

## THE BRAND LANE CONCERTS.

### Rachmaninoff.

Music in Manchester does not nowadays often fall under the sway of personal genius. We have skill and enthusiasm in plenty, but these are qualities which must suffer themselves to stand before the bar of criticism. Genius needs not abide our question—it is free. The moment Rachmaninoff stepped on to the platform on Saturday night we were conscious that a great man was present and that a great concert was toward. Our first impression of him was enough—mastery beyond both our praise and our criticism. Rachmaninoff, tall and high-shouldered, with an inscrutable, ageless face, walked slowly to his piano. He scarcely deigned to take notice of us; he bowed formally. And because he did not recognise us and behave like a "performer" covetous of public praise—because of these things we knew all the more that he was a master.

At the concert's end there was a demonstration; one of Manchester's oldest and most honourable musicians declared that Rachmaninoff's playing had been wonderful—in the line of Liszt and Rubinstein. This opinion needs a little elucidation for those young students of music who at the present time are led mistakenly to suppose that the Liszt tradition of piano-playing thrived pretty much on a swollen, insincere rhetoric and on display for display's sake. Rachmaninoff restores the ancient grandeur of style to the piano, but he disdains the grandiose. He has not a single gesture of the showman; his playing may be said to have an aloofness that does not admit the presence of an audience at all. As we listen to him we get the impression that we are eavesdropping. He uses his instrument as a way of life—to live through a sincere, artistic experience. His aloofness is an essential trait of the romantic style; as he sits at the keyboard he seems placed in strange isolation. He plays almost without bodily motion. His wrists and fingers make the music; the fingers are marvelously expressive in their hoverings, their masterful sweepings and attacks. But the rest of him is still. He does not look upwards, seeing his visions coming out of heaven, in the good old theatrical way. His eyes are always on the keys, pin-points of concentration. At the end of a piece he rises stiffly, bends forward to our applause ever so politely. But his face remains absolutely inexpressive, except for its aspect of permanent and quite impersonal indifference. His playing was perhaps the most significant I have ever heard. Consider the programme, the main works in it: Beethoven's F sharp Sonata, Op. 78; the Schumann Novelette in F sharp minor; the Nocturne in D flat and the Valse in E flat of Chopin; the Chopin Scherzo in C sharp minor; Tchaikovsky's Variations from his Op. 19—who would cross the street to hear music so hackneyed? This music, one would have sworn until Rachmaninoff had played it for us, could contain no new delights, no pleasures that long and mechanical acquaintance had not staled years ago. It was Rachmaninoff's achievement to make these standard works seem fresh from the forge, every note vital and full of meaning. Incidentally he caused us to think we had never before heard them played, save in a mild, commonplace fashion. He expresses his power by keeping, like an artist, within the range of his instrument. His sonority is unforced, a matter of intensity; not of noise. His songfulness, of which he is sparing, is never too yielding in line; he seems always proud of the piano's essential keenness of tone. He uses the pedal dexterously in his production of light and shade. But he does not abuse this device; indeed, he is often austere in the niceness with which, by a perfection of timing, he releases the sustaining pedal to avoid dissonance. His attack is so intense that he commands our ears—and our minds—at once. He has the composer's instinct for what is important in a structure: he seems to see the end in the beginning and to lay out his proportions accordingly. Yet we never get the effect of a nicely studied interpretation; the sense of form is quick and instinctive with Rachmaninoff. It is, in his control, not only a matter of outlines but of strong new-born rhythm going inevitably its ways, capable of a gnome capriciousness, but always subordinate to a big-minded design.

The sonata of Beethoven's Op. 78 is not for a large hall; Beethoven here is in a mood of emotional relaxation, giving himself over to a flow of tone and not to a dynamic disturbance of tone. You would not expect Rachmaninoff to achieve a good account of this sonata. For his playing really loves the depths of the piano, the strong, unlighted bass. The sonata contains little or nothing of Beethoven's apocalyptic thunders; during its two short movements the treble clef usurps the bass clef repeatedly. Rachmaninoff not only put the music in its period by his admirable articulation of the "Mannheim" figure of the delicate introduction, but by his eloquent economy of tone he gave us to understand that the work stands at one of the crossroads in Beethoven's creative development.

The Novelette in F sharp minor of Schumann—the last and longest of the set of Op. 21—freed the composer from the tame domesticity into which pianists for years have set him. Here we had no miscellaneity at all, but a proud fanciful play of an imagination which could find unity in contrast, take quick wings, and come home full circle.

Rachmaninoff's playing vitalised Schumann with an instantaneous touch, a rhythm plastic as poetry, and, where fascination of touch was not the main need, the utmost grandeur of harmony. Every note was made to mean something. The change of rhythm at the close, where triple time is accelerated bar by bar, was a delight of imaginative transformation.

The performance of the C sharp minor Scherzo of Chopin was perhaps the most electrical event of an unforgettable night. The attack and pace of the octaves of the opening were demonic. Here we could feel the true spirit of Rachmaninoff's playing—a Mephisto-like irony, caprice, and masculinity. The entrance of the chorale would have been questionable if a student had done it. But in all of Rachmaninoff's playing, there sounds a lifetime's culture and authority. The alternations between sonorous harmonies and delicately stroked broken chords—these were controlled with not a single dislocation of the rhythm. The coda was breath-snatching in its accumulated power, speed, and uncanny precision. Rachmaninoff, though entirely personal, and though a virtuoso as well as a poet, always plays the music as written—to a note. The D flat Nocturne was a model of dual melody, lusciously yet not sentimentally ornamented. And the three Medtner pieces were alive with pointed and graphic accent and movement.

It was significant of much that Rachmaninoff's paraphrase of Kreisler's pretty tune "Liebesfreud" began heavy as iron in the bass. The Viennese mildness was dispelled; in its place we had another Mephisto waltz. Rachmaninoff does not woo the impressionable senses; he has in him something of the denying spirit. Had he never written the Prelude in C sharp minor the crowd could scarcely ever have

known of him, for there is in his music and his playing neither the geniality that makes for democratic enjoyment nor the intimate sentiment that makes for democratic sympathy. He played the notorious prelude even before the crowd asked for it—a condescension probably designed to save time. Many of us left the hall at the first descent of the familiar three-note figure, satisfied to remember Rachmaninoff as one of the great pianists of his period. Has he an equal at the present day for mingled technique and power? Schnabel has the mind and the technique. Has he Rachmaninoff's personal force—a force that lays hold of you in a trice and, even after the concert is done with and the man gone from your sight, remains in the memory, like something thrown out by a being not of the common world. N. C.