

Rachmaninoff at Best Here

Great Russian Pianist
Pleases Big Crowd
at Auditorium

By HARRY R. BURKE.

Sergei Rachmaninoff, as a master of piano, grows alike in stature and authority with the passing of the years. Not in 30 of those years has this reviewer heard that a Russian Titan of the keyboard so supreme as yesterday, when the Cheney Concert Direction presented him in recital at the Auditorium; his first recital in St. Louis since 1932. He was Rachmaninoff at a pianistic zenith, master of every resource of the technic of his art, but master also of the spirit of melody. That spirit was transcendent. Technic could only serve it.

Not one of his offerings but might have raved elsewhere as a show-piece. Only by the wrench of thought could that be realized. His is the true economy of means, effortless in seeming. With certitude, with never a waste of energy or power, he evoked the very spirit of emotion. In brilliance sang the jeweled notes; their tone sustained and sonorous, yet each one diamond cut in clarity. Each given its precise color value. Each placed exactly as in time and space. Each shaped, as colored, with a marvelous command of pedal.

He seemed a more mellowed Rachmaninoff in this more intimate glimpse of an artist than may be gained from an orchestral collaboration; perceptive, penetrant, discerning, possibly a little amused, but having no concern except with beauty. No one's personality has a greater detachment from the ivory keyboard, yet he makes it the instrument of a most personal art. That is to say, he is ever the piano's master. It is as though the instrument has no secret resources which he has not explored. That tells not half. Nor have, one listening believes, the pages of his scores.

LYRIC BEAUTY REVEALED

Upon that is built his authority—the authority his astonishing technic but serves. As in the Beethoven D-minor sonata, Opus 31, No. 2, this is evident. It is not that Rachmaninoff has augmented the stature of Beethoven. But that the towering Russian has had the intellect to perceive the stature of Beethoven and to disclose it as it was revealed by Beethoven in setting out on his new path. Romain Rolland called this a "Shakespearean" sonata, comparing the spirit of its final Allegretto to the "Midsummer Night's Dream." But in Rachmaninoff's reading the lyric beauty of its detail, as in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," but complements the poignancy of drama, as the composer sets forth in evanescent notes his autobiography.

The wide range of Rachmaninoff astonishes: the catholicity of his taste. Bach, Chopin, Beethoven, Liszt, Wagner, himself. He reconciles these seeming irreconcilables in the solvent of beauty. Dynamics, velocity, power, color, that glorious and sustained singing tone; these contribute, but above all is the un-failing perception of melody, to which he manifests a passionate devotion, tender, caressing, yet burning with a lambent flame.

That fine authority was evident in the Bach Italian Concerto, with its molded Allegro, its tender and fragrant Andante, and the gayly dancing figures of its Presto. Earlier it had announced itself in the "De Profundis" of Liszt's Prelude, "Weeping, Plaints, Sorrows, Fears," which is after Bach and was presented with a poignant sincerity. It was asserted again in the enigmatic Chopin C-sharp minor Scherzo, virile, thundering with cannon, staging the tenderest of lyrics of love, its contrasts given unity by the melodic line. Once it was the fashion to deery his Chopin as being tintured with Rachmaninoff ad lib. Perhaps a mellowed understanding has changed the pianist's approach. Perhaps then we were only blind to the vital and virile beauty his greater mind perceived. Memories of vanished tone are tricky.

PLAYS OWN PRELUDE

There were four of his own Preludes to open the program a second half—the brooding and the struggle of the B-minor; the sprightly A-minor with its dashing speed and galloping chords; the G-minor echoing overtones in beauty; the B-flat major with its processional thunders. Then the Liszt Sonnet of Petrarch in E-major—a medieval statuette carved, as it were in tone, and polychromed with an exquisite delicacy of color.

To conclude Liszt's transcription of the "Spinning Song" from the "Flying Dutchman," with its haunting echo of the Dutchman's own despair, and the monumental Brasin transcription of Wagner's "Magic Fire" music, breath-taking in beauty.