

Symphony Concert....

BY FREDERICK YEISER.

After an interval of 27 years the appearance of Sergei Rachmaninoff as soloist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra constitutes a major event, as it would in fact at any time. Therefore it may not be amiss to attach some significance to the position on the program of the Overture to Handel's "Occasional Oratorio." For this week's concerts are in the nature of an occasion.

It is scarcely to be wondered at that the presence of such a distinguished soloist should create an atmosphere of excitement about the concert, or attract an unusually large Friday afternoon crowd to Music Hall. This last, rather than the actual playing time of the music, may have caused the concert to run 10 or 15 minutes longer than usual.

The members of the orchestra stood up to greet Rachmaninoff as he made his way across the platform to play the Beethoven Concerto. But the ovation which he received upon his entry, big as it was, could not compare with the ones accorded him after each of his two towering performances. They were the homage due a great artist.

Somebody will one day doubtless explain why the last of Paganini's Caprices has invited so many composers to use it as the basis for a set of variations. Perhaps it is a good tune. In any case, Rachmaninoff has used it for "beneficent exploitation," as Lawrence Gilman puts it, in the Rhapsodie for Piano and Orchestra.

There are 24 variations in all. In them Rachmaninoff appears to do almost everything that is humanly possible on the piano. The staccato, almost stuttering, character of Paganini's theme gives rise to fiendish technical difficulties both in the piano part and in the orchestral score of the variations.

It would seem, offhand, although it does not happen to be the case, that nearly every variation were heavily syncopated and that either the solo instrument or orchestra, and sometimes both, were playing on the off-beat. Eugene Goossens and the orchestra, it is safe to assume, have not encountered a more stubborn assignment for many a long day. And their successful accomplishment of it reflects greatly to their credit.

As is generally the case with variations, they fluctuate somewhat with respect to quality and effect. It is impossible to discuss them all. Some of them would require several hearings before they would sink in.

In one of them, I forgot which, the composer comes perilously, if pleasantly, close to "swinging it," if I may be permitted the luxury of the use of the vernacular. In another, the seventh, the composer seems about to lead off with a phrase something like the beginning of his famous C-sharp minor prelude. This is the "Dies Irae," theme which he utilized in his tone-poem, the "Isle of the Dead." It occurs also in the tenth variation, and again in the finale. It is this melody and the lovely andante cantabile of the eighteenth variation which puts the stamp of Rach-

maninoff on the Rhapsodies and thus signalize them as something more than another set of variations.

Needless to say, Rachmaninoff plays his Rhapsodie in stupendous fashion. After hearing him in this taxing work, it should be plain to anyone why he elected a less heavy work during the first half of the concert.

A sizeable number of people subscribe to the superstition that Beethoven's C-major Piano Concerto is a piece for students, therefore beneath the dignity of big pianists. Or that is too "easy." But did not Hans von Bulow once say that no such thing as an easy piece existed? When Beethoven himself introduced this concerto, his public thought that he was using it to show off his prowess as a pianist as much as his ability as a composer.

As a sort of transitional step in Beethoven's struggle to solve problems of form, his first attempt (actually the third) affects the fluent conversational tone in vogue at the time. Here and there, as in the development section of the first movement, and in the second movement, there appear suggestions of the later Beethoven. The third movement, a sportive rondo, redolent of the Austrian country side, tastes strongly of Haydn, but without his suave blending of sparkling wit and incisive logic.

All of the strongest superlatives in the thesaurus would fall short of describing how beautifully Rachmaninoff plays this concerto. He gives to every phrase precisely the proper turn. He takes the rondo at a breathless pace, yet every note stands out as clear as crystal. Those who recall the performance of the C-major concerto last season by Robert Schmitz can form an idea how it sounded then under the hands of a very good pianist and how it sounds this week by a master. Rachmaninoff, it may be noted, courageously omits the cadenza at the end of the first movement.

Except for some extended tutti passages allotted to it, most of them in the first movement, including the opening one in its entirety, the orchestra functions chiefly as an accompanying instrument. Mr. Goossens takes care of this part of it with more than his customary solicitude and skill.

Prokofieff's excursion back to the eighteenth century, which resulted so pleasantly in his Classical Symphony, can be easily explained by his sincere devotion to Mozart. His "natural classicism," as Constant Lambert calls it, can be held to account for the success of this experiment. Prokofieff hoped that this work would sound like something that Mozart would write if he were a man of the twentieth century. Perhaps it does. For in spite of its adherence to the archaic style, it savors of the present day, thanks to its harmonic progressions. It is one of the few tributes to Mozart memory that would not cause him to stir uneasily in his grave.

The finesse required to bring the mischievous spirit of this symphony to the surface, yet without lifting it out and waving it about in the air, Mr. Goossens has right at the tip of his fingers. He manages it with just the right empha-

sis and shading. The response of the orchestra contributes to a delightfully crisp performance from start to finish.

Solidity, fullness, and energy generally form the salient features of Handel's works. In the Overture to the "Occasional Oratorio" they are quite prominent, as are the trumpet parts—one of them very high. They give to the Overture its majestic ring.

Perhaps Mr. Goossens's particular interest in the Don Juan character, or characters, has given him the insight to project such a glowing performance of Strauss's setting to Lenau's poem. As Professor Tovey points out, the philosophy of the sentiments expressed by this Don Juan is not good citizenship, but it

is neither insincere nor weak. The last clause pretty well describes the performance, too.

The proximity of a big figure like Rachmaninoff seems to have had an electrical effect on Mr. Goossens and his men, for their playing during the entire afternoon topped its usual high level.

For another thing, with the Handel and Prokofieff to lead up to the Beethoven, and the Strauss to follow the Rachmaninoff Rhapsodie (and it is strong enough to do so), the program proves to be one of Mr. Goossens's happiest achievements. That, and the superior performances mentioned above—and Rachmaninoff — will make this week's concerts memorable ones.

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