

Rachmaninoff's Great Playing in Birmingham

SIXTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD Sergei Rachmaninoff, world-famous pianist and composer of, among other things, the Prelude in C Minor, lumbered to the stage of the Birmingham Town Hall, last night, dragged his weary weight of melancholy—he was really weary because he had landed not many hours before from America, and he is always melancholy—towards the piano as slowly as, they say, Bradman walks to the wicket.

Then he sat down at the piano and played; and with that playing electrified an audience to such a pitch of enthusiasm as I have never seen in a Birmingham audience before.

Lovely Lullaby

He played Liszt and Chopin and Beethoven, and Rachmaninoff. But he didn't play the Prelude in C minor.

And in all of them he revealed a superb technique, and a relentless logic in the matter of phrasing, rhythm, and interpretation.

Everything, even the gay last movement of the Beethoven Sonata in D minor, was touched with his own sombre gloom. But he did not substitute for gaiety, as some do, sugared sobstuff. The Chopin Nocturne in D flat major, for instance, was a lovely lullaby. But in that night bright stars twinkled as well as the mellow moon.

For most of the programme we had

the real stuff; superb technique, technique that should have amazed but did not because it was only the tools in the hands of two masters, the composer and the pianist. Evanescent pianissimos, mighty crescendoes, piled up with the same two magic hands, phrases unerringly picked out and moulded to perfection, they were all there. But they seemed inevitable.

Show Pieces

Only at the end did Rachmaninoff, the inexperienced concert player, open his bag of tricks, and turn from playing to displaying.

For show pieces he chose a transcription of the Fire Magic music from Wagner's Valkyrie done by a certain Brassin, which he played with great bravura, but which really, to me, sounded like a man playing from a full orchestral score; and Liszt's arrangement of a piece of music which virtuoso violinist Paganini wrote to show what he could do with bow and gut.

It was good fun, and a brilliant digital display. At the end the audience roared and applauded. Rachmaninoff played an encore. Again they applauded, and again he played, and again.

But he didn't play the Prelude in C minor. Maybe he's grown tired of it, too.

IVON ADAMS.

FEED THE BIRDS