

RACHMANINOFF PLAYS LIKE A SLAV DEMIGOD

Performance Last Evening Was
a Revelation of Prodigious
Poetic Mastery.

A PACKED HOUSE

At Least a Thousand Came to
Hear the Prelude in C Sharp
Minor — Not in Vain.

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE.

The professional musician remarked that at least a thousand people had come down to hear the Prelude in C sharp minor. There were in that case 999 others. He did not admit that he cared in the least to hear it, though he had never heard Rachmaninoff.

"And he's sure to play it," he said. "Nothing on earth can keep him from doing it—though it's not on the program."

The biggest audience of the season heard the lean, lanky, spike-haired Slav giant whose smile is like the rising of an Arctic sun and whose walk across the long stage has an air of profound distinction even in its loose-jointed clumsiness. He sits bowed at the piano which is much too low for him; like a huge cobbler at his last. He scans the crowd with a puzzled aloofness, wishing they would stop rustling. Presently in a great silence he strikes the familiar G major chord of God Save the King. As soon as everybody is up he begins to play it softly, reverently, almost tenderly. Near the end he crushes out big, massive chords with fine ease and lets it go at that. Quite wonderful; and altogether new.

Master of Pure Tone.

"I wonder," says the professional. "If I should play it that way would the people think it was fine or—just weak?"

Rachmaninoff was already disposing his cumbersome anatomy for the Handel Variations. After caressing the keys like a zephyr he began sedately and with an air of melancholy to play the lovely antiphonal phrases answered by their echo. At once you recognize a master of pure and perfect tone; in the Variations on the theme, a crisp accuracy of rhythm. Then in the Beethoven Sonata Pathétique—which the elucidator behind me remarked did not mean pathetic in the sense of sorrowful but merely full of feeling—he showed how reverently and benignly he could stroke off that marvelous legato melody in the second movement. Why with such a tender regard for the lovely classic outlines of this thing did he not play it all as one movement and stop the ap-

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plause? Showmanship perhaps. Even this hermit of the near Siberias is becoming stung with the homage of the crowd. But it was a lovely work, done with such cool mastery, but with no desire to prove that Rachmaninoff was the equal of Beethoven. And in the Weber-Tausig Invitation to the Dance he perfected the little tragedy of himself; that so profoundly impressive a man should be playing such a sentimental and gaudy show-piece at all—especially with all the exotic ornamentations lavished on it by Tausig who quite outdoes Eeingartner. But this also he did with great brilliance, with originality, with a certain analytical coolness as though he had no care how long he made it last because the crowd were hushed over the lovely tones he made and his perfect control of all the nuances of rhythm.

Fine in Chopin.

Chopin—here is the perennial goal of the melodists of the piano, the test of any master's ability. He who cannot play Chopin is no great pianist. Rachmaninoff undertook to read himself into Chopin as though he would like to have been there when the Pole composed the Barcarolle with its wistful, wondering double scale upwards, and its slow lilting rhythm. He carefully revised the Valse and gently, dispassionately retraced the outlines of the Polonaise, which seemed to be finished before it was done. He has a way of toying with the movement of a piece to suit his own humor, yet he never takes license; always that easy masterful painting of the tone and the perfect

manipulation of the "tempo rubato" which in his case is something you can always count.

I do not profess to understand the three fairy stories that came next, or who Nicholas Medtner may be; I daresay he is some Slav. They were fine enough, and quite richly woven in color and texture; but why should some annotator not have told us just what the composer was driving at?

His own group, an Etude Tableau, the "Faisies" song transcription and a Prelude, are all new here. Just what an etude tableau is I have no idea. But in this case it seemed to be something new without being very modern; a nice bit of tone that was next thing to silence. The Prelude in B flat major is a big bit of technical virtuosity done up in a small and powerful package. The Minuet by Bizet, according to R—off, was tossed off with fine lyric ease, and the artist once again staved off the inevitable C sharp Prelude for an encore.

A Sensation With Liszt.

He came back for the Liszt Second Rhapsodie when everybody was ready to believe he would do something with it that nobody else had ever done—and he did. This performance was quite as sensational, in a much more dignified way, as the playing of the Tannhauser Liszt Overture by one Friedman a while ago. With deliberate crushing strength the giant bit into the staccato and ominous chords that usher in—what to some imperfect players becomes an orgy, but in this case became a wonderful epic of tonal painting and carving of melody and weaving of harmony and modeling of rhythm. He tossed out great masses of lyric tone, but never once tortured the piano. The thing worked itself up from slow, almost calculated beginnings to a prodigious tantrum under absolute control. Such impeccable observance of metrical effects along with complete abandon of mood one seldom hears. It was all so easy—for him; although he was himself writing another rhapsody into the Liszt. A truly colossal piece of piano orchestration when with a sort of grim humor the giant made close staccato dissonances in the lower middle register sound for all the world like the stuttering of French horns, and made you hear the warbling flute, the soaring strings, the plucked double bass. What a conductor this man should have made! He conducted himself as though he and the piano were an orchestra.

And after the first encore—the inevitable; the thing for which many people had come; the C sharp minor, played as only Rachmaninoff can do it, even though he must be sick to death of the grand old emotional and descriptive thing which its magic tolling of the Kremlin bell chords that die away after the middle climax into a hush deeper than the subdued melancholy with which the Prelude began. No, none of that Thorhammer percussion as 'tis done by ambitious amateurs from the piano shops; just a story-poem of tone. The professional musician missed that. He had to leave early.