

THE BRAND LANE CONCERTS

Rachmaninoff

Dr. Johnson once said that anybody chancing to meet Burke, if only for a moment while sheltering from the rain, would be bound to say "This is an extraordinary man." So with Rachmaninoff. The moment he stepped on to the platform on Saturday night the Free Trade Hall became the habitation of strange and powerful genius. If Rachmaninoff had merely lifted the lid of the piano and propped it up and then passed out of our sight we should have felt the presence of his demon. Yet he does not demonstrate at all; he comes before us and bows formally—as every great artist ought to, for genius should command and not solicit our esteem. Rachmaninoff is more economical in his movements—as a pianist even than Schnabel; his technique, with all its enormous scope and sovereignty, begins and ends at the hands—those lithe hands and long, tapering fingers, each alive, sensitive, individual. Never, surely, was there a pianist whose hands were as beautiful to watch as Rachmaninoff's. They curve and hover and sweep and flash and dance and march. The crossing of these hands in the D flat major Etude of Liszt would have rendered the music audible to a deaf man. But apart from his hands and fingers, the carriage of Rachmaninoff, as he plays, is stolidity itself; he sits there as though oblivious of an audience. He recognises our presence only so far as politeness desires. He is essentially remote in his romanticism—and that brings us to a discussion of his piano playing qua interpretation.

We need not go into his unparalleled technique, excepting in so far as it illuminates consideration of him as an artist. He can do with the keyboard much as he likes; he can play the "Carnaval de Pesth" of Liszt with reserves of skill without turning a hair. If we call him the greatest pianist of the day we'll not be far wrong. But that opinion may gain in weight if, while we give expression to it, we also try to recognise that Rachmaninoff's qualities have their defects. Or rather—since it is absurd to talk of "defects" in a great artist—let us say that his temperament, because of its very power, must show certain traits which cannot be affined to all music, no matter how admirably Rachmaninoff finds the appropriate "external" style. At bottom his mind seems aloof and not exactly warm. He is a Russian, with the note of inimical distance in his romanticism. Here, of course, is a mind very much removed from the familiar romanticism of the Germans, who like to tell their secrets almost comfortably, in a quite domestic intimacy. Such was the romanticism of Schumann, whose "Davidsbundlertanze" was in the programme of Saturday. Rachmaninoff played these character pieces with a rare range of meaning, but the harmonic treatment was alien to Schumann's expansiveness. The iron in Rachmaninoff's nature is revealed by the stark decision of his chordal playing; he contracts harmony, as though for reticence's sake, while Schumann expands it, for the sake of his warm, tangible, and very lovably German conceits. Rachmaninoff gave to Schumann uncommon strength of purpose, and for once the composer was more than a miscellaneous writer; the pieces were marvellously unified by a rhythmical control which saw the end of the whole set in the beginning. We missed the touch of the instantaneous, though; the picturesqueness of Schumann, mild nowadays maybe, was fixed for us as though in the acid of the engraver's weapon. Here was a Schumann entirely masculine; moreover, one who kept us rather at a remove from familiarity.

Rachmaninoff's harmony seems a cultivated derivation from a rhythm of barbaric origin. The rather grim sharpness of it is liberated only during intricacies of melodic figuration—for example, in Liszt, whose music is played by Rachmaninoff as it has never before been played in our time. It is to be doubted whether he gives us the complete Chopin. Even in his scherzi Chopin addresses himself to what George Meredith called the "drawing-room of civilised men and women"; Chopin must be allowed, in every reading, to keep his charm, his fascination, his illusions, his aristocratic rapture and woe. Rachmaninoff played the B minor Scherzo with a severe sort of taciturnity of expression which could not be concealed by the sheer brilliance of his execution. There were no rhythmical delays or yieldings: the lyric section went its way without a single effort at dalliance; the work as a whole hid its heart not under a robe but under tough armour. The B flat minor Scherzo, with its more heroic stature, was more satisfying; in the winsome middle section, however, there was still the sense of a distrust of a feminine phrase, though the playing, as a whole, in its variety of tone and rhythm, was something to rave about.

Rachmaninoff's genius as a pianist derives from Liszt—not the sentimentalist of the "Liebestraume," known to the multitude, but the ironic spirit who wrote the finest Mephisto music extant. A miracle of technique and artistic re-creation was achieved in the Valse Impromptu, a piece which usually is played as though of very slight consequence. Rachmaninoff gave to the dance the breath and being of the airy fantastic; it was charming, and yet more than charming. The capricious rhythms told of the greater Liszt, the composer who knew well the meaning of Goethe's denying spirit—"der Geist, der stets verneint."

Rachmaninoff's incomparable piano playing was at its most masterful in his own Etudes-Tableaux, which exploit with a most comprehensive genius the instrument's range, though as music they reveal little that is new. Here the gradations of tone, the felicity of the rhythm, were the joy and despair of every pianist present. The audience was enthusiastic, and would not go home until Rachmaninoff, without unnecessary delay, played the C sharp minor Prelude and, like the great artist he is, played the music as though he had never played it before.

N. C.