

Rachmaninoff Delights Big Audience

Pianist Particularly
Brilliant in Chopin,
Schumann Numbers

By Donald Steinfirst

It was to be expected that Sergei Rachmaninoff—himself the embodiment of twentieth century Romanticism—would play the music of Schumann and Chopin exquisitely last night in his recital at Syria Mosque. The great Russian pianist who has appeared countless times before Pittsburgh audiences was singularly in the vein last evening. If the years have not mellowed his austerity and apparent indifference to his auditors, they have provided increasing poetry for the fingers and complete repose for the interpretative mind.

One may question the wisdom of a Bach transcription, particularly that of the E Major Partita which Rachmaninoff played last night, or even the ostentation of the Liszt group, but there was no gainsaying the music of Chopin or Schumann. In music of this genre, Rachmaninoff reigns supreme. The phrases fell from his fingers like so many gently-formed pearls, each note carefully and exquisitely put in its proper place with due respect to the whole.

Tonal Line Obscured

After a storm rendition of the National Anthem, a la Rachmaninoff, the pianist opened his program proper last night with his own transcription of the Bach suite originally written for unaccompanied violin. We found it a disappointing transcription. The solo violin has only one tonal line, and when it is transcribed this line is obscured and muffled by the treatment for piano. Certainly Bach, which should be the very essence of clarity, does not improve with multi-voiced impurities. Of the three sections, the Gavotte came off best because of its very simplicity and because here alone, the pianist elected to eliminate the use of the retard which is never found in such Bach and is in decidedly bad taste.

With the D Minor Sonata of Beethoven that followed, the pianist was in his element. The "Tempest" Sonata is a particularly lovely and lyrical work, stemming from the composer's middle years. The Allegro with its dramatic runs was a perfect example of dynamic control. The Adagio revealed a lush smooth tone, eloquent and persuasive, and the pianist's fingers fairly flew in the concluding Allegretto with its light rippling rhythm.

Chopin Group Is High Spot

The first half of the evening concluded with the F Sharp Minor Novelette of Schumann, a gay capricious romantic song that Rachmaninoff explored to the utmost, and a Chopin group that was the high spot of the evening. The F Minor Ballade with its melodic accompaniment was finely chiseled and beautifully proportioned. The familiar F Sharp Minor Nocturne was soft-spun and haunting with an aura of eeriness that created its own mood. The set ended with the "Two-Four" Waltz in A Flat played very rapidly but with crystal clarity reminding the listener of a gossamer web so light that it could not be touched.

Two groups made up the post-intermission music, one by the pianist himself and one of Franz Liszt. The artist's own set of Four Etudes Tableaux, in B Minor, E Flat Minor, A Minor and D Major are earnest sincere studies of a musician who stems musically directly from the early nineteenth century. None of the studies is extremely important, yet none is trivial. All are without ostentation and sensationalism.

At the end there was the Liszt group played effortlessly and without forcing and also without complete distinction. The "Valse Oubliee" was quiet and gentle. The "Sonetto del Petrarca" had much of depth and perception and the "Tarantella" "Venezia e Napoli" with its razzle-dazzle was a perfect virtuoso finish.

The audience was large and enthusiastic and the pianist, hurrying to catch a train, could only add a mazurka of Chopin and his own ubiquitous C Sharp Minor Prelude to the printed list. The audience would have liked more.