

# Anton Rubinstein.

## In Remembrance.

By JESSIE ZUCKERMAN, B.A., L.R.A.M.

It is only fitting that on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Anton Rubinstein (16th November, 1829) we shall pay respect to the genius who, in his day, was the foremost master of the pianoforte. One of the greatest Jewish pianists and composers, he was primarily a performer, gifted with extraordinary technique, who combined the opposites of strength and charm, passion and tenderness in his playing. When we learn that in his veins there flowed Oriental blood, we are not surprised that, like a musical Vulcan, he was able to bring forth from his instrument tones that touch the whole gamut of human feeling from the loftiest of passions to the most delicate of sensibilities. But he was too much of the artist and disciple of the German school not to curb his strength and guide it wisely according to the dictates of the beauty inherent in his art. He ranks with Liszt as one of those few giants who, through the power of their artistic personality, the warmth of their comprehension and classic completeness of their playing, swept all before them.

It has been said of him: "As well try to count the spokes of a wheel in motion as follow the single notes and chords of such a performance. Here indeed was no dwelling upon fragmentary details. All was continuity, a blending of tonal effects, a massing of those fragments which generally exist for most of us as entities, into phrases which followed upon one another in such quick succession that only the most practised and experienced ear could have disintegrated them. Yet why disintegrate? Here was a revelation of what music should be."

Although we more or less take it for granted to-day that the performer shall have a good memory, it is noteworthy that Rubinstein displayed phenomenal feats of memory in his time.

The laurels that had come to him as a virtuoso since his boyhood did not content him, and he sought to add to them those of the creative artist. His goal was a high one. He worked with untiring zeal and produced a tremendous quantity of compositions, much of which perhaps suffers because of this rapid production. Among his orchestral works are the "Ocean Symphony," the "Dramatic and G. Minor Symphonies." There is the piano concerto and smaller works such as the lyrical "Spring Songs," "Asra," and "Hebrew Melodies." But it was the theatre which drew him ever, and he wrote a series of operas, many of which were produced with great success. In some of his works, e.g., "The Maccabees," which was first produced in Berlin in 1875, his Jewish origin was not to be denied. In this opera a Biblical atmosphere prevails. Judah approaches with the victorious army of Israel. The warriors sing his praise as King of Israel, but he humbly bows his head: "The Lord of Zion alone is King." His mystic opera, "Moses," and his oratorio, "The Tower of Babel," are

permeated with a deeply religious spirit. As a composer he strove to put new life into sacred composition, although he did not succeed in achieving what he set out to do. It was his wish to create for religious opera its own home, as Richard Wagner had done for the music-drama in Bayreuth. He was a composer of great ability, but worked too hurriedly, too prolifically, and much of his composition is accordingly not first-rate. There are, however, exceptions, which justify his being ranked highly as a composer. He was also an able conductor.

During the course of his travels Rubinstein came to realise that the Russian student of music was badly handicapped in comparison with those of other countries, in that he had no national conservatory of music where he could work unhampered and develop his own particular genius. With the help of money donated to him by admirers of his scheme, he founded the Royal Musical Society, which later developed into the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music, the first real Conservatory in Russia. For a period he devoted himself exclusively to teaching and promoting the growth of this institution. He was an inspiring master, who discovered for the world the colour, beauty and spirit of Russian folk-music, and how this could be embodied in original composition. He was thus the forerunner of a school of composers, of whom to-day Igor Stravinsky is a striking example. In contrast with the ordinarily superficial way in which the average performer regards the art of tone-shading, to Rubinstein with his wonderfully gifted and finely trained ear, there were not merely five degrees from very soft to very loud, but more than five times that number, thus adding tremendously to the artistic possibilities in interpretation; all of which he imparted to his pupils in plain, practical explanations, definite instructions with a true understanding of artistic matters.

As a pianist, a composer, a teacher, he was an outstanding figure. As a man he was a great personality—human, lovable, kind, and, notwithstanding his genius, humble, a man who by the sheer force of his genius, greatness and genuineness of character, overcame all social barriers. In his memoirs Leopold Auer has written: "Very simple of manner, without affectation of importance, he was charming in his relations with all artists and, indeed, with all whom he regarded as devoted to the true sense of music." There was an innate simplicity and truth at the core of his personality, which guided him infallibly through his existence.

It was on the 16th November, 1829, that Anton Rubinstein was born in the village of Wechwotynetz, near Jassy, in Bessarabia. His grandfather was a learned Hebrew scholar, his parents were pious Jews, but they suffered cruelly under the persecution of Czar Nicholas, who, when Anton was still in his infancy, issued a ukase to the effect that the

Jews were either to embrace Christianity or forfeit all their possessions. The Rubinsteins chose the former alternative. Anton, who was one of six children, of whom Nicholas also made a name for himself as a musician, received his earliest instruction from his mother. She gave him his first piano lessons and realised soon from his response that here was no average musical intelligence, that in this lad there burned the precious flame of genius. To nurse that flame, then, it was necessary to move to a large city. Moscow was chosen, and from his seventh to his thirteenth year Anton was taught for nothing by Professor Villoing, the leading piano-master of the city. At the age of ten he gave his first public concert in Moscow. Critics were unanimous in their appreciation of his playing of his beautifully clear tone, with at all times the necessary force; above all, of the fact that this child-artist entered fully into the idea of the composer and comprehended his aim. There was no question that here was an artist deeply sensitive to the beauty in music.

Two years later he toured Europe and demonstrated his genius further afield. Audiences were enthusiastic, gifts were showered upon him. In Paris Chopin was overcome by his playing of one of his (Chopin's) Nocturnes. Liszt, greatest virtuoso of his age and then a grey-haired man, listened to him in Germany and declared that now he had met his superior. (Liszt's friendship with Rubinstein was only broken by his death.) In England he was similarly received. Russia on his return gave him a royal welcome, and his concerts in the capital met with signal success.

For a period of two years after this he studied composition in Berlin, and then went to Vienna, where he composed and supported himself by giving lessons. Liszt's friendship here displayed itself in a practical, helpful way. In 1848 he returned to St. Petersburg, where he received royal patronage, thereby establishing his position and musical reputation. Some years later he became the director of the Imperial Russian Musical Society, which he had been instrumental in founding, and from which the Conservatories of St. Petersburg and Moscow were to spring. To foster the growth of the St. Petersburg institution, he gave up everything—concerts, tours, composing—to teach there until he felt he was no more needed, namely, when the Conservatory was already an assured success. One among the many brilliant pupils who came under his direction was Tchaikowski. Royal recognition of his invaluable services to Russian music was not wanting.

He toured America later and also gave a series of concerts in the capitals of Europe, which were arranged to bring out the historical development of musical literature and marked an important epoch in the history of music.

After a lifetime of indefatigable labour, he died suddenly on the 20th

November, 1894, at Peterhof, near St. Petersburg. Rubinstein will be remembered rather than as a composer, one in whom great genius was allied with innate nobility and integrity of character.

## Items of Interest from P. Elizabeth.

Very little is heard of the doings of Port Elizabeth—though a progressive and up-to-date town she is apt to hide her light under a bushel. It is therefore time that someone led her forward into the limelight, not only that "her example may be better than precept" as the old copy books used to say, but that smaller places may read of and do as she does.

On Sunday, 19th October, and the second day of Succoth, a most interesting ceremony took place in the Western Road Synagogue, namely, the confirmation of four girls. They were Ruth Brick, Esther Lurie, Pauline Seagull, and Maisie Gordon. It was a simple yet most impressive ceremony. Clad in pure white, symbolical of their girlhood, the girls were led in, after the reading of the Law, by the President, Mr. J. J. Kaplan, while the Choir sang *Baruch Habo*. They stood in front of the Ark while Rev. Levy addressed them. Speaking gently and solemnly, he urged them to observe the Commandments and traditions of their Holy Faith, and as the future Mothers in Israel, to do their duty conscientiously.

The girls in their turn recited the ten Commandments, Blessings and Psalms in Hebrew and English. Such a ceremony must impress itself upon their memories, and should be a beacon of light to guide them in their future lives.

Another recent happening was a very successful amateur performance held in the Opera House, and produced and staged by Mrs. A. Schumacher. This was entitled "A Schnierlie Perel." Funds were in aid of the Port Elizabeth Hebrew School. There was a talented company, and surely if all these efforts that are being put forth bear fruit, Port Elizabeth will soon become a "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation."

Yet another item of interest was a dancing display by the pupils of Miss Kathleen Gosschalk. This was also given in the Opera House and was a signal success, as is testified by the fact that after all expenses were paid, Miss Gosschalk was able to hand £25 to the Child Welfare Society and £25 to the Jewish Ladies' Association, for which charities the display was organised.

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