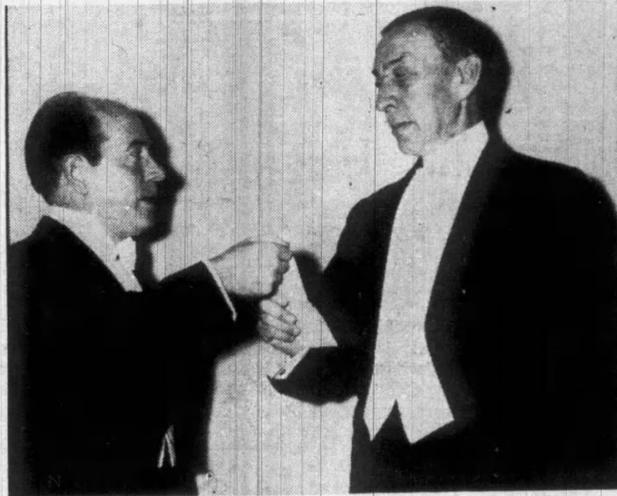


MUSIC

Rachmaninoff Hears Own Work With Audience



Money moved both ways at Constitution Hall last night. As piano soloist with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, Sergei Rachmaninoff (right) was a laborer worthy of his hire, but here is the composer turning right around and handing Conductor Eugene Ormandy of the Philadelphia Symphony a check to help write off the orchestra's deficit. He told Mr. Ormandy that he was merely living up to his belief that "we all should do our part to assist such wonderful musical organizations."

By HELEN BUCHALTER

Sergei Rachmaninoff, tall, bent, funereal looking as ever, sat with the multitudes last night at Constitution Hall for part of the first Philadelphia Orchestra concert of the season. He took a seat unobtrusively to the side and slumped in his chair. An usher came up and offered him a program which he refused. He knew the program by heart. Except for the opening overture, Beethoven's third Lenore, it consisted entirely of Rachmaninoff, his third symphony and his first concerto.

The great pianist and somewhat less than great composer thus broke with tradition, by appearing in the audience before his solo offering on the stage, because he wanted to hear his newest work, a symphony which he completed only last August. He listened thru most of the first two movements with his hands over his eyes. Before the third and last movement began he departed.

As a piece of unintentional musical criticism, it was a well-pointed gesture, for the last movement brought to final fruition the shortcomings of his latest work. Hearing his earlier concerto afterwards only further pointed up its weakness.

Just as Rachmaninoff 20 years ago revised the concerto of his youth to give it more body and maturity, I wish the young Rachmaninoff could return and bring fresh impulse and purity of invention to this work of his old age.

Rich as all of his works are in warm Slavic melodies that recall his illustrious Russian predecessors, this symphony is so heavily and frenetically orchestrated that it wearies rather than excites the listener. It is not so much a matter of a superabundance of musical ideas as it is excessive use of orchestral devices that dilute the appeal of its lovely thematic material. Frequently and particularly in the nervous middle section of the slow movement, Rachmaninoff seems to have been writing pianistically for the orchestra and the last movement, with its bounding leaps from mournful lyricism to a rushing fugato only intensify the delirium.

Turning to the flowing lyricism and the natural vitality of the concerto was like throwing off a dead weight. Mr. Rachmaninoff's boundless artistry as a pianist needs no overemphasis. Playing his own concerto gave us his musicianship at its greatest and there is little doubt, remembering the far from fulsome applause after the symphony, that the large audience's ovation was for Rachmaninoff, the personality and the pianist.

Mr. Ormandy's appearance marked his Washington debut as a graduate from co-conductorship to the title of musical director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The event was marked by his return to the use of the baton, thus removing one trace if not all of Leopold Stokowski's former connection with the orchestra. Musically, Mr. Ormandy was up to all of his old tricks. This ensemble is so expert that its conductor apparently can't resist putting all of its stops on show. Exaggerated dynamics, highlights and low-points, leaping excitement and slumberous diminuendos turned Beethoven's popular overture into a real "interpretation." How much of the Rachmaninoff symphony owes its jitters to its performers I can not say, but only report here with all humility my first impression.

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