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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF REMARKS
BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT
AND
ARTUR RUBINSTEIN
UPON PRESENTATION OF THE
MEDAL OF FREEDOM

THE EAST ROOM

12:25 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Mr. and Mrs. Rubinstein, distinguished members of the Cabinet, guests:

Let me welcome each and every one of you to the White House this afternoon. Many of you, as I look around the room, have been here from time to time over the years and as long as Betty and I are here I hope that you will regard the White House as a home away from home.

As most of you know, the Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian honor that is within the power of the President of the United States to bestow. I feel very deeply privileged on this occasion to act on behalf of all Americans in presenting that medal to one of the giants of our time.

The legend of Artur Rubinstein has been built upon many, many pillars. Critics have acclaimed him the greatest master of the piano living today, a musician as thoroughly familiar with Chopin and Beethoven as with the interpretations of more modern Spanish and Impressionist pieces.

It is difficult for many of us to believe that Artur Rubinstein made his New York debut in Carnegie Hall some 70 years ago. He was a young man and by his own account he was not yet the artist that he knew he could be, but in the years that have passed then, through his extraordinary dedication and through the support of his lovely wife and family, who are here with us today, he has turned his vision and his interpretations into an uncompromising standard of musical excellence.

Yet to millions of fans across the globe, Artur Rubinstein has given something more than the joy of music -- he has also given the joy of life itself.

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"I love life unconditionally," he has said, and he has communicated that sheer delight to generation after generation. It was his late and very fine friend, Sol Hurok, who wrote, after first hearing Mr. Rubinstein in 1921, "The power of his personality and the sense of grandeur and poetry that enveloped his playing filled me with almost unbearable excitement."

The multitudes who have packed concert halls in Europe, in the Soviet Union and Latin America and in the United States -- they, too, have felt that unbearable excitement from that man.

Here in the United States we feel a very special bond with Artur Rubinstein because in 1946, some 30 years ago, he chose to make America his home. Artur Rubinstein has been decorated and celebrated in almost every land, but it is said that above all else he values the document that made him an American.

I know that many of you here today have long looked forward to this moment and I feel proud that on this 200th Anniversary of our Nation I have the great privilege to present this medal to one of our greatest national treasures, Mr. Artur Rubinstein.

And now, Mr. Rubinstein, if you will please step forward, I will read the citation and will present to you the Medal of Freedom.

The citation reads as follows: "To Artur Rubinstein: Musician and gentleman, bon vivant, Artur Rubinstein has shared his singular and deeply personal mastery of the piano throughout the world. For over seven decades, his ceaseless vitality, his luminous spirit and his profound depth of mind have brought a fresh sparkle to the lives of people everywhere. His audiences love him, his colleagues and friends revere him, and his country -- the United States of America -- is proud to proclaim him as a giant among artists and men."

MR. RUBINSTEIN: Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen:

I blush orally, because my old age does not bring the blood to my face, for all the things you said. (Laughter) I was touched very deeply. I never had anything like it and I feel very proud of those words. In my own mind it is not deserved, but it is good to feel that the President of the United States thinks in that way about me.

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My love affair with the United States is a very long one -- it started in 1906, as you mentioned. I arrived here to this country which was not quite musically ripe. (Laughter) And I was far from being ready for my profession. I was still playing the piano as a young student, but they received me very kindly. We both faked our lack of maturity and so we got along very well together.

The next time I came to the United States was right after the first World War at the time of the gay twenties, the great joy of our victory and prohibition where one drunk more than ever before. (Laughter) And instead of being very much concerned about the music, I was a happy bachelor, also very happy about the result of the war. So I didn't play much but I was a playboy anyhow. (Laughter)

It was then I married. I was then a ripe man of 40 with a career which was pretty nice, pretty good. I had many countries who listened to my playing with pleasure, but the United States was still elusive, I was afraid of it. I felt that maybe it was not my time and I owe it really to my wife who gave me the courage to come back.

We came back here and now I must tell you, Mr. President, this country has saved the life of my family and of my own because somehow by providential miracle my success started right before the second World War came on.

We lived in Paris peacefully -- I traveled for my concerts -- and I would have stayed there but in 1938 Mr. Hurok thought it was the time for me to come again to the United States -- and he was right, it was the right time, and I had instantaneous success this time and a re-engagement for the next year which meant in 1939.

Due to the war I brought my family with me and my children, my wife and my children, and never left the country since. And this country began to spoil me, to love me, to give me such long, long, long years of affection, of friendship. I cannot express it in words, really. I feel here millions of people who are my friends. I always call them my best friends in the world, yes.

Well, my feelings toward the United States is of great gratitude and just a continuation of a long, beautiful love affair. Thank you, Mr. President, for giving me the best sign of anything I could get in this country because I think that my friends, which are those millions of Americans, will be very glad to hear that I got this high honor and this historic luncheon given by our President of the United States.

I would like to applaud our President.

(Applause)