

THE HALLÉ CONCERT

Overture, "Anacreon" Cherubini
 Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra
 No. 3, in D minor (Op. 30) Rachmaninoff
 Comedy Overture, "The Pierrot of
 the Minute" Granville Bantock
 Symphony No. 2, in D minor (Op. 70) Dvorák

There was another enormous audience last night at the Hallé Concert, and, of course, the source of attraction was a pianist—this time the artist who is ironically known to the multitude as the composer of the *Prelude* in C sharp minor.

Opinion in all parts of the world would agree that Rachmaninoff is the most complete of living masters of the instrument; his technique is comprehensive, and he is, of course, musical to his bone's marrow. Most important of all, he is a composer, and for this reason he is able to approach a work as none of his pianist contemporaries can approach one—that is, from the inside, as an organic and felt creative process. Music for him is not, as it is with, say, Horowitz, first an inspiration to brilliant and lovely piano-playing. And notes for Rachmaninoff are not, as they often seem for Schnabel, so many symbols of an inviolable spiritual universe. Music is Rachmaninoff's "way of life," his instinctive means of expressing experience. The piano is part of the universe in which he lives, as natural to his thinking and feeling as speech and physical reflex action. He does not come to music via the piano, but to the piano via musical sensibility. In other words, he plays from the creative centre outwards—not from the piano inwards; he does not say, in effect, "Apropos of a given concerto or any other piano music, I will exhibit myself as a great player." His intent position at the instrument, apparently oblivious of his own volatile play of the hands, suggests that he is the medium of absorbed composition; we can feel him moulding the form, seeing with the vision of creation the original cocoon. This sense of internal activity of Rachmaninoff is conveyed to us even when he is not presenting works of his own; last night he played the solo part of his D minor Concerto, and magnificent though the performance was as piano technique and style, the dominant and powerful appeal was constructive rather than interpretative; we were taken into the artist's workshop—I had almost written "forge," but that would have flattered the value, as powerful music, of the D minor Concerto. It is a fine composition of its kind, much subtler in its figuration than the better-known Second Concerto. But it rings the changes on, and adds nothing to, the familiar Rachmaninoff formula—an aristocratic melancholy expressed by long-spun phrases, developed by a daring use of sequence, and put into contrast with quick movements which have a staccato military flavour, the whole scored for the orchestra beautifully from a warm if limited palette.

All Rachmaninoff's large-scale works mingle the elegiac style with a sharp military precision. The first movement of the D minor Concerto echoes a beautiful

ballad sensibility; the second swells to a greater fullness of harmony; and in the finale the flashing ornamentation of the piano vies with the orchestra's alternations of emphasis and mounting phrases of repeated song. The general style of the work, as with all that Rachmaninoff has written, risks a certain monotony; the slow and languishing chromatic tunes, and the sinking harmonies, pall after a while, but the ear finds refuge in the original way the composer subtilises and lends character to figuration which derives from the nineteenth-century romantic writers for the piano. If the concertos of Rachmaninoff depend much on technical refinements for their interest, we are not often in danger of a wandering mind so long as Rachmaninoff himself is playing them and bringing to performance the impulse of the first delighted improvisation—for Rachmaninoff's music is ruined if it is made to sound deliberate, or burdened with the usual machinery of the concerto.

Mr. R. J. Forbes is usually splendid as the conductor of a concerto; he served Rachmaninoff well, and without a hint of loss of freedom the orchestra played to the soloist's scale. The music asks for the most sympathetic echoes from the orchestra of piano melodies, and for an eloquent interchange of moods. None of the foreign conductors who have visited us recently has accompanied a concerto with Mr. Forbes's understanding and experienced proportion. Rachmaninoff obviously was always at ease; his tone and warm clearness of outline, his suggestive harmony, his brilliant and flexible rhythm, his unerring judgment of all the resources of great piano-playing left us with nothing to do but admire and envy. No pianist shares his rapid art of pedalling, or his dazzling yet effortless use of crossed hands, and his lovely supple wrists. He keeps us always fascinated because there is, no matter how many times he comes before us, an enigma about his art. His power, lyricism, brilliance are somehow masked or withdrawn; we cannot really share in them; we must remain at a distance. There is nothing of display in Rachmaninoff; he is a dignified artist and—best of all—he has looked into life and lost his illusions. The D minor Concerto demands a more sensitive orchestral colour than we heard last night, for it lives not on musical ideas but on romantically modulated harmony. Now that Rachmaninoff on two consecutive occasions has done justice at the Hallé Concerts to his own music, perhaps he will in future play one of the greater masterpieces—say the Second Piano Concerto of Brahms.

In the evening's second part Mr. Forbes gave agreeable performances of Bantock's "The Pierrot of the Minute" Overture, and of the D minor Symphony of Dvorák—in which the composer's own lyrical genius comes out occasionally but more often pays naive homage to Brahms.

N. C.