

MARCO POLO

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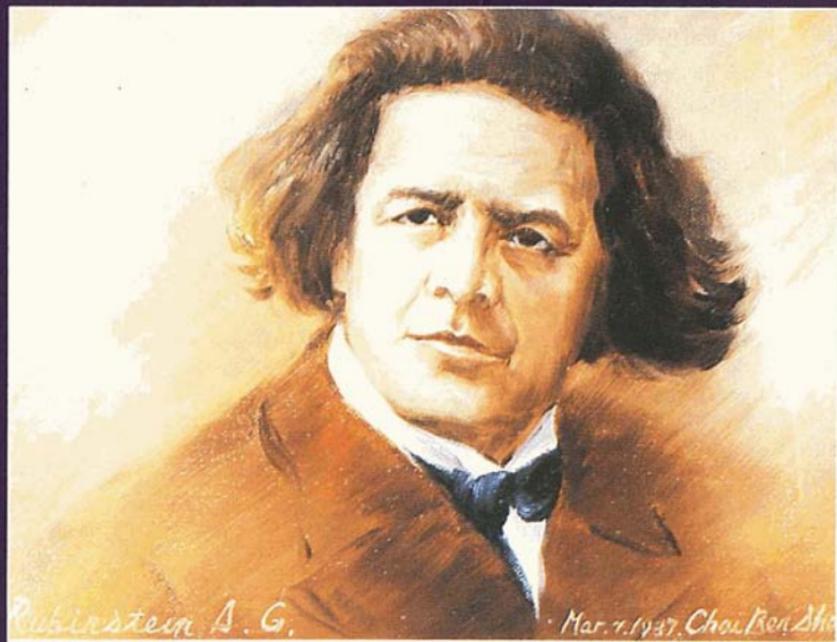
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Anton

RUBINSTEIN

Symphony No. 6

Philharmonia Hungarica
Gilbert Varga



Anton Rubinstein (1824 - 1894)

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor, Op. 111

Anton Rubinstein has had a bad press. In his own life-time he incurred the hostility of the Russian nationalist composers, led by Balakirev, a group that, with some justification, he described as amateur. To others his compositions seemed facile and superficial. In his own words he seemed in Germany to be Russian and in Russia German. Posterity has been similarly critical of Rubinstein. Sacheverell Sitwell, in his biography of Liszt, refers to him as "a fountain of bad music", while a scholar of the eminence of Gerald Abraham can describe him, as a song-writer, as "a highly competent imitator of Mendelssohn or Schumann with little personality" and elsewhere write in the most disparaging terms of his music.

Whatever detractors have had to say, Anton Rubinstein enjoyed a high enough reputation as a composer in his own time, while as a pianist he was at least the equal of Liszt. It is an irony of the history of taste that the nationalist composers should have explored a vein of material that has won continued popularity, whatever technical shortcomings their music may have contained, while Rubinstein has been regarded as a mere craftsman, lacking true musical inspiration. It is only now, nearly a hundred years after his death, that it is becoming possible to reassess his very real achievement.

Anton Rubinstein was born in the Podolsk District of Russia in 1824. His first music lessons were with his mother, followed by study under Villoing, with whom he embarked on a concert tour at the age of eleven, playing for Chopin and Liszt in Paris and for Queen Victoria in England, and impressing members of the Russian Imperial family. In 1844 his family settled in Berlin, where he took lessons from Glinka's composition teacher, Siegfried Dehn, and was able to associate with Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. The death of his father in 1846 led to the return of his mother and his brother Nikolay to Russia and to his own move to Vienna, after playing to Liszt in Weimar. From the latter he received

little encouragement, when it was most needed, and Liszt was later to refer to Rubinstein as "a Pseudo-musician of the Future".

Returning to Russia in 1848, Rubinstein won the patronage of the German-born Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, the sister-in-law of the Tsar, and formerly Princess of Saxe-Altenburg. The relationship was to prove an important one both for Rubinstein and for the future of Russian music. With the support of the Grand Duchess he was able to start a series of concerts in St. Petersburg in 1859 and three years later to establish the St. Petersburg Conservatory. A similar institution was founded in Moscow in 1864 by his brother Nikolay.

Throughout his life Anton Rubinstein had to cope with a certain hostility because of his Jewish origin, although the Rubinsteins, like the Mendelssohns before them, had become Christians, accepting what the German-Jewish poet Heine had described as "a ticket of admission to European culture". Jewish emancipation was relatively recent, and there was always a lurking suspicion that no Jew could properly represent the national spirit of the time, whether in Russia or Germany or anywhere else. The Jewish reaction to this was often to become plus royaliste que le roi, more German than the Germans, a phenomenon particularly evident in the significant Jewish support for Wagner, a composer known for his anti-semitic ideas. Sacheverell Sitwell, indeed, is prepared to perpetuate the myth of the Jews not as creators but as interpreters, with "a faculty of providing the almost perfect counterfeit". Others have been able to understand Jewish pre-eminence in performance as a reflection of the social and educational restrictions placed on the Jewish community by a hostile society.

It was largely racial hostility that led Rubinstein, in 1867, to resign as director of the concerts of the Russian Music Society that he had founded and as director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His career thereafter was spent in international concert-tours as one of the greatest pianists of the age and as a composer who could please the general public. In 1887 he resumed the

position of director of the Conservatory and two years later celebrated his jubilee. By this time his fame was a legend, attested by the popularity of his historic concerts, in which he offered a discerning public a remarkably diverse diet of keyboard music.

Rubinstein died in 1894. For the younger generation of composers he seemed the epitome of the superficial - "C'est du Rubinstein" was the highest dispraise, while, with Balakirev, the new generation were happy to refer to him as Tupinstein, Block-head, punning on his name. Nevertheless, however, blind they may have been to his work as a composer, it was necessary to acknowledge the debt of Russian music to his efforts in establishing professional public concerts in the country, and providing the beginning of a system of professional musical education that has born remarkable fruit in the present century.

As a composer, Rubinstein enjoyed success with some of his operas, particularly *The Demon*, based on the poem by Lermontov, while his symphonies, works of classical clarity, proved impressive enough. The first symphony was written in 1850, with the second, the famous *Ocean Symphony*, composed in the following year and later revised and augmented. The last of his six symphonies was written in 1866.

Symphony No. 6 in A minor, Opus 111, opens with a remarkably dramatic *Moderato con moto*, effectively written. The following *Moderato assai* provides a measure of contrast, although here too there is an almost operatic element of drama in the writing. The *Allegro vivace* has all the ingredients of a striking Scherzo, expanded and leading to a witty conclusion. The final *Moderato assai* continues in the same characteristic vein, reminding us of Rubinstein's verdict on Brahms. In a letter to Liszt he wrote of the champion of pure music, "For the drawing-room he is not graceful enough, for the concert hall not fiery enough; for the countryside he is not primitive enough, for the city not cultured enough". The Sixth Symphony of Rubinstein has grace, fire and evidence of

a long-established European cultural tradition, however little of the primitive it may contain.

Philharmonic Hungarica

The Philharmonic Hungarica was established in 1957 by Hungarian musicians who had left their native country after the political troubles of 1956. Since its first concert, given in Vienna on 28th May, 1957, the orchestra has won an international reputation. Two years later the orchestra found a permanent home in the West German town of Marl in North-Rhine-Westphalia and has received considerable assistance from the national and regional governments and from its new home-town.

Achievements during the last thirty years include, in addition to a large number of concerts in various countries, the recording of all the symphonies of Haydn under Antal Dorati, the Honorary President of the orchestra. Recordings by the orchestra have been rewarded with a number of international prizes, including the Premio della Critica Discografia Italiana, the Grand Prix des Discophiles of Paris, the London Critics' Prize, the Paris Grand Prix du Disque, the Montreux Prix Mondial du Disque and the Grosser deutscher Schallplattenpreis.

The Philharmonic Hungarica travels widely, with concert tours to the United States and Canada, to the Far East and throughout Europe. In addition to work in the concert hall, the orchestra plays regularly in the opera-houses of Düsseldorf, Cologne and Bonn.

Gilbert Varga

Gilbert Varga spent his childhood in England in the southern country of Sussex, where his father the distinguished Hungarian-born violinist Tibor Varga, had settled. The family later moved to Sion in Switzerland. From the age of 14 Gilbert Varga studied at the Conservatory of Detmold, where his father was a professor, while continuing to pursue a career as a violinist. At the age of 21 Varga undertook studies in conducting, with Franco Ferrara in Rome and Venice, with Sergiu Celibidache in Stuttgart and with Charles Bruck in the United States of America. He made his first professional appearance as a conductor in 1974 and in 1980 became Principal Conductor of the Hofer Symphoniker (Bavaria) Orchestra, while continuing a busy career as a guest-conductor in a number of countries. In 1985 Gilbert Varga was appointed to the position of Principal Conductor of the Philharmoni Hungarica.

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Anton
RUBINSTEIN
(1829 - 1894)

Symphony No. 6

Philharmonic Hungarica
Gilbert Varga, Conductor

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor, Op. 111

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| 1 | Moderato eon moto | (11:44) |
| 2 | Moderato assai | (7:37) |
| 3 | Allegro vivace | (9:14) |
| 4 | Moderato assai | (13:32) |

Recorded in Marl, FRG from 16th to 18th July, 1986.

Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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