

RACHMANNOFF'S ART DISPASSIONATE, KEEN

Composer-Pianist Dissects and Annotates Works of Other Men and Himself.

By RICHARD I. STOKES.

CROUCHED over the keyboard as if peering into music through a microscope, Sergei Rachmaninoff, at the Odeon last night, affected another example of his singularly dispassionate, pellucid and analytical method of expounding the compositions of other men and of himself. Temperamentally aloof from emotion, he refrains from lending the feelings of others. Never does he lose himself in the raptures of tones, like a tragedian plunging headlong into a role; his attitude, cool and imperturbably self-possessed, is rather that of a great critic who minutely examines, keenly reflects and eloquently comments. He is the Sainte-Beuve of pianists.

In his musical interpretations we do not hear a musical Booth identifying his personality in ardent self-edification with the characters of dramas in sound; but rather a thoughtful and refreshing annotator who pens his scholia on the margin of the manuscript—a stress upon some inner part which would otherwise be overlooked, the luminous underlining of a rhythm, an exclamation point inserted to call attention to some new stroke of phrase. It is informative, ingenious and absorbing; but when the analysis is done, we feel the need of another pianist to perform the synthesis of putting the parts together once more.

A Scholast of Genius.

But how eminently able a commentator is this giant and shambling man of genius from Russia! Himself the creator of much melodious music, he looks straight through the music of other men to the bottom of its bar. From that piercing, clear-sighted inspection not a cell of the organism escapes; only, as in the case of surgeons, the mysterious pulse of life itself eludes him. One senses that he has meditated with profound curiosity upon the function of every note and of the dot after it; that he thoroughly comprehends the purpose of every device of modulation, dynamics and tempo; that he has drawn incisive conclusions as to the relation of each measure to the class surrounding it.

Moreover, whatever he has discovered and whatever he has reflected, he has the gift of imparting to others with utmost clearness. The meaning of his comments is never for a moment bewildered. Of fervent Russian blood, trained in sentimental Germany, he has arrived at the uncompromising lucidity of France. His touch, too, is so sharp, brilliant and chiding that he makes amazingly small use of the pedal to propel his tone. His technique is colossal; equal in velocity, power, and also delicacy and grace, to any demand likely to be put upon it. His ear is acute for the physical beauty of music; no flower blooms upon the vine of sound that he is not soon to cull it, to savor it with loving relish. In short, this is a musical giant with most of the gifts save the precious one of passion.

A Subjective Attitude.

Scholarly he is, but no pedant. His eye glazes is too vigorous and too fresh to sink among the dryadists. For the sake of making his point, he may take liberties of tempo and emphasis; but his innovations are always suggestive, illuminating and valuable. Very often—as in the work of truly distinguished critics—his accomplishment, like that of the composer, is also creative.

His subjective attitude leaves us to understand, when listing his program, some such title-page as this: "Mozart's Sonata in A Major, edited and annotated by Sergei Rachmaninoff." It was so throughout the schedule, even to the pianist's own works, which he seems to contemplate in the same mood of impersonal detachment. There were Mozart's Sonata No. 3, Schumann's "Papillon," Op. 2; Chopin's Premier Balade, "Bacchante" and Valse in G-flat Major; Rachmaninoff's "Polichinelle" and "Bacchante"—handled with a certain naivete upon the same program with that of Chopin; and Liszt's stupendous show-piece, "Rhapsodie Espagnole." For encores there were two of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words"—"The Hunting Song" and "The Joyous Peasant"; Chopin's waltzes in F Major and C-sharp Minor; and, it goes without saying, Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp Minor.

That Inexorable Prelude.

It was clear that the composer-pianist hoped for once to escape playing this celebrated piece, which he wrote at the age of 16 and which has come to bore him to extinction. But when the formal program came to an end without it, a man in the gallery voiced the thought of the audience by shouting, "Play your own prelude!" Rachmaninoff has written a score of preludes, but there was no need to specify the key. With a certain painful grin, the pianist bowed his resignation to fate, and played the piece like an entomologist holding at arm's length some curious but not particularly edifying beetle.

Rachmaninoff maintains towards his audience an attitude as remote as if an invisible curtain were spread between them, so that the popular hold he has won is all the more astonishing. No artist of recent days, save Kreisler, has drawn to the Odeon a bigger crowd than he one last night. And it was an audience which visibly delighted in his playing; one that remained seated after the program was over and clamored for more until two encores were added.