

Anton  
**RUBINSTEIN**

**Le Bal**

**Warren Lee, Piano**



## Anton Rubinstein (1829–1894)

### Le Bal, Op. 14 • Allegro appassionato, Op. 30, No. 2

Anton Rubinstein has had a bad press. In his own lifetime he incurred the hostility of the Russian nationalist composers, led by Balakirev, a group that, with some justification, he described as amateur. To others his compositions seemed facile and superficial. In his own words he seemed in Germany to be Russian and in Russia German. Posterity has been similarly critical of Rubinstein. Sacheverell Sitwell, in his biography of Liszt, refers to him as 'a fountain of bad music', while a scholar of the eminence of Gerald Abraham can describe him, as a songwriter, as 'a highly competent imitator of Mendelssohn or Schumann with little personality' and elsewhere write in the most disparaging terms of his music.

Whatever detractors have had to say, Anton Rubinstein enjoyed a high enough reputation as a composer in his own time, while as a pianist he was at least the equal of Liszt. It is an irony of the history of taste that the Russian nationalist composers should have explored a vein of material that has won continued popularity, whatever technical shortcomings their music may have contained, while Rubinstein has been regarded as a mere craftsman, lacking true musical inspiration. It is only now, some 125 years after his death, that it is becoming possible to reassess his very real achievement.

Anton Rubinstein was born in the Podolsk District of Russia in 1824. His first music lessons were with his mother, followed by study under Villoing, with whom he embarked on a concert tour at the age of eleven, playing for Chopin and Liszt in Paris and for Queen Victoria in England, and impressing members of the Russian Imperial family. In 1844 his family settled in Berlin, where he took lessons from Glinka's composition teacher, Siegfried Dehn, and was able to associate with Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. The death of his father in 1846 led to the return of his mother and his brother Nikolay to Russia and to his own move to Vienna, after playing to Liszt in Weimar. From the latter he received little encouragement, when it was most needed, and Liszt was later to refer to Rubinstein as 'a Pseudo-musician of the Future'.

Returning to Russia in 1848, Rubinstein won the patronage of the German-born Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, the sister-in-law of the Tsar, and formerly Princess of Saxe-Altenburg. The relationship was to prove an important one both for Rubinstein and for the future of Russian music. With the support of the Grand Duchess he was able to start a series of concerts in St Petersburg in 1859 and three years later to establish the St Petersburg Conservatory. A similar institution was founded in Moscow in 1864 by his brother Nikolay.

Throughout his life Anton Rubinstein had to cope with a certain hostility because of his Jewish origin, although the Rubinsteins, like the Mendelssohns before them, had become Christians, accepting what the German-Jewish poet Heine had described as 'a ticket of admission to European culture'. Jewish emancipation was relatively recent, and there was always a lurking suspicion that no Jew could properly represent the national spirit of the time, whether in Russia or Germany or anywhere else. The Jewish reaction to this was often to become *plus royaliste que le roi*, more German than the Germans, a phenomenon particularly evident in the significant Jewish support for Wagner, a composer known for his anti-Semitic ideas. Sacheverell Sitwell, indeed, is prepared to perpetuate the myth of the Jews not as creators but as interpreters, with 'a faculty of providing the almost perfect counterfeit'. Others have been able to understand Jewish pre-eminence in performance as a reflection of the social and educational restrictions otherwise placed on the Jewish community by a hostile society.

It was largely racial hostility that led Rubinstein, in 1867, to resign as director of the concerts of the Russian Music Society that he had founded and as director of the St Petersburg Conservatory. His career thereafter was spent in international concert tours as one of the greatest pianists of the age and as a composer who could please the general public. In 1887 he resumed the position of director of the Conservatory and two years later celebrated his jubilee. By this time his fame was a legend,

attested by the popularity of his historic concerts, in which he offered a discerning public a remarkably diverse diet of keyboard music.

Rubinstein died in 1894. For the younger generation of composers he seemed the epitome of the superficial – 'C'est du Rubinstein' was the highest dispraise, while, with Balakirev, the new generation were happy to refer to him as 'Tupinstein', ('block head'), punning on his name. Nevertheless, however blind they may have been to his work as a composer, it was necessary to acknowledge the debt of Russian music to his efforts in establishing professional public concerts in the country, and providing the beginning of a system of professional musical education that has born remarkable fruit in more recent times.

Rubinstein's *Le Bal* ('The Ball') presents a series of ten pieces, representing, like Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*, a characteristic ballroom scene, the anticipation of the dancer, the varied dances themselves and final reflection on what has passed. Rubinstein's miniature drama, in ten numbers, is dedicated to his pupil Princess Sophia of Nassau, the future Queen of Sweden and Norway, who had been brought to St Petersburg by her mother, in order to give her daughter experience of formal court life. The work was first published in 1855 and was revised in 1871.

The ball opens with *Impatience*, as a dancer awaits her turn in a movement that includes allusions to the *Polka* and the *Waltz*, tentatively interrupted. The first dance is a *Polonaise*, its tempestuous progress relaxing into a section of relative tranquility. The *Contredanse* brings the dancers together, men and women in facing lines, leading to duets as couples join together, after passing up the line. Here couples find their partners, followed by a varied set of six dances. The *Waltz*, a form of dance regarded with suspicion by an older generation, came to enjoy great popularity among younger dancers, bringing couples together as it did. Rubinstein's *Waltz* strays from the familiar territory of Chopin into that of Liszt. It is followed by a momentary pause for breath in an *Intermezzo*, then recalling the initial mood of anticipation. The familiar rhythm of the *Polka* leads to a *Polka-Mazurka* and a *Mazurka*, Polish dances, and an energetic *Galop*. The work ends in a *Dream*, a recollection of the excitement of all that has passed.

Rubinstein's *Allegro appassionato, Op. 30, No. 2* was also first published in the mid-1850s. In D minor, the piece is framed by its principal theme, its passion modulating to F major for the relative tranquility of contrasting material. It is coupled in publication with a *Barcarole, Op. 30, No. 1*.

Keith Anderson

## Warren Lee



Warren Lee made his debut with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra at the age of six. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London and the Yale School of Music, he was the First Prize winner of the Stravinsky Awards International Piano Competition and the Grand Prix Ivo Pogorelich in 1995. He has performed on four continents, often in collaboration with international artists and leading orchestras. His recordings for Universal Music (Hong Kong) and Naxos have garnered favourable reviews worldwide. A Steinway Artist as well as an award-winning composer, Warren Lee received the Ten Outstanding Young Persons Award in Hong Kong in 2012 and was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2015 for his contribution to the music profession. In 2017 he received the Ian Mininberg Distinguished Alumni Award from the Yale School of Music.

For more information, please visit [www.warren-lee.com](http://www.warren-lee.com)



During his lifetime Anton Rubinstein gained a considerable reputation as a piano virtuoso the equal of Liszt, and for a stream of distinctive compositions, among them symphonies and operas. He was also responsible for revolutionising standards in Russian teaching and performance – yet despite his eminence many of his works have been overlooked. *Le Bal*, Op. 14 presents a characteristic ballroom scene in ten sections full of energy and rich sentiment. This miniature drama charts the anticipation of the dancer, a series of eventful dances and a final reflection on what has been.

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(1829–1894)

	<b>Le Bal ('The Ball'), Op. 14 (1854, rev. 1871)</b>	<b>81:52</b>
1	No. 1. Impatience: Allegro agitato	6:30
2	No. 2. Polonaise	8:16
	No. 3. Contredanse:	
3	Introduction – Allegro – Moderato	1:33
4	No. 1. Tempo I	1:49
5	No. 2. Allegretto non troppo	2:37
6	No. 3. Allegretto	2:36
7	No. 4. Allegretto vivace	2:20
8	No. 5. Allegro non troppo	2:07
9	No. 6. Allegro molto	4:04
10	No. 4. Valse: Allegro	10:10
11	No. 5. Intermezzo: Andante – Presto – Allegro molto agitato	2:31
12	No. 6. Polka: Allegretto con moto	6:47
13	No. 7. Polka-Mazurka: Allegretto	5:35
14	No. 8. Mazurka	7:37
15	No. 9. Galop: Allegro molto	8:10
16	No. 10. Le Rêve: Andante	9:01
17	<b>2 Pieces, Op. 30 – No. 2. Allegro appassionato (1856)</b>	<b>5:51</b>

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Recorded: 22–23 November 2019 at Wyastone Concert Hall, Monmouth, UK  
Producer, engineer and editor: Phil Rowlands • Booklet notes: Keith Anderson  
Publisher: Ed. Bote & G. Bock 1–16, J. Maho 17

Cover: *Ball at the Assembly Hall of the Nobility in St Petersburg on 23 February 1913* (1915)  
by Dmitry Kardovsky (1866–1943)

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