

## Sergei Rachmaninoff Heard in Choral Union Event

Pianist-Composer at Best in  
Slav Music; Plays C  
Sharp Prelude

By Carl E. Gehring  
Sergei Rachmaninoff, celebrated Russian pianist-composer, appeared in his dual musical capacity Wednesday evening in Hill auditorium in the eighth of the Choral Union concerts this season. In the former role, he again proved himself to be one of the foremost keyboard artists of the generation; his technique and interpretations were well nigh flawless, however unconventional the latter appeared. As to his status as composer, that is another matter; but it may be said that as composer, Rachmaninoff is a most interesting figure. Endowed with a tremendous talent for composition, the man nevertheless is a throw-back; he writes in comparatively outmoded idioms and it is doubtful whether his works would enjoy their wide vogue were he known as composer only.

In certain respects, Rachmaninoff might be cited as a modern Anton Rubinstein. The latter, one of the foremost pianists of his time, also aspired to compose. But his creations lacked the divine spark basic in great music. His operas were void of the dramatic power of Wagner's, just appearing then, and Rubinstein, sensing the deficiency, hated Wagner cordially. With Rachmaninoff, the case is almost identical. He is not of the clan of rugged composers whose blif-bang-clang output most graphically bespeaks the age, and it has been suggested, probably with truth, that Rachmaninoff subtly sought to discredit those who veer so far to the left when he styled himself a "musical evolutionist."

**Prelude in C Sharp Minor**  
Rachmaninoff, furthermore, in carrying on where Tchaikowsky left off in 1893, assumed a heritage of none too lasting vitality. The influence of Peter Iljitch in Russia, where it should be strongest, has been reported to be at ebb tide. Rachmaninoff's scores, moreover, lack the compelling eloquence and stark hysteria of the earlier composer. Where Tchaikowsky's music might be gauged in terms of vast Russian forests, Rachmaninoff's could be likened to less significant second-growth timber. Yet, Rachmaninoff plods on, unmindful of the vexatious cross-currents and questionings which trouble leading intellects. Therein he is interesting, sincere, therefore he commands admiration. His steadfastness of purpose was shown some time ago by an article in which he offered substantial advice to young composers.

The Prelude in C Sharp Minor, only work of Rachmaninoff's to be played Wednesday evening, is an early effort, being Op. 3, No. 2. Its appearance years ago was in the nature of an announcement that a new genius, whatever his magnitude, was at the gates of immortality. Slavic in its somber character, the Prelude combines elements of artistic merit and popular appeal. In this respect it resembles Dvořák's "Humoresque," Schumann's "Traumerei," and Elgar's "Saint d'Amour," miniatures which are better known than are major works of their respective composers. So famous did Rachmaninoff become by virtue of this Prelude, he finally became annoyed at the insistence with which audiences clamored for its performance, feeling that better music of his was being restricted. Even here, the Prelude replaced Rachmaninoff's "Moment Musical" on the program "by request."

**Unconventional Interpretations**  
As already suggested, the concert was the ultimate in technical performance. As to interpretation, there were interesting departures. These had more to do with the Mozart Sonata No. 14 in D Major, two Sonatas, in D Minor and C Major, by Scarlatti, and the Schumann "Carnaval," which comprised the first group, than with the second, composed of Nocturne in D Flat Major, Valse in F Major and Ballade in G Minor, by Chopin, Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C Sharp Minor, an arrangement for piano by Rachmaninoff of Kreisler's "Liebesleid," and for encores, a piano arrangement of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumble Bee" and the "Troika en Traineau," Op. 37, No. 11, by Tchaikowsky.

From the cosmopolitan standpoint, the rendition of the Mozart sonata could not have been surpassed. Many Russian musicians, by word and deed, have evinced a great liking for the scores of Mozart, and the Sonata was dexterously and beautifully recomposed in the hands of Rachmaninoff. Delightfully placed and even misplaced bits of emphasis, particularly in the sudden accentuation of brasses in lower register, gave new character to Mozart. Rachmaninoff's typical conservatism in the use of the pedal together with the utmost in fingering imparted a delicacy and liquidity to the flowing in

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passages and runs that one had not suspected were lodged in these measures. Throughout, Slavic impetuosity was held in leash; restraint reigned supreme.

#### "With Rachmaninoff-Like Speed"

Similarly fine were the Scarlatti and Schumann renditions. An organ-point, twice sounded on A in the former's D Minor Sonata, was maintained with such an even striking of the keys, it seemed to induce an audible shimmer. Rachmaninoff's interpretations often are shaped and determined by the scope of his technique. His tremendous velocity in execution has made the term "with Rachmaninoff-like speed" a flattering compliment when applied to other pianists. Difficult scale passages he runs off with the last word in form and grace, and with no apparent effort. With such velocity at his command, Rachmaninoff employs the most unusual rubato effects. These were heard in all their dimensions in various units of the Schumann "Carnaval," which composition also showed off the pianist's extraordinary powers of dynamics. Great acclaim greeted the artist upon the conclusion of the group.

Yet, even greater applause was his at the end of the concert. For, with the second group concluded, one wished that Rachmaninoff had played from Slavic composers all evening. The piano sang Chopin as Chopin must have wished it when he uttered his ideal of piano playing. The Nocturne and Valse provided fitting preludes to the thrilling experience of hearing Rachmaninoff dispatch a composition in which various moods, languor, exultation and despair, of the Polish master, found utterance and contrast. "Liebesfreud," one observed, while a good vehicle for Rachmaninoff in its new form, has lost in transcription through the undue freedom the pianist exercised in recasting the piece.

The quirks of Rachmaninoff's temperament, one being his extreme aversion for close proximity with people in the mass, worked to advantage at the concert. Not only was the stage cleared of the usual and disconcerting over-flow crowd, but the manner in which his personality projected itself over the house seemed to make for a quieter audience.