

Everyman's Rachmaninoff

The Problem Concerning a Great Pianist's Popularity and Wherein It May Lie

By THOMAS ARCHER

One of the puzzles in contemporary music is the kind of popularity enjoyed by Serge Rachmaninoff. No matter where he goes the Russian composer-pianist is greeted by enormous audiences that attest their admiration and interest in terms sometimes perilously near suited to the prize ring. It was so at his recital here last Monday, and it has been invariably so in the past.

This is doubly strange because Rachmaninoff's practical making of music is not of a popular nature. He is primarily an intellectual player who dwells in lofty spheres. His approach to his art is severe, and as an interpreter he is invariably uncompromising. The trained hearer usually finds his work cut out to follow a Rachmaninoff performance with undivided attention.

Yet the crowd dotes on him. In a city like Montreal where audiences do not always flock to concerts in their thousands, he is habitually greeted by a full house. At few other recitals are audiences so persistently generous in their applause, and so thoroughly intrigued with the whole affair. For them, it seems, a recital by Rachmaninoff is a show and a good one, too.

It needs but little perception at one of these recitals to sense the wide gap, an unbridgeable chasm in fact, existing between the executant and his audience. Last Monday Rachmaninoff felt it himself and showed it by an obvious annoyance at the boisterous behavior of many of those present, although it says much for his stature as an artist that he refused to permit his irritation to affect his music, even when he felt the need of modulating in his own measures from the second to the third movement of Chopin's Sonata in B minor in order to stop further exercise by the horny-handed ones.

To return to the puzzle—wherein lies Rachmaninoff's popularity with those whose knowledge and appreciation in matters of music is, to say the least, slightly undeveloped? Unquestionably it is not in Rachmaninoff the maker of music. Hence it must be in Rachmaninoff the man.

It cannot be denied that most people find his personality an exotic one. A lady present at the concert last Monday put the matter succinctly when she said: "He has such an interesting face!"

It is Rachmaninoff's fortune or misfortune to be taken as a typical representative of the suffering Slav

whom Dostoevsky and others are supposed to have held up for the sympathy and sentimental commiseration of the world.

Indeed many of us thought all Russians were suffering Slavs, melancholy fellows constantly contemplating suicide and gazing figuratively with loving eyes upon the grave. We thought this until the Revolution spread Russian art and Russian thought and Russian people among us and we found that the legend was largely a myth and that most Russians are normal souls even as you and I, blessed moreover, with a great capacity for enjoying life and a highly developed sense of humor.

But the superstition still seems to persist so far as Rachmaninoff is concerned. People go to his recitals eager to watch that tall, spare figure with the cropped head who looms on the stage and strides slowly and mournfully to the pianoforte, whose clothes are cut in sober lines, the ensemble calling to mind a Scottish divine of the 17th century who spent his days contemplating the doctrine of predestination and the awful fate it held in store for sinners.

What, however, has this to do with music and the way Rachmaninoff makes it? Nothing, absolutely nothing.

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