

Rachmaninoff Makes Piano Speak Its Soul

Recital by Sergei Rachmaninoff, presented at Orchestra hall Sunday afternoon, Nov. 22, 1942.

The program:
Partita, E major, for violin alone. Bach [Transcribed for piano by Rachmaninoff]
Sonata, Opus 31, No. 2..... Beethoven
Polonaise, C minor..... Chopin
Ballade, F minor..... Chopin
Nocturne, F sharp major..... Chopin
Scherzo, C-sharp minor..... Chopin
Four études tableaux.
Opus 39..... Rachmaninoff
Valse Oubliée..... Liszt
Sonetto del Petrarca..... Liszt
Tarentella, "Venezia e Napoli"..... Liszt

BY CLAUDIA CASSIDY.

The self-renewing miracle of music is that when a great artist is in top form we seem never to have heard him, or the music he plays, before. It was like that at Orchestra hall yesterday when Sergei Rachmaninoff appeared in his annual recital. The Mephistophelean Russian is 70 years old and he has made countless appearances in Chicago for more years than many of us have been going to concerts. Yet there was about yesterday's performance a freshness, a validity so revealing it used virtuosity as a mere vehicle of expression.

This, it seemed to say, is how the piano should speak to men who listen. This is its true tone, its eloquence, its nobility. This is something that makes the dazzling seem flamboyant, even superficial, for it has the glow of life from within. This is the piano in such high estate that you know what a man means when he says of Rachmaninoff's Beethoven, "If the piano has a soul, that's the fellow who understands it."

That looks pretty fancy in print, but it made sense at Orchestra hall. There had been in that Beethoven a completeness that demanded recognition. It was a matter of maturity, of understanding, of technique — but most of all a matter of tone. That tone had a matchless balance. You heard every note in its proper relation, and then you knew why Beethoven put it there. You saw the bones of structure thru the transparent flesh of that tone, and both were beautiful.

This clairvoyant candor illuminated the entire concert, but reached its peak of eloquence in the Beethoven, in a titanic performance of Chopin's great ballade, and in the gravely fastidious evocation of an era that was Liszt's Sonetto del Petrarca. This was music as a personal expression of the grand style, and it made you, even in the act of listening, wonder if you would hear its like again.

There was not, in this concert, a trace of the dryness that can brush a streak of asceticism, even of asperity, across a Rachmaninoff performance. There was, from the opening Bach, a joyousness about it, such as a man feels when his hands can do no wrong to a piano responsive even in silence. In sensitivity of perception and splendor of projection, it was magnificent.

That Bach, by the way, was an astute transcription of unusual brilliance, with the audacity the great Russians bring to Bach, and yet it bore the signature of the man who wrote it, not of the transcriber. Rachmaninoff's own music, four of the nine études tableaux, came after intermission, and for all their spectacular skill they had an impersonal reticence which must have surprised people who consider all Rachmaninoff's compositions decadent.