

# RACHMANINOFF AT THE HALLÉ CONCERT

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## Music, Stage, and Films

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Overture, "Semiramide" .....	Rossini
Alliegretto, from "Lobesans" (Hymn of Praise), Op. 52 .....	Mendelssohn
Concerto No. 2, in C minor, Op. 18, for Piano and Orchestra .....	Rachmaninoff
Symphony No. 4, in F minor, Op. 98 .....	Brahms

When Rachmaninoff last night came before the crowded Hallé Concert audience he, as usual, wore the air of a weary man; he toiled towards the piano, bowed inscrutably, seemed to conceal a sigh of resigned boredom; then began to bewitch us, and possibly himself, by playing that seemed to awaken from his instrument all the music it has known and heard during a long epoch in which great pianists have wooed it, cultivated it and taught it the language of romance. Rachmaninoff is the most comprehensive of his craft; others may be his superior in certain ways. Schnabel excels him in depth and philosophy; Horowitz has more wondrous and instantaneous powers of evocation. But in Rachmaninoff we have a synthesis: by the time he has gone through a long work we know all, or nearly all, that it is possible for a piano musically to express. He can sing for us, and keep his most lilting line sonorous. He can excite us with a hard military staccato which does not hurt us with discordance. His rhythm is fluid and romantically suggestive, but he does not obtain his flights and circlings at the expense of design and natural movement of figuration. And his form is balanced without the slightest tyranny over the true domain of legato melody. He enlivens dexterity by warmth of tone, so that it achieves fancy; he concentrates his essences in the chalice of style.

It is perhaps a pity he seems doomed nearly always to have to play his own C minor Concerto. His fate has been ironical. First the C sharp minor Prelude, then the C minor Concerto—both of these of his children cling to him, while others he maybe loves better go neglected. But Rachmaninoff is seldom weary once he has taken warmth from exercise at his instrument. As a composer he often keeps things going less by development of

themes than by extending and elaborating his ornamentation. He plays his arabesques with a spontaneous touch which kindles light. Even an ordinary broken chord is made to disclose rare beauties; we are reminded of the fairies' hazel-nuts in which diamonds were concealed but you could break the shell only if your hands were blessed. The vitality and fire which reside within the hands of Rachmaninoff make an astonishing contrast to the immobile sphinx of the rest of him; it is as though the whole current of his personality were drawn out of his fingers' ends, leaving the rest of him without occupation. Dr. Sargent and the Hallé Orchestra provided a secure musical setting for Rachmaninoff, though here and there the tone was loud enough to obscure much of the piano's brilliance. For the general rhythmical layout of the concerto Dr. Sargent no doubt received the soloist's warmest approval; Rachmaninoff certainly seemed always at ease and willing to oblige with all the readiness of the aristocrat of pianists.

The Fourth Symphony of Brahms began so unlike Brahms that I wondered how music familiar for years could possibly be made to sound so strange. The pace was quicker than the tissue of Brahms ever could stand; the temper or mood was restless and violent in a modern way. When we came to the andante (or at least D) marvelled that a composer capable of an unphilosophical energy a few moments ago should become remote and archaic during the opening section, and reflective and heart-easing in the melody introduced by the cellos. If there is any movement in all music which is autumnal it is the opening movement of the Fourth Symphony of Brahms. Dr. Sargent almost caused the E minor of Brahms to remind us of the E minor of Tchaikovsky's Fifth. Brahms calls for the elegiac note in this first movement, which last night received a contemporary dynamic effectiveness. It was, I fancy,

Walter Niemann who admired the Fourth Symphony of Brahms for its periods of ghostly, uncanny stillness and shadowy desolation. Dr. Sargent is less a reflective than an active conductor; he seems to live in the present and to feel music as a succession of episodes. It was not surprising, then, that when he arrived at the Passacaglia last night he crowned his season of good work with the Hallé Orchestra by a piece of conducting as strong as any he has ever done in Manchester. The great current of tragic force was maintained through all the manifold changes; attention to the intricacies did not produce coldness. The playing possessed spaciousness and much transforming power. The colour was perhaps not dark enough; nobly though the trombones sounded in one of the most awe-inspiring passages extant, they missed the "shimmer of antique gold." The scherzo was bracing and vibrant—altogether the performance did justice to those qualities in the symphony which strike and appeal to us immediately. Dr. Sargent's rendering will no doubt ripen in time to a conception with a metaphysic behind it. He will, as Pater would say, come to see the end in the beginning; and to realise that there is in the first movement the rhythmical sweep of Time's scythe; and that the energy of the scherzo is demonic rather than bucolic. The marking "allegro giocoso" is not to be taken too literally. In these days it is no doubt difficult for a conductor who is still a young man to arrive at the point of view of Brahms which was established by the musicians who knew him and lived in his different and distant day.

At the outset of the evening a work was played for the "first time at these concerts." This was an allegretto from the "Hymn of Praise" of one Mendelssohn. It revealed a faith in melody which was reassuring in these times, when all the new music tries to be so odd and atonal. We must go further into this man Mendelssohn and find out if he has written anything else.

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