

MUSIC IN LONDON

Rachmaninoff and Beecham

LONDON, FRIDAY.

Last night, at the concert of the Royal Philharmonic Society, the Queen's Hall was packed for the first performance in London of the "Rapsodie" for Piano and Orchestra of Rachmaninoff. Manchester had an opportunity of hearing the work a week or two ago at the Hallé Concerts; frankly, the performance in Manchester, compared with last evening's, was as coal to fire, as the photograph to the reality. Sir Thomas Beecham's conducting made all the difference in the world, for though the London Philharmonic Orchestra was technically not better than, and perhaps not as safe as, the Hallé, the sensitive phrasing and rhythm of the conducting not only released the music's vitality to the full but also gave perfect freedom to Rachmaninoff, who was able to play at his best, with superb verve, brilliance, and fantasy. At the end of the performance, the audience stormed and shouted their delight. And a phenomenon occurred. Rachmaninoff actually smiled as he bowed; then he turned impulsively to Sir Thomas and shook him by the hand in the most animated and grateful way. Much is needed to get behind the mask of Rachmaninoff.

The reception of the "Rapsodie" by the London critics has been mixed indeed; the music is accused of superficiality and vulgarity by that school which has no room for salon flavours in music. But even the school which is less pompously English praises in faint damns. Probably there never was a period like the present for solemn reactions to music—in this country at any rate. The "Rapsodie" of Rachmaninoff makes a welcome and necessary contribution to the pianist's orchestral repertory. Moreover, it contains much more genius than a single hearing of the work will discover. The music proves that even to-day the law of diminishing returns has not put into bankruptcy the arts of melody, rhythmical changefulness, and personal and beautifully sounding orchestration. The "Rapsodie" does not begin too graciously: for too long it depends on percussion and velocity. In time, though, these quick, hard accents are seen to be but a prelude, a rhythmical preparation, for the slower movements to come—and one or two of these are really lovely with the strain of lyrical melancholy which is nowadays Rachmaninoff's own secret. There is also the racy (vulgar if you like—why not?) "quick-step" of Variation 14, which flows gorgeously into the finest movement of the work, the flashing scherzando, first for piano alone: it soon mingles with the strings and wood-wind, exquisite in their cadences. Nothing more gracious and cultivated than this variation has been written for the piano for years: The work does grow on one, even the rhetoric of the finale, noisy with the showmanlike recall of the "Dies Ira" theme, an echo of Liszt's "Totentanz." If an English composer had written the "Rapsodie" we should be making a fine song about it to-day. Salon music, yes; but a salon that has been made by a long culture, and a view of music far removed from the provincialism of the English teaching emporium. If the "Rapsodie" goes to no emotional depths we need not worry: there is enough music to be going on with that teaches us the better life.

The rest of Thursday's Philharmonic concert was more or less humdrum. Borodin's first symphony is agreeable and youthful. But Holst's "Beni-Mora" Suite, with its absurdly obvious Orientalisms, is English music at its driest and most superfluous—the schoolmaster abroad, "doing" the bazaars and travelling down the street of the Outer Nails, innocent of everything but the discreet directions and conversation of the man from Cook's.

N. C.