

MUSIC: RUDOLF SERKIN PERFORMS BEETHOVEN

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Published: September 15, 1983

To open each season, the New York Philharmonic traditionally puts on a gala benefit concert for the orchestra's pension fund, with the aid of a universally admired soloist, if possible. Last night the attraction for a richly turned out audience was an old favorite, Rudolf Serkin, playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C under the baton of Rafael Kubelik.

It was his 106th appearance with the Philharmonic over a quarter of a century and it proved at least one thing to the satisfaction of devoted Serkinites, which means almost everybody with ears: at age 80, he obviously has not given up practicing. The great man still has the fingers to handle Beethoven and the mind and soul to make you care deeply about a work that time and technology have made as familiar as your own face in the mirror.

This is a fairly small-scale work, although in spite of its numbering it was Beethoven's third piano concerto, if an immature effort in E flat is counted. It does, however, call for considerable power and sonority in places, qualities that Mr. Serkin does not supply as easily nowadays as he once did. Still, it was a supple and forceful performance, recognizably Serkin. He did not tinkle away at the piece and hope that his listeners would think he was trying for an elegant, Mozartean interpretation. His touch, though often rather brittle, was firm and his command of the musical line was total.

With Mr. Kubelik drawing an alert and sympathetic accompaniment from the orchestra, Mr. Serkin sustained the Largo with long, gentle phrases and made the concluding Rondo dance with delicacy and wit. There sometimes was an autumnal quality to his reading or a contemplative turn of phrase that threw a strange light on superficially robust, virtuosic passages. There also were a few blurred spots, notably in the brisk finale, but perfection is demanded only of mediocre artists. Great masters such as Mr. Serkin can drop a note or two without shocking anyone who knows what musical performance is, or should be, all about.

Another pianist might have chosen either of the two shorter cadenzas that Beethoven left for the opening movement, but Mr. Serkin opted for the exhausting long one and played it splendidly, every last note. Many a pianist has trimmed this cadenza here and there, because it can seem a bit long and weighty for this concerto. Sviatoslav Richter, for one, used to chop out 21 bars near the end. But Mr. Serkin has never been known for compromises and he does not seem to need them now.

For his part, Mr. Kubelik chose Mahler's Symphony No. 1 and treated it to an affectionate reading. This was a performance that did not try to emphasize the Classical formalities of structure that can be discerned in this work. Instead, Mr. Kubelik changed tempos so often and so drastically that one had to refer continually to the score to be sure that he was not twisting Mahler's intentions all out of shape. In fact, there is ample justification in the score for the kind of exaggerated rubato and swooning phrasings that characterized this performance. Mr. Kubelik, like Mahler a Central European by birth, plainly feels this music's idiom deeply.

For my own taste, it was all too soupily rhapsodic and ponderous to be entirely convincing, but there certainly are sentimental aspects to Mahler's music, early and late, that lend it a strange and heartbreaking quality. The orchestra, faced with a score that often exposes soloists and small groups mercilessly, played with commendable accuracy and followed Mr. Kubelik's stop-and-go interpretation without serious trouble.