



My Young Years

Arthur Rubinstein

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The personal recollections of the piano virtuoso provide a record of his life and creative development from his childhood days in Poland to the years of the First World War.

My Young Years Details

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Author : Arthur Rubinstein

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From Reader Review My Young Years for online ebook

Tom Schulte says

Rubinstein so often reports the piece was a success in concert from the very earliest part of this career, that I was prompted to find this recording of him performing the Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto No 2 in G minor to see about it, and indeed full of exploitable dynamics I can see why this piece would win over even reluctant audiences. Rubinstein is as much an evangelist for Brahms and this long, elaborate, adventurous Grand Tour of a performance career. Now, I think of that and listen more closely whenever I see "Brahms" shows on the data display on my radio when I have Sirius XM "Symphony Hall" tune in.

This is a dense and breathless telling of the young man's accidental discovery of this ability and lurching early career, on up to World War I. Along the way, he recounts all the elite and low-lives he met, including casual dalliances with young ladies inside and outside of bordellos. (The ease of relating these sexual adventures is rather intriguing considering a life in high art, but then it was a popular art and Arthur was, really, a pop start on the road.)

Among the luminaries and characters met and described here are German pianist Heinrich Barth, Ludwig Bösendorfer himself (piano manufacturers figure in often as agents behind recital arrangements as they seek talent to showcase their often shoddy wares), Pablo Casals (a miserly anarchist here), Lina Cavalieri of My Secrets of Beauty and Arthur's pin-up girl, Russian basso and roué Feodor Chaliapin, the tragic and talented toper and gambler Paul Draper and his powerhouse wife Muriel, the original Englebert Humperdinck, various royalty, Jenny Lind, Lydia Lopoukhava future wife to John Maynard Keynes, cameo by a sullen John Reed, his best Karol Szymanowski, the Tchaikovsky brothers, and much more.

The final chapters covering World War II are fascinating for depictions of life during wartime in a vacant Paris, crowded London, and neutral Spain. At the beginning, we read of a Poland largely subsumed by its neighbors and a tense Europe where even well-attended concerts do not make it easy for a performer to obtain passports without subterfuge.

Santiago says

Frivolous but honest, intelligent master.

Alyssa says

Rubinstein had a very interesting life, but unless you can stand his alternating bragging and self-pity, I suggest you find a different account of his life. In his very own words (while describing someone else), it was "a story larded with self-praise." I have no desire to read the other 2 books.

Pedro Gadelha says

Nicht nur für Musiker.

Richard says

[redacted and moved to blog]

Martha Rosemberg says

Too much egotism

Lobstergirl says

Arthur Rubinstein was the Wilt Chamberlain of classical pianists. Apparently he would have sex with any moderately attractive female. And the reader is never left to wonder whether any female he meets is attractive or ugly; everyone in his range is subjected to the "hot or not" treatment.

Rubinstein begins his active love life having an affair with the wife of the couple he boards with. (He has essentially made himself independent of his family who are back in Lodz, Poland while he studies in other nations.) I wasn't clear on how old he was when this affair started - 14? 15? 16? In another anecdote, Rubinstein goes to the Folies Bergère and ends up in a room having sex acts performed upon him by not one but two of the lovely staffers. At the end of the event - surprise, surprise - he is presented with a bill that is much higher than he expected and has to leave some beautiful gem-encrusted cufflinks that he was given in England by a wealthy sponsor as collateral. Another time, while concertizing in Spain, he meets a sad Spanish woman, recently widowed, on a park bench at night. She emits her tragic tale of the death of her husband, he briefly commiserates, and suddenly they are having sex on the bench. The longest relationship of this memoir is with the pseudonymously named Pola Harman, a young married mother of two and the sister of one of his best friends, the pseudonymously named composer and conductor Frederick Harman. (Their real life names, I have since learned, were Julius Wertheim and Lily Wertheim.) At first he and Pola just sneak around. Then her entire family finds out about the affair and becomes alienated from her, keeping the children. For several years Pola lives with Rubinstein, her children very far away. Sometimes she gallivants with him on his concert tours, sometimes she stays at home alone. Now, obviously Pola was an adult, responsible for making her own decisions, but what kind of person implicitly asks or expects a mother to abandon her children for the sake of a multi-year love affair?

One of the oddest bits of Rubinstein's early years doesn't even merit a mention in the memoir. He befriended an American couple in London, Paul and Muriel Draper (Muriel was the sister-in-law of famed interior decorator Dorothy Draper). Paul was a singer of lieder and Muriel created a salon in her London home frequented by musicians, artists, and writers - John Singer Sargent and Henry James were among its attendees. Muriel "had a fine, graceful figure, a pale, silky complexion, and remarkably beautiful hands. But her face was disquieting: her narrow, long head, topped by hair that she kept closely under a net, her high cheekbones, her short, slightly flat nose, and exuberantly large mouth with thick red lips made her look like a white Negress." Soon Muriel and Arthur are having an affair (unbeknownst to Pola, who waits alone for

Arthur). And one day Muriel announces she is pregnant. Eventually Arthur meets the baby, "which looked like any other baby". "His name is Smudge," she announced. (I have never known his real name.)"

According to sources which are not this book, "Smudge" was Rubinstein's son; his name was Raimund Sanders Draper. He was killed during World War II, deliberately crashing his plane in order to avoid hitting a school. Did Rubinstein really not know "Smudge" was his son? Did it occur to him at least that he might be, given that he was sleeping with Muriel at the time she became pregnant? I guess I'll have to read the sequel to find out.

(This memoir only covers his childhood in Lodz up to about the middle of the First World War. He's still a bachelor when we say *au revoir*.)

The other thing that makes young Rubinstein unlikable is that in addition to being a horndog he was an incurable bon vivant who found it nearly impossible to economize. This was fine as long as his aristocratic friends and sponsors, of which there were many, were footing his bills or advancing him money. These were times filled with lobster, caviar, and champagne dinners, nighttime entertainments, and gambling. But when these friends weren't around, Rubinstein would descend into abject poverty. (His Polish family was solidly bourgeois until his father was ruined by a serious business downturn, so they were rarely able to help him with money.)

One thing I will sympathize with him on is the need for artists not to give away their talent as if it is charity. The wealthy and/or aristocrats would often attempt to have Rubinstein play at their gatherings or soirees without paying him, and he resented it unless it was a group of his close friends. In America, both Mrs. W.K. (Birdie) Vanderbilt and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, of all people, stiffed Rubinstein after he had played ("professionally") at their parties. And Pablo Casals, with whom Rubinstein played a concert in London, never gave him his cut of the proceeds.

As you would expect with a memoir of a rising artist of enormous talent from the early 20th century, the cast of characters is incredible. The composer Karol Szymanowski was one of Rubinstein's closest friends. (Oddly, though Szymanowski was gay in real life, in the memoir he seems to be heterosexual.) Rubinstein was friends with Pablo Casals and the great violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. Paderewski hosted the very young Rubinstein at his estate. Maurice Ravel and Camille Saint-Saëns came to hear him play. At Muriel Draper's salon he met John Singer Sargent, Henry James, and the writer Norman Douglas. Proust attended one of his concerts. Busoni attended another. While vacationing in Italy at the home of Mabel Dodge he met John Reed and Gertrude Stein. Modest Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich's brother, was a friend who helped him procure concert engagements. Rubinstein had a long conversation about *The Rite of Spring* with Stravinsky after hearing it performed for the first time. (Stravinsky didn't know Rubinstein was a pianist, he just thought he was a random man very interested in music.) He came to know Sergei Diaghilev, and one day ran into Picasso. Baron George Curzon hosted him at his estate. He saw Maxim Gorky at a cafe one day. And oddest of all, one day in St. Petersburg he saw a dirty, bedraggled man sitting in a room surrounded by acolytes, whom he later realized was Rasputin.

In spite of the occasional moments of seriousness, such as a failed suicide attempt (because he had no money to pay his bills) and his hunger in Paris during the First World War (which didn't last long as he quickly acquired new aristocratic sponsors), the overall tone of the narrative is very light-hearted, superficial, and self-serving. I found it rather off-putting. It's hard to tell how much is truth and how much tonal embellishment. Of most interest to me were the passages where he talks about specific pieces of music, or approaches to playing. The world was very lucky to have Arthur Rubinstein, the pianist and musician.

Dragana says

The great pianist's story, life that was never too easy but somehow always turned lucky in the long way. An unique insight into one's life, love and pain. This is not a book you would perhaps immediately pick up from a shelf without knowing about its background and the man behind the hands. But once you take it you will travel far away, to different countries, time, through many beautiful piano masterpieces.

Betty Confetti says

Rubinstein wrote 2 biographies, this one and "My Many Years." This one covers his youth up to about 30. Young Years is fabulous in that Rubinstein tells so much that is uncomplimentary of himself that it's believable, fascinating, and at the same time incredible. One comes to understand the mixing bowl of artistry that great musicians are subjected to in order to become who they grow up to be. In many ways, his early life reminds me of the mixing bowl of Louis Armstrong's early life--both in many ways aimless due to youths with hardly any connection to parenting authority. Also, the constant inter-connections of the theatre, movies, and music along with political developments as a backdrop is a constant theme in both books. Rubinstein, like Albert Einstein, also came to an appreciation and love for the state of Israel that is incredibly similar, and one can trace this to the antisemitism that both experienced leading into World War II. Rubinstein reveals himself to be both removed from major events of the day, as during World War I, he fled to South America and pursued with zest his performance career, as well as connected through movers and shakers. But always food is a big deal to him--clearly someone who probably never ate a Big Mac. Overall, I found My Many Years to be less authentic, as it is hard to believe he honestly had left behind the womanizing that characterized his youth. Was he always faithful to Nela, his wife? And really, who was Annabelle? These omissions reveal a certain degree of cover he gives himself in the second volume. I'm suspicious. My interest is whetted, and I will learn more about the true Rubinstein.

Jan Peczkis says

A Polish Patriotic Jew Who Stood Up for Poland. Includes Candid Jewish Self-Criticism

Rubinstein, an assimilated Polish Jew, is beloved by Poles for his spontaneous display of patriotism. He played the Polish National Anthem, at the very first meeting of the United Nations in 1945, in protest of the fact that Poland (that is, the rightful, non-Communist Polish Government, in exile during WWII) had been denied representation in this new international body.

This book is about Rubinstein's childhood and early career as a pianist through about 1916. My review focuses on matters related to life in foreign-ruled Poland. For a time, Rubinstein's love for Poland was not in a patriotic sense. (p. 13). Later, he identified himself explicitly as a Polish patriot in response to the Prussian mistreatment of the Poles. (p. 44). When news came of Poland being in the process of resurrection as an independent state, Rubinstein wanted to join the Polish forces. (pp. 433-444).

Charges of anti-Semitism are so easy to make. While a boy, came to know pianist Ignace Jan Paderewski, and rejected accusations that Paderewski had been an anti-Semite. (p. 81).

SOME JEWISH SELF-CRITICISM

Rubinstein had discussions with his fellow Jews, in which the themes centered on Jews as victims and Jews as objects of envy. (pp. 364-365). Earlier, however, he had voiced frank criticism of certain aspects of Jewish conduct. He said: "My point of view was that anti-Semitism, in many ways, was justifiable. 'When I see these rich Jews and their wives behaving in public the way they do, showing off their wealth, their jewels, their furs, pushing themselves forward wherever they go, I can understand the indignation of the Gentiles.'" (p. 363).

Rubinstein's attitudes towards Orthodox Jews paralleled that of those (e.g., reputed members of Haller's Army) who humiliated them. When reminded by his friend Dr. Goldflam that only a small minority of Jews were wealthy, Rubinstein retorted: "'All right, doctor, all right,' I argued hotly, 'but what do we have on the other hand? The ghettos? These masses of meek little men with their beards and side curls, afraid of everything and everybody? Why don't they use their born gifts and intelligence for something better than buying and selling clothes? It infuriates me when anti-Semitic Poles slander us, calling us Jews usurers and thieves. I know that we have, fortunately, a highly cultured elite, too,...but it is too small--it is unable to offset the bad effect of the rest.'" (p. 363).

Earlier in life, Rubinstein's opinions had been even stronger: "We had been brought up in the Polish language. We were little concerned about Jewish laws or dogma, although we were always proud of our race. Still, I do remember having been derisively critical of the Polish Orthodox Jews, with their long black coats and their sidelocks and beards and their singsong. My father had taken me, once or twice, to a synagogue, but only for musical reasons--to hear a famous cantor perform--and on these occasions there was a curious mixture of Jewish worshippers and Christians who were enthusiastic about the singer." (pp. 46-47). [Misconduct against Orthodox Jews was hardly limited to some of Haller's men. The informed reader realizes that, even in modern Israel, Orthodox Jews sometimes face humiliations--in this case from fellow Jews.]

POLES SUCCESSFULLY PUSHED BACK AGAINST THE GERMANS

Now consider German-Polish relations. Rubinstein described how the Poles thwarted the harsh Prussian measures: "Being fervent Catholics, they produced many more children than their oppressors or any other European country--the Germans used to call them, derisively, 'Polnische Karnickel' (slang for Polish rabbits). But that wasn't all--overnight these carefree, free-spending, light-hearted people turned into first-rate economists. In order to fight the German offensive, clergy, peasants, and landowners pooled their money, opened banks and other organizations of credit, and thus, well-armed, succeeded in buying, often under assumed German names, twice as much land as they had been losing to the settlers. The whole province became divided into two fanatically hostile groups..." (p. 44).

Juan Camacho says

A child prodigy who had total recall and lived a crazy life. It's an emotional book
