

Rachmaninoff Hypnotizes Huge Audience at St. Paul Concert

By JOHN K. SHERMAN

When one listens to Sergei Rachmaninoff, one hears more than "just another pianist." From the moment the tall, gaunt composer steps warily on the platform, one is keenly conscious of the presence of what might be called "musical greatness." Dexterous facility and a technique of wide range are all there—but in addition, there is an arresting intelligence and a brooding sensitiveness behind the mere manipulation of white and black keys that place him in realms far above the ranks of piano-thumpers.

Realizing this, a crowded audience at the St. Paul auditorium last night stood at their seats, as if hypnotized, long after the lights of the hall had been dimmed, clapping and shouting themselves hoarse. Whether they wanted him to play the ever-familiar "Prelude in C Sharp Minor" or any encore that occurred to him, is a question. At any rate, the great composer refused to cater to gallery popularity by playing the "Prelude," and after three Chopin encores, smiled faintly at the thunderous ovation evoked, and retired, with that hulking gait of his, to the blackness behind the asbestos curtain.

The program paid no particular attention to grouping, but contained three points of interest that burned themselves into the minds of his hearers through sheer greatness of interpretation. These three were the Beethoven piano sonata, opus 26 (containing the Funeral March), the Etudes Symphoniques of Schumann, and two Etudes Tableau by the composer himself.

The sonata was, in reality, Beethoven plus Rachmaninoff. But the imposition of his own personality was neither obtrusive or offensive. The composition was Russianized somewhat, the opening Theme and Variations seemingly soaked in Slavic moodiness. The Marche Funerale (third movement), was richly and somberly macabre, pulsing in strange harmonies of darkling shades.

Schumann's Etudes Symphoniques were less ingratiating, but thick with the deep probings of the composer in rather philosophical mood. Not a shade or suggestion escaped the lithe fingers of Rachmaninoff.

The Etudes Tableau revealed Rachmaninoff as a composer of peculiarly haunting melodies. The first was a conflict—nothing less—between a feminine treble and a threatening and brutal bass. The second contained echoes of his superb second concerto and employed a rich Oriental harmonic texture.

The pianist also played two rippling Mendelssohn Etudes, the Funerailles of Liszt, which has terrific work for the left hand, Medtner's Fairy Tale, a trifle, and a Tausig transcription of a Johann Strauss waltz, "One Lives But Once."

The visual impression of the composer is almost as vivid as the memory of his music. Rachmaninoff is serious-visaged, almost emaciated. Until one hears him play, one doubts his vitality, but when his fingers touch the keys there is no doubt of it. He is truly one of the outstanding musical minds of the day.