Anton Rubinstein
(b. Vikhvatinets, Ukraine, 28 November 1829 – d. Peterhof nr. St. Petersburg, 20 November 1894)

Symphony No. 3 in A major, op. 56 (1855)

Preface

"The weird, barbaric looking master and magician of the pianoforte, with his immense mass of hair and awkward movement, without smile, or any sign of consciousness apparently of aught beside the single purpose of his music, and with a look upon his face as of one eaten up by the intensity of a life-long absorption in his art, as if all the expression had struck inward, and what you saw was but the lifeless simulacrum of the man, approached his instrument, courteous to his audience if not gracious, amid applause which was but the forerunner of the outbursts that were to follow." (Dwight's Journal, 19 October 1872)

Thus a contemporary description of perhaps the only nineteenth-century pianist who could brook comparison with Liszt. Rubinstein was groomed to be a child prodigy in the classical mould: he toured the capitals of Europe from the age of eleven (1840-43), made the acquaintance of Liszt and Chopin, established fruitful contacts with the Russian royal family, and was received by Queen Victoria. He thereupon settled as a teenager in Berlin, where he completed a solid study of composition (1844-6). Later, after being taken up by the tsar's family as pianist-in-residence, he gradually assumed a towering position in the musical life of his native Russia and in the consciousness of the world. He founded and conducted the Russian Musical Society (later the Leningrad Philharmonic) in 1859, co-founded and directed the St. Petersburg Conservatory (1862-7), conducted the Vienna Philharmonic (1871-2), toured America in 1872, and became a worldwide household name for transcendent pianism, comparable to Paderewski or Horowitz in later ages. Despite his Herculean workload he also managed to produce a huge volume of compositions, including some twenty operas. His sixtieth birthday was cause for celebrations by all classes of society throughout the vast expanses of the Russian Empire.
Rubinstein, as a composer, had a remarkable, indeed almost dangerous facility. He produced songs and short piano pieces almost as if he were writing postcards. Of the latter, the famous Melody in F (op. 3, no. 1) and Kamennoi-Ostrow (op. 10, no. 22) have achieved immortality in countless arrangements and have virtually entered the collective unconscious of Western civilization. If the larger works have been less fortunate in this respect, the reason may be found in the great flowering of Russian music, from the "Mighty Handful" via Tchaikovsky, Rakhmaninov, and Stravinsky to Prokofiev and Shostakovich, that soon cast his enormous output onto the sidelines.
Rubinstein's importance as a composer is perhaps best viewed in relation to his most brilliant pupil and perennial rival, Tchaikovsky. It was to Rubinstein that Tchaikovsky, as he freely admitted, owed his craft as a composer. He assiduously prepared piano reductions of his teacher's tone poems Ivan the Terrible (op. 79) and Don Quixote (op. 87), and he had no doubts, even later in life, in proclaiming Rubinstein one of the two great symphonists of the age (the other was Joachim Raff). Rubinstein took fright at the young Tchaikovsky's student works and intuitively backed off from his later creations, even failing to acknowledge Tchaikovsky's dedications. But he had no qualms about conducting the Russian première of his pupil's Second Piano Concerto (30 May 1882) and frequently placed other works by Tchaikovsky on his many concert programs. By the 1890s it was clear to all that Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky, whatever their personal differences, were the most famed and respected Russian composers of their age.
The Third Symphony was completed in 1855 and included in a memorial concert conducted in

Rubinstein's honor by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Though never as popular as his Symphony No. 2 – The "Ocean Symphony" – the Third found a ready following among Rubinstein's many admirers in Russia and abroad. It is worked out in full symphonic style, with an expansive opening movement, a plaintive slow movement in the minor mode, an F-major scherzo with a lilting trio, and a rousing finale in the Mendelssohnian manner. The work was published in full score by A. Schubert, Leipzig and New York, in 1862.

Bradford Robinson, 2005
Performance material: Benjamin, Hamburg