein and he, in turn, has given much to the country of his birth. He remains Poland's super-ambassador-at-large, and has earned his place in the annals of his native land as in the annals of piano music.

Writing from the vantage point of the mellow octagenarian, Rubinstein recalls with warmth and wisdom the follies of his young years. That he has kept a young heart all know who ever heard him play. The ones lucky to know him personally, as a great raconteur, will immediately recognize him in his book. This is obviously not a ghost-written eulogy but a truthful and personal admission of his strengths

and weaknesses, the beautiful and the sad days, the many silly things he did and the good ones. His charming truthfulness captivates you and saves this memoir which is much too long and often repetitious. Rubinstein's life has been bizarre and often incredible almost from the earliest days he remembers; it has been a rich young life, and he retells it with gusto and fantastic devotion to detail. He must either have total recall - not improbable perhaps when one considers his phenomenal musical memory and the enormous repertoire he performs by heart - or he wisely followed Goethe's device of mixing Dichtung with Wahrheit. But though one feels that he may have added a few sforzandi and rubati in telling his story, and occasionally also a brilliant cadenza, he rarely writes a wrong note; his fiction, if there is any, is the deeper extension of truth. It is incomprehensible that he should have remembered not only the exact programs of the early performances, some seventy years ago, but also what he said and what somebody else said, and what he ate on certain days. His education as a practising gourmet is almost as lovingly traced as his education as a pianist.

In both cases there have been bewildering ups and downs. One day young Arthur dines with Paderewski, "my first taste of a langouste, the southern species of lobster, and of pink champagne," and a little later he lives in a small pension de famille in Paris, $1.40 a day for room and all meals. "We were fed mainly on salad and hash." Young Arthur soon learned fine distinction made by French epicures between "dining" and "being fed." When he was offered his first American contract one day in Paris, he celebrated by running to the Café de Paris and having "two whole mousses au chocolat."

Young Arthur's love life too is a bewildering staccato story with many crescendi and decrescendi. He tells it all, and I can see the smile in his eyes, because he knows that his women admirers have been waiting for this encore for many, many years, and Rubinstein's encores were never disappointing. It's all there, the older ladies who couldn't help seducing the nice boy, and the two ladies from the promenoir of the Folies-Bergère who took him to the small hotel across the theater and left him after what he calls "a ticklish and tantalizing operation" with a bill of over two hundred francs when he had only eighty francs in his pocket. He had to leave his cufflinks there. "It took me three weeks, on the day before leaving for America, to get the money to recover the cufflinks." But the women he loved best, naturally, were the women of Warsaw. "Let me state here and now that, in my humble opinion, they are the most attractive species of the weaker sex in the world." This is one of the few humble opinions expressed in this flamboyant memoir. No wonder that when he decided to get married - long after this book comes to an end - he married a typical Varsovienne, "add to the feminine grace and chic of the Parisienne the famous charme slave." The description fits Mrs. Aniela Rubinstein, née Mlynarska, perfectly.

Lucky as always, Rubinstein lived in what has been called nostalgically la belle époque, and remains truly the last happy era in modern times - for people with money anyway - before World War I destroyed the structure and ended the dream forever. The great people he met were not café society or gossip-column celebrities: great musicians, composers and performers, and great artists. Rubinstein tells charming anecdotes about them and about the great of this world. Most of them are gone,

they won't mind, and the twinkle is still in the raconteur's eyes when he remembers, after playing for King Edward VII that four ladies were present, all former mistresses of His Majesty, "he had good taste, I must admit, all four of them were beautiful." He never tries to get more deeply into these fascinating people. Of Picasso, he writes, "Picasso and I talked for hours about everything; we understood each other perfectly." At this point Rubinstein is too wise to pretend phoney intellectualism. As a performer, both musical and as raconteur, he was always the emotional romantic type. Musicians and especially students of the piano will not get anything approaching insight out of his memoirs. As so many performers, Rubinstein has been an instinctive re-creator, and though he admits to being "a born extrovert," when he met people, he becomes strangely withdrawn about music and playing the piano. Perhaps it is too close to him; or he is unable to express what makes him perform in a certain way and why. He is not a man in search of the deeper truth in music. He is a great performer with infectuous enthusiasm who has given many happy hours to mankind, God bless him. This is a nice, old-fashioned story, told in an old-fashioned raconteur's way, but true and honest, and permeated by Rubinstein's love of life. "If I am lucky," he writes in the last paragraph, "it is because I love life with all my heart, because my happiness is unconditional, and because I thank life every day for what it has given me."

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