

## MUSIC IN LONDON

## Rachmaninoff

LONDON, SATURDAY.

Queen's Hall was full on Saturday for the piano recital of Rachmaninoff. It was a typical London matinée audience, and, to be sure, there was little in Rachmaninoff's programme likely to go over the heads of the audience, mainly women. The "Moonlight" Sonata, the G minor Ballade of Chopin, one or two of Rachmaninoff's "Etudes-tableaux," the "Golliwog's Cake-walk," a Hungarian Rhapsody of Liszt—and, of course, at the finish the "celebrated" Prelude in C sharp minor. Can a man be a great artist who keeps so closely in touch with his following; ought he not to lead them, and not just keep abreast? Is it conceivable that a Busoni, a Schnabel, would submit to Rachmaninoff's bondage to the C sharp minor Prelude? At every recital Rachmaninoff plays the work; could anything be more humiliating, more undignified? And, apart from the C sharp minor Prelude, Rachmaninoff gives to his public a repertory which might have been selected from a schoolgirl's satchel. Even one of his encores has to be the most hackneyed of the Chopin nocturnes. On Saturday he played, apart from the music already mentioned, the Liszt Sonetto No. 104, "del Petrarca," in A flat; that and the A major Variations of Mozart were almost the only unhackneyed contributions of quality. The recital was wonderfully played, but it added little to the sense of life and of art. It was definitely a concert for the crowd; and Rachmaninoff was, as Busoni would put it, a "performer."

But what a pianist the man is, and what a fascinating personality! He puts us under a spell. His face is a mask—hiding, possibly, an expression of cynicism. He walks stiffly to the platform and acknowledges, but does not solicit, applause. He waits for complete silence, playing, while the audience ceases coughing, the loveliest harmonies. (He can give to the commonest chords overtones of rare romance.) On Saturday just as he was about to begin the Mozart Variations some unfortunate amongst the people on the platform dropped an umbrella. But Rachmaninoff merely assumed a look of benign patience and recreated his mood afresh.

His Mozart was clearcut but not charming. He is apparently primarily interested

in his command of the modern grand piano's powers of blended colour; Mozart was a duty to be got through as conscientiously as possible. The "Moonlight" Sonata was beautifully given with a very slow adagio which had a gloriously songful sostenuto. Rachmaninoff's pedalling is marvellous; cloud and sunshine over the valley is not more soft and changeful than Rachmaninoff's light and shade, achieved by sensitive pedalling. The allegretto of the "Moonlight" Sonata was also taken slowly and given a most unusual tranquillity and lyricism. Rachmaninoff's hands are so expressive that a deaf man might well swear that he was hearing the music. The fingers curve and hover and sweep and dance; each supple finger is individual; every note in a harmony is alive and personal. He plays entirely with his fingers and his feet; the rest of his body is amazingly still.

He was not the ideal Chopin player at this concert; the G minor Ballade had a certain starkness. He is, for all his versatility of style, a Russian, with a mind removed from the alluring romance of the G minor Ballade. But it was good to hear a Chopin of keen melody and rhythm; sentimentality is often added to Chopin, in spite of the fact that Chopin's keenness and clarity of figuration are obviously the antithesis of sentimental dalliance. The Scherzo in B minor showed us Rachmaninoff's technique at its most masterful; the presto con fuoco was vivid yet absolutely musical, and the molto più lento was serenity itself. Still, even with all this art, Rachmaninoff could not prevent the ballade and the scherzo from seeming a little faded. Is the Chopin of the future contained almost wholly in the studies?

In the brief fragment from the "Années de Pèlerinage" Rachmaninoff proved himself a noble Liszt player. He even caused the "Golliwog's Cake-walk" to sound like new music created by genius. He is the all-round pianist; he brings to his extraordinary technique the creative artist's penetration into the materials of music. Yet, somehow, his art ends in beautiful piano-playing; it does not take on the note of what Matthew Arnold called the "criticism of life." He gives us a concert, a perfect concert—but he gives us little that is deeper than that.

N. C.