

MUSIC

SYMPHONY HALL

Boston Symphony Orchestra

The presence of Sergei Rachmaninoff at the Boston Symphony concert yesterday afternoon made the occasion particularly notable. He returned both as composer and soloist after an absence much too long. One hopes that the future will see him more frequently represented on these programs, in both categories. The afternoon was devoted to his Second Symphony, in E minor, and his Third Piano Concerto, each of which received deeply stirring, eloquent performance. The Friday audience, more numerous than usual, was more enthusiastic than has been the case in many weeks. When the concerto had brought the concert to an end, they stood applauding until Mr Rachmaninoff had come back several times to the stage.

An extreme opinion may be ventured: that no more polished or emotional playing of the E minor Symphony can be imagined than that which Dr Koussevitzky brought to pass. This is just the sort of music which calls upon his greatest gifts as interpreter, music of poetry, passion and soaring ecstasy. In itself, the Symphony is anomalous: an early work written before Rachmaninoff was 30, long, prolix, but superbly scored for orchestra. Its very length inclines one to seek little derivative places, and there can be found suggestions of Tchaikovsky, echoes of Wagner, even a fleeting, paradoxical similarity of mood and style with some of Sibelius' earlier symphonies. The last movement, with its restless modulations, the contour of its melodies recalls the final movement of Cesar Franck's Symphony. Throughout, the device called the sequence is over-stressed.

Not that Rachmaninoff consciously inserted these reminiscences; his integrity is above question. They may have been in the back of his mind, but that seems unlikely—except for Tchaikovsky. They simply occurred. The originality of his own thought is not obscured. As in the case of the C minor Piano Concerto, Rachmaninoff's voice is heard above the efforts to emancipate his style.

This originality is more a concern of emotion, of a remarkably varied harmonic structure, than of preoccupation with the intellectual problems of form. While the thematic ideas are not in themselves exceptional, the instrumental dress which clothes them with such splendor is consummately beautiful. Rachmaninoff as a melodist is the spiritual heir of Tchaikovsky, though far more disciplined than that unhappy poet of sorrow.

A pianist, Rachmaninoff here thought in terms of the orchestra, of the color and contrast obtainable by interplay of choirs and single instruments. There is no stodgy hacking away with solid, air-tight chords, in the manner of poor Schumann, who could never forget he was a pianist. With the Third Piano Concerto Rachmaninoff maintained this mental elasticity and accomplished the feat of combining a brilliant piano part with an accompaniment as symphonic as the purest symphony ever created.

Furthermore, he managed to satisfy virtuosity and the muse of inspiration. This Concerto is just as delightful as those of Liszt, but how much more substantial! As he played it yesterday, particularly those astounding passages of full chords at uncanny speed, there was a revelation of how felicitously good music and virtuosity may be joined. This does not happen very often. For the rest his playing was as it has been these many years, superbly clear, controlled and expressive; masculine playing that avoids both the excesses of the old "grand" style and the tendency to overrefinement so often found in the new.

Dr Koussevitzky's share in the total success was considerable. Without his ministrations the Symphony would not have made the effect it did. He ordered the orchestral portion of the concerto in thoroughly sensitive fashion.

Albert Roussel's new Fourth Symphony, a recent Parisian sensation, will have first American performance at the concert's next week. The program includes Rimsky-Korsakov's "Night on Mt Triglav," Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, and the "La Valse" of Ravel. C. W. D.

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