

THE PALIMPSEST

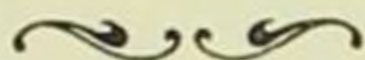
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Grand Concert

"The greatest living pianist in the world, Anton Rubinstein, and the very famous violinist, Henri Wieniawski," announced the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* on February 17, 1873, "will appear Wednesday evening, February 26th, at Union Hall, accompanied by two world-renowned soprano and contralto singers — M'lles. Liebhart and Ormeny. It is but rarely that our city is graced with the presence of a troupe giving a concert as highly refined and classical as this will unmistakably be. Regrets because of non-attendance upon this talented performance will be of no avail after the golden opportunity has passed."

A grand concert, indeed! Seldom have four such artists performed in Iowa. Noted lecturers, actors, and musicians have usually come singly. During the decades following the Civil War, Iowans became accustomed to first rate entertainment. Opera houses were well patronized. The coming of Rubinstein to Burlington must have

been counted a rare chance to hear good music, especially at the price of two dollars a seat on the main floor and a dollar in the balcony.

A few days after the first announcement, the following advertisement, written and published in a strictly formal style so characteristic of the times, explained the nature of the coming entertainment:

RUBINSTEIN CONCERT

Rubinstein and Wieniawski

Mr. Graw has the honor to announce
One GRAND RUBINSTEIN Concert
for

Wednesday Eve., Feb., 26

at 8 o'clock when

Anton Rubinstein

will make his first and only appearance in
Burlington, together with an ensemble of
eminent artists, including

Henri Wieniawski

The World-Renowned Violinist

Regarded as the only "rival to the memory of
Paganini"

M'lle. Louise Liebhart, the celebrated London
Soprano

M'lle. Louise Ormeny, the Favorite Contralto
Mons. L. Rembialinski, Conductor

According to this announcement the ticket sale began at eight o'clock Monday morning, February 24th, at R. M. Washburn's hat store. Seats could be "reserved by mail or telegraph."

The enthusiasm engendered by the prospects of such a concert was reflected in a *Hawk-Eye* comment. "The Rubinstein concert, which is to occur in Union Hall next Wednesday evening is already creating an anticipated furor. Demands for reserved seats were made at Washburn's, yesterday, but of course they were not gratified." The delay in obtaining tickets caused a false rumor to be circulated. "An idea is prevalent about the town that the price of reserved seats is to be four dollars. This is a gross mistake. The price is placed at two dollars, which, for an entertainment of this kind, is extremely low."

In praise of the coming attraction the reporter continued: "The delight with which musical people, all over the world, have heard this monarch among pianists, testifies to his extraordinary power. He is not simply a player. He is a musical genius. For twenty years he has held front rank among the foremost composers of the age. His profession is not the result of mere liking, nor of a capacity for execution. It is the fruit of musical thought, which finds in every note the expression of an idea. There is a mental force in his

management of his instrument, which strikes the thoughts of his hearers."

That the press agents were likewise busily engaged in promoting the concert in the neighboring cities, is shown by the following announcement which appeared in the Mount Pleasant *Press* on February 21st. "The grand Rubinstein Concert is to delight Burlingtonians on the 26th of February. Music-loving people are on tip-toe watching for the great pianist." In support of this assertion a critic in the New York *Mail* was quoted.

"So far as regards the gymnastics of his art, he equals any of his predecessors in any of their specialties. His greatness is that he unites the power of all of them. His left hand playing is marvelous; he can dash off octaves with greater brilliancy than could Sanderson; his touch is as delicate and beautiful as was that of Gottschalk, and he certainly equals Thalbery in the evenness and perfection with which he makes the piano give an orchestral accompaniment to a distinctly brought-out melody. Under his hand the piano seems to be endowed with endless reserves and resources. It is one of the deadest of instruments, but it gives intensity of life that thrills one like the violin under the master's bow."

The Mount Pleasant *Journal* about the same time admonished its readers to take advantage of

the opportunity. "Any and all who take the slightest interest in intellectual culture, whether they are musical or not, should not fail to embrace this opportunity of hearing the great pianist. It will profit all, for none who are possessed of intellect and some heart can fail to be impressed with his playing."

As for Wieniawski, it was said that he was "one of the most eminent" of modern violinists. He was the son of a Polish physician, born in Lublin, on July 10, 1835. His musical genius asserted itself at a very early age, and his mother went with him to Paris to study when he was but eight years old. He enrolled at the Conservatoire, and was soon permitted to enter Massart's class. When only eleven, in 1846, he won his first prize for playing on the violin. He became a great virtuoso, "distinguished from the mass of clever players, by a striking and peculiar individuality. Technical difficulties did not exist for him, — he mastered them early in childhood. Left hand and right arm were trained to the highest pitch of perfection, and while the boldness of his execution astonished and excited his audience, the beauty and fascinating quality of his tone went straight to their hearts, and enlisted sympathy from the first note."

Union Hall, the place in which the Rubinstein-

Wieniawski concert was advertised to be held, was located in the large, three-story brick building, situated on the northeast corner of Valley and Main streets. For a number of years it proved to be the center from which radiated the social, political, and cultural life of Burlington. There occurred a continuous whirl of activities of almost every description, including the gayest parties and balls, the most important political rallies and conventions, and the finest concerts and lectures which the lyceum talent of the nation afforded. Many artists "from across the waters," also contributed to the edification of the people of Burlington.

The hall was first listed in the *Directory of Burlington* for the year 1868; and the last listing was in the directory of 1884. For nearly two decades it must have figured prominently as a place of entertainment. The hall proper consisted of a large, rectangular room with a small gallery at the rear, seating several hundred people. Removable wooden chairs were used instead of the more comfortable, upholstered, permanent type now so commonly employed even in the small-town cinema. They were of the straight-backed variety, which could be easily removed when the room needed to be cleared quickly.

Acoustically the hall must have left much to be

desired, for a contemporary critic frankly declared that, "to make music in Union Hall is no fool job. That anybody can please anyone there, is a remarkable sign of merit." From this statement it appears that Rubinstein and his company must have performed under a tremendous handicap in Burlington.

The night of the concert proved to be one of the most disagreeable of the entire winter. The local reporter facetiously remarked that, "Rubinstein and his company took us by storm last night. The weather was fearfully inclement. The wind blew a gale — a heavy sleet was falling, and the streets were a mass of ice. Nevertheless, Union Hall was filled before the hour for the commencement of the concert. Among the audience we recognised many residents of Mt. Pleasant, Fort Madison, Wapello, Monmouth and other neighboring towns." According to the *Mount Pleasant Journal* of February 27, 1873, a "number of our citizens went to Burlington on Wednesday evening to hear the great pianist Rubinstein, and Wieniawski, the violinist."

Seldom, if ever, had Burlington witnessed so distinguished a gathering. The hall was brilliantly lighted for the occasion, and as the appointed hour approached an air of tense expectancy permeated the audience. The coming of each late arrival

seemed to be the signal for the craning of many necks. Finally, the great pianist entered the hall. Almost instantly there was a lull in the conversation, and soon a hush had fallen over the entire room, as though the people felt that they were in the presence of a dominant personality. As he stood upon the platform, the eager audience, with marked spontaneity, "rose at" him, and he was greeted with a warm, though restrained applause, which Rubinstein acknowledged, bowing rather stiffly, first forward and then to the right and left.

His appearance was striking, and his features, while not exactly classical, were not unpleasing. His head was massive and of a Russian type, "without beard or moustache, but with a thick shock of darkly brown hair," or, as another commentator described it, "decidedly Beethovenesque." His dress, and that of other members of his party, was strictly formal, after the manner of the many great artists appearing at the time upon the concert stage in Europe and America. Doubtless, his quick eye, long trained in the instant evaluation of the tastes and cultural level of his listeners, instinctively noted the rather high percentage of formal dress appearing in the audience before him. The character of his listeners compared favorably, in intellectual and physical appearance, with the many audiences for whom he had played

in the much older and larger eastern cities. This may be attributed to the fact that Burlington and other Iowa cities had attracted many cultured citizens from the East.

This must have pleased Rubinstein, for he gave unstintingly of his talent, and his efforts could not have been greater had he been playing before the most fastidious audience of a European capital. Before the concert, "he looked pale and resolute, — but like a man who meant to do and dare greatly. His small eyes, never strong, had a half closed, mystic, abstract look; his hair was thick and tumbled, his gait was far from graceful; but the instant he sat down to the piano a change seemed to come over him. His absorption was irresistible and contagious.

"He retained the old habit, — caught from Liszt — of tossing his head back occasionally and passing a vagrant hand through his bushy, leonine mane. He often raised high his hands, and swooped down on the piano like an eagle upon its prey — another mannerism — also caught from the great abbate by all his disciples. But the moment he began to play, the attention was enthralled, and for two hours and a half the excitement continued trance-like, or at fever pitch, until the pent up enthusiasm at the close culminated, — in a four-fold recall."

On the day following the concert, Burlingtonians read in the *Hawk-Eye* that, "Rubinstein, the chief feature of the troupe, opened the entertainment with a number of selections from the German masters. Of course," continued the writer, "a person ignorant of the science of music cannot criticize his wonderful performance, or give any intelligible description of it. And we don't feel overly bad about it, for we don't think that anybody can really describe it," and thereby, in his sincerity and frankness, hangs the value of this particular commentator's story. It probably best expressed the common judgment because it was the least colored and sophisticated of all the reports of the concert.

"There is besides his musical dexterity and taste, an individuality which makes his playing unlike that of any artist we have ever heard. The feeling of the audience was manifested by an unexampled enthusiasm. The encores were persistent; in fact, too much so, for a delighted audience don't stop to think that all this music is very hard work to the people who are trying to please them. Rubinstein gracefully acknowledged the applause and played several extra pieces."

Concerning Rubinstein's co-artist: "Mr. Wieniawski, the violinist, also made himself a favorite in his first appearance. His execution is wonder-

ful, — the bravos which greeted him at every appearance, and followed him from the stage, were so hearty that there is no doubt they were pleasing to him. He was more amiable than anybody had a right to expect, and did more than his share towards the enjoyment of the evening."

"The singing of M'lle Ormeny, who has a powerful and highly cultivated contralto voice, had also its own share of popularity. She was highly applauded." The soprano, Mademoiselle Liebhart, "sang delightfully, and was constantly recalled." The performance as a whole was recognized "as one of the most artistic and pleasing ever given here."

The Mount Pleasant *Journal* reported that Rubinstein played with the "grandeur, majesty and deep pathos of Beethoven, the weird dreamings of a Schumann, the magic charms and witchery, interspersed here and there with towering passions, of Chopin, and the severe style of the old writers, such as Bach, Scarlatti, Handel, etc., do not lose their identity under his master hands. He brings out the peculiar characteristics of each in strong and bold lines and makes us really acquainted and familiar with them. He unlocks the door to untold treasures and lets us partake of them freely. He gives food to the mind and heart and leaves us with a consciousness of having

learned something which is both beautiful and useful."

Obviously copied from the studied pen of some eastern critic, this estimate nevertheless conveys some idea of what must have been the mood of the audience at the close of the concert. After the last encore, the emotions of most of the men and women present were too full for expression. The company broke up quietly with an occasional nod and handshake, all carrying away a feeling of awe and bewilderment at the brilliance of the performance they had just witnessed. As one man expressed it, "I never expected to hear such music, this side of heaven."

BEN HUR WILSON