

MUSIC

By James Gibbons Huneker

Rachmaninoff Raises the Roof.

No, he did not play it at Carnegie Hall yesterday afternoon. That is, Serge Rachmaninoff, the doubly distinguished composer and pianist, did not play his celebrated Prelude in C sharp minor, though the Rachmaninoff "fans"—and there were thousands of them in the audience—clamored for the favorite piece of Flatbush "flappers." They surged toward Serge in serried masses. They clustered about the stage. They raised aloft their arms as they supplicated the Russian to give them his recollection of the Henselt concerto. But to no avail. He played five encore numbers, one of them being the Prelude in G minor, first made known here by Josef Hofmann, who does not play it so rapidly, thereby getting a more sonorous tone. It is dangerous, however, to criticize the interpretation of a composer. He ought to know what he wishes. So please do not accept our opinion as official. He also played his own "Humoreske," which we didn't know till a friend prompted us. It is truly humorous, with more than a moiety of the devilry that lurks in the dark forest called the Russian soul. The other three encores were salon music, clever, not very original, though effective. But the chief thing is the fact that Rachmaninoff did not play it. All Flapperdom sorrowed last night, for there are amiable fanatics who follow this pianist from place to place hoping to hear him in this particular Prelude; like the Englishman who attended every performance of the lady lion tamer hoping to see her swallowed by one of her pets.

Otherwise the program was far from exciting—old-fashioned, it could have been called. Mozart's familiar variations in D, and the D major Sonata of Beethoven, opus 10, No. 3, began the afternoon. The oldsters were reminded of von Bülow. The same cold white light of analysis, the incisive touch, the strongly marked rhythms, the intellectual grasp of the musical ideas, and the sense of the relative importance in phrase-groupings proclaimed that Rachmaninoff is a cerebral, not an emotional, artist. Not Woodrow Wilson himself could have held the academic balance so dispassionately. Even the staccato Princeton touch was not absent. Nevertheless, there were some disquieting details in the reading to conservative Beethoven students. The principal one hinged on the question of tempo. The first movement is a Presto. It was taken at a prestissimo, plus a prestissimo. Not a blurred outline was there, yet the speed detracted from the essential weightiness of Beethoven's proclamation. The Largo was better, the Menuetto most ingratiating, the Rondo full of the quizzical human interest in its challenging theme. Both the Mozart and the Beethoven were as clear as a dry-point etching. (But we wished that he would have discarded the double-bars.)

We have said that Rachmaninoff is not emotional, but that must be taken in a limited sense. Jozsef Hofmann is not emotional, as was his master, Anton Rubinstein, yet there is a color, a glow, not in Rachmaninoff, whose touch is like a boulder of granite in chord playing, whose piano voice in cantilena is not velvety. The C sharp minor nocturne (Opus 27, No. 1) by Chopin was thoroughly satisfactory because of its superlatively fine adjustment of tonal dynamics with the tragic mood-picture. It reached the head, not the heart. The A flat Valse Opus 42 was brilliant, while the best of the group was the Polonaise in C minor, Opus 40, seldom heard—Paderewski loved it—and when heard seldom played in the profoundly significant manner that the virtuoso delivered its moving measures yesterday. It is a pendant to the popular Polonaise Militaire, and might be the obverse of the heroic medal; after the bugle blasts, the proud panoply of war, follows fast the awful penalty. "Home they brought her warrior dead!" is the motto of this processional elegiac polonaise, its melancholy muted, its resignation worn like crêpe in every bar. Rachmaninoff played the work nobly.

His own compositions were enjoyable, and the C sharp minor rhapsody of Liszt dazzling. He gave a polka that made one long to be up and dancing. Rubinstein in "Le Bal" has a fetching polka, and the form is almost of the ragtime persuasion. After the Chopin polonaise we were most impressed by the encore, which appropriately trod on the heels of the Beethoven sonata. It, too, was from a Beethoven sonata in A flat; Opus 31, No. 3, the scherzo-like Allegretto, which von Bülow played so overwhelmingly. Rachmaninoff took it quicker than the nimble little Hans and with the same clarity and electric precision. The Russian is a master etcher on the keyboard.