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A portrait of Franz Liszt, the composer, with dark, wavy hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark coat with a white collar. The background is a textured, dark greenish-grey.

# Rubinstein

**MUSIC FOR PIANO FOUR HANDS Vol.2**

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**DUO PIANISTICO DI FIRENZE**

**Sara Bartolucci · Rodolfo Alessandrini**

Anton Rubinstein is one of those legendary figures whose life could be the basis for a book or a film script. Gifted with an exuberant personality and an infinite generosity, he was also a tireless worker with an impressive musical talent: he was able to transpose any piece into another tonality and knew an enormous quantity of music by heart. His piano style, which initially followed the elegant phrasing of Field (Anton had been a pupil of Villoing) was subsequently influenced by Liszt: there is a story that the first time Rubinstein heard Liszt play he was so struck by the great Hungarian musician's style that he swooned, and Liszt himself had to interrupt the concert in order to revive him. Later they became friends. As time passed, Rubinstein grew to become a living legend of the piano, being equally flattered by critics and adored by his enthusiastic fans all over the world: for example, his debut in America sent his followers into such a frenzy that they organised a band to play one of his famous melodies outside the hotel where he was staying.

At the same time (incredibly), Rubinstein was also a conductor and a pioneer of the musical organisation in Russia: he was responsible for the opening of the first music conservatories in his homeland, and was the founder and director of the conservatory in St Petersburg, while his brother Nikolai did the same in Moscow. Musicians owe their professional recognition to him, since prior to that time, unlike actors, artists, architects and sculptors, they had no official space in the social hierarchy; the birth of what is now known as the 'Russian piano school' can be attributed to him.

But Anton Rubinstein was above all a tireless composer, able to speedily produce all types of music, from lyric opera and sacred opera (a form he practically invented) to instrumental and vocal chamber music, and numerous piano works: a glance at his endless catalogue gives an idea of the enormous quantity of music he composed.

Rubinstein was in contact with the most important personalities of his time: he frequented the courts of all the reigning monarchs in Europe and met all the most powerful Russians. At the same time, through sacrifice and hard work, he managed to avoid adverse currents and to uphold the dignity of his musical ideals. He was appreciated by Mendelssohn, Moscheles, Kalkbrenner and Chopin, and had an intimate friendship with Liszt and Saint-Saëns. Although he was in constant respectful conflict with the Five, he is nevertheless recognised as the spiritual father of the great Russian talents of the second half of the 19th century. Even the young Rachmaninoff was impressed by his piano playing, and after having listened to two of Rubinstein's endless concerts, he commented that the experience had been one of the most important moments of his life.

Rubinstein's achievement as a pianist was however not equalled by his achievements as a composer: constantly criticised by the Five for the evident Germanic roots present in his work, he was a victim of his own easy creativity; he composed so quickly that he seemed almost obsessed by the need to create new music, which prevented him from correcting, modifying, perfecting and refining any new

work, with the consequent loss of excellent ideas amid banalities and imperfections which could have been easily avoided.

Rubinstein himself commented in one of his aphorisms: 'There exist artists who effectively work on the one creation all their life, striving towards perfection; others produce copiously, but are far from perfection. The second type seems more logical to me. Absolute perfection is not a possibility of human endeavour, and the imperfect can contain much that is wonderful and worthy of attention.' The sentence is a perfect (self-)criticism which can also be used to describe his compositions for piano four hands, comprising *Three Characteristic Melodies*, *Six Characteristic Pieces*, a monumental Sonata and the very particular suite, *Bal costumé*.

The few publications regarding the life and work of Anton Rubinstein are often too superficial in their discussion of his pieces for four hands, treating them almost as useful only for beginners, but they are really more complex and in line with the average quality of this composer's production.

The first volume of this complete work contained the *Three Characteristic Melodies* Op.9 (1847), the *Six Characteristic Pieces* Op.50 (composed between 1854 and 1858), and the monumental Sonata Op.89. The second volume is dedicated to the suite *Bal costumé* Op.103, the longest piece of music ever written for piano four hands and the last that Rubinstein composed for this particular ensemble.

*Bal costumé* (Masked Ball) was published in 1880, with the subtitle *Suite de morceaux caractéristiques pour piano à quatre mains*. It is the musical representation of the fashionable masked balls that high society organised during the Carnival season, which often served to showcase elaborate and refined costumes.

The Suite consists of 20 pieces that – with the exception of the first and last which function as the Suite's opening and closing – are based on the alternation of two masked figures, one male and the other female, well described with characteristic rhythms and themes. It is not a polyptych composition, rather an extensive series of pieces with no real connection among themselves, although the true value of the work can only be appreciated by keeping in mind the general picture of the enormous fresco painted by the author. Many of the pieces are constructed using the form A–B–A.

Each piece refers to its corresponding historical period in brackets: these range from the 12th to the 18th century, but as the knowledge of history and musicology in Rubinstein's time was vastly inferior to our own, we are bound to note the lack of adequate descriptions of the various eras and musical styles, which remain predominantly Romantic in nature with perhaps a slight reminiscence of the Baroque.

In this extraordinary tapestry, there is however much to admire in Rubinstein's ability to construct a melody; each piece contains at least one important melodic idea that has an immediate impact on the listener. The clever handiwork of the composer and contrapuntist is also evident in the themes that are never banal and are often developed and intertwined with surprising naturalness.

The abnormal length of the Suite has had a detrimental effect on its diffusion, forcing artists to present only a selection of the pieces in public, a practice that has led to some becoming famous and some being forgotten; the more celebrated numbers have been transcribed for various ensembles and also for full orchestra, as American concert programmes of the late 1890s testify. Rubinstein himself played the entire Suite at least three times, with Louis Brassin and his pupils Esipova and Terminskaya, but it must be remembered that his concert programmes were legendary for their length and very different from the curtailed recitals modern audiences are used to.

*Bal costumé* opens with a majestic, symphonic **Introduction**, its writing dense and heavy, interrupted by a lighter and more fluid central Trio.

*Astrologue et Bohémienne* (16th century) highlights the austere and menacing tones of the astrologer's prophecy with bass notes, and the gipsy's exuberant and extrovert dance theme with high notes. It is almost a competition between the two as to who can offer the more worrying prediction.

*Berger et Bergère* (18th century) has a central melody that imitates the nasal sound of a shepherd's bagpipes, later transposed to the high register of the shepherdess's song, where it represents harmonious gusts of wind.

*Marquis et Marquise* (18th century) begins with a slow modulation combined with rococo ornaments that suggests the image of aristocratic processions on official occasions, untouched by earthly passions. These nevertheless appear in the central section, which is emotionally more moving, offering an increasingly intimate and less formal dialogue between the Marquis and his Lady.

*Pêcheur napolitain et Napolitaine* (18th century) is one of the most famous and intriguing numbers of the whole series. It is a joyful tarantella in minor mode (much more elaborate than the one composed by Rubinstein's brother Nikolai) with surprising rhythmic and harmonic solutions. After a normal introduction, the scene abruptly changes to a smooth tenor solo in major mode similar to a fisherman's song at sea, which merges in the distance with the echo of the tarantella that the women are dancing on land. The mix between the 3/4 tempo of the song and the 6/8 tempo of the dance is most interesting. The final coda brings the tarantella rhythm to a crescendo.

*Chevalier et Châtelaine* (12th century) contrasts the Cavalier's clarion with the soft lyrical tones of the Lady of the castle. A dramatic symphonic development follows bringing to mind a battle scene. The repeat of the initial idea is intended to represent the Cavalier's hypothetical homecoming.

*Toréador et Andalouse* (18th century) is perhaps the most famous piece of the entire Suite. Its brevity, freshness and easily remembered theme, its strong Spanish characterisation and brilliant scoring make it a little gem, often used as an encore.

*Pèlerin et Fantaisie* (Étoile du soir) represents one of the Suite's more emotional pieces. The wanderer's footsteps in the bass, sustained by a serene chorale, stop awhile to admire the star Fantaisie depicted by

Rubinstein with simple and soft acute, arpeggiated chords. At the top of the hill the traveller and the star are so close to one another that they meet in a moving central section. Afterwards, the wanderer goes on his way and is lost on the horizon while the star, left alone, shines in the sky.

*Polonais et Polonaise* (17th century) is another famous piece from *Bal costumé*, frequently transcribed. Although it is indicated as 17th century, the influence of Chopin is immediately evident, both in the heroic masculine presentation of the initial theme and in the more feminine central mazurka.

*Bojard et Bojarde* (16th century) describes the austerity of the feudal Russian aristocracy, using a well-known popular folk song from the area for the central part in a minor key.

*Cosaque et Petite-russienne* (17th century) is one of the longest and more elaborate pieces of the Suite, and also the one with the most authentic 'Russian' atmosphere. It is composed of two parts: a minor-key cantabile introduction with two cadenzas, and a major-key Allegro, following the Cossack dance tradition, which normally uses moderately slow steps to describe the waiting families and the suffering of war, and more vigorous and joyful dances to describe the victory and the return of the soldiers.

*Pacha et Almée* (18th century) presents a vision of the Arabian world seen through the typical stereotypes of the Romantic period. A majestic march with standard Oriental intervals describes the Pasha's procession. The odalisque's sensual and seductive central theme strongly resembles the third movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. It is important to stress, however, that this latter masterpiece was written eight years after *Bal costumé* was published...

*Seigneur et Dame* (from Henry III's court) is the only piece that has a sort of third protagonist, in the figure of the court. The first part imitates a more antique music style with a baroque flavour which, while in no way appertaining to the era of Henry III, gives a good idea of an archaic atmosphere. The two main figures then weave around each other in the usual A-B-A structure, with the lady dominating the central part in pre-Impressionist style.

*Sauvage et Indienne* (15th century) contrasts the impetuous and violent character of the savage with the sweet theme of the Indian girl. This is music that cleverly highlights the striking timbral possibilities of four-hand symphonic piano-playing.

*Patricien allemand et Damoiselle* (16th century) alternates a noble chorale interlude with a more impassioned central section that mirrors the similar episode in *Pèlerin et Fantaisie*, this time through the elaboration of pleasing progressive links.

*Chevalier et Soubrette* (18th century) is a light-hearted romp with an elegant beginning but with a rapid emotive change in the central episode.

*Corsaire et Femme grecque* (17th century) bears the marking 'Moderato = [minim]' and uses running semiquavers almost throughout. The sustained melody of the female figure is presented at the climax of the first section and then repeated in a lighter and sweeter tonality.

*Royal Tambour et Vivandière* (18th century), like *Pêcheur napolitain et Napolitaine*, is particular in its opening phrases where it combines two different metrics (2/4, 6/8) contrasting the pompous military personality of the drummer (in 6/8) with the light-hearted happy-go-lucky sutler. The central Trio is a true military march that concludes with a genial rhythmic superimposition of trumpet blasts and drum rolls.

*Troubadour et Dame souveraine* (13th century) compares the regal character of its principal theme with the fast-running episodes of the troubador, whose lute is suggested by the use of arpeggios and repeated high-key chords. The development is extensive and dramatic in its return to the initial atmosphere.

*Danses*, the longest and most complex movement of the Suite, announces the epilogue of the masked ball with an orgy of dances that begins with a Great Waltz that becomes an exultant Polka and finally a whirling Galop which calls for a virtuoso piano performance.

*Bal costumé*, while not containing extraordinarily difficult piano passages, is not an easy work to perform. There are uncomfortable and complicated moments often with hidden traps that require careful preparation. Perhaps for these reasons the Suite has never received the attention it merits; but like much other Russian music of that period it has suffered from the unexpected change of taste and mentality following the new current of 19th-century music: beautiful melodies and immediate comprehension were no longer considered acceptable. Besides which, as always with Rubinstein, there is the problem of the size, the classification and the destination of this lengthy and cumbersome work. But Rubinstein's destiny is a constant crisis of identity, as he remarked in a famous aphorism: 'Russians call me German, Germans call me Russian, Jews call me a Christian, Christians call me a Jew; pianists call me a composer, composers call me a pianist; the classicists think me a futurist, and the futurists a reactionary. My conclusion is that I am neither fish, flesh nor good red herring – a pitiful individual.'

This reasoning fits this Suite all too well: too difficult for amateurs, snubbed by the concert performers because too salon-style, too long for the general public, too melodious for musicians. But if you have the patience to listen to it without prejudice, you will find that it is full of beauty, as is all Rubinstein's music.

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Translation: Elizabeth Hancock



### Duo pianistico di Firenze

Sara Bartolucci and Rodolfo Alessandrini formed the Firenze Piano Duo in 1990, and quickly became one of the most original and eclectic duos of recent generations. They have since won important international competitions and performed in Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Japan and the US.

Their extensive repertoire includes composers of all types and of all historical periods. They have played over 170 works in public with more than 50 first performances. They are also famous for their own transcriptions, many of which can be heard on CD.

Their Radio and Television recordings are numerous: they have realised the first world recording of the *Manifesto of Futurist Music* by F.B. Pratella (CD – Radio 2 Music, Mudima, CH) and they have recorded works for piano four hands by Anton Rubinstein and Frédéric Chopin for Brilliant Classics.

They have published important urtext four hand scores for the publishers Schott and Carisch, and they are editors for the Four Hands Editions, the largest editorial project for piano duo ever thought.

After graduating *magna cum laude* in Florence, they specialised in Fortepiano and Romantic Piano with Stefano Fiuzzi at the International Piano Academy of Imola, receiving the honorary title of 'Master'. They are also the artistic directors of the prestigious *Muzio Clementi* Piano Competition in Italy.

### World-premiere recording

Recorded: 8–13 August 2018, Accademia Bartolomeo Cristofori, Florence, Italy

Piano: Yamaha piano, Bussotti & Fabbrini

Recording engineer: Niccolò Gallio

Mastering: Alessandro Maffei

Artists' photo: © Simone Favilli

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