

The Wonder of Rachmaninoff

BY WESLEY E. WOODRUFF.

It was a sort of red letter night at the Temple last evening—what one of our departed writers used to call an occasion of "eclat". Whatever the motive that drew out that auditory, it was a pouring of people that the Temple has not seen in some years. Extra chairs were lined up close to the stage, and there were perhaps a hundred or more at the rear not able to get seats who stood through the performance. The throng must have reached a total of over 1,500. And it was more than merely a great company. There was an eager, almost excited interest about the thing that one felt from the beginning.

The enthusiasm tore loose with the first serious number, the Beethoven, and at that it was far from being the most interesting item, despite the immortal name attached thereto. In fact, mustering up the memory of the gorgeous evening with the full chorded opulence and dynamic processions of the later numbers, this first one seemed a bit meagre. But the great man re-entered without undue delay and granted the extra that was wanted. So he was responsive through the evening, giving extras after the detached numbers at the beginning, and then from the middle point remaining at the piano and carrying the program through as it was, without additions, until the last event, after which he cheerfully came back and gave more extras.

Here we were, looking the actual presence of a great man, whose contributions to the literature of music have been very great in quality and in quantity—compositions which generally speaking, do not use all the idiom of the school of neo Russians like Gratchaninoff, Ippolitof-Ivanof, Arhangelski and others, but which is more like the musical habit of Tschalkowski. The former group seems to us still exotic, whereas the idiom of Tschalkowski and Rachmaninoff is less so. Rachmaninoff is known in the orchestral creative world, and for piano his opus numbers must ere now have reached a vast sum. Again he has given to the Russian church some of the greatest treasures of its liturgical music settings.

And, too, here was, in person, a man who had gone through Russia much of the toil and fret and terrorism of the new regime, and who in despair had fled to these shores, which though more new in the items of modern civilization, still hold but the most generous and welcoming hand to music—for Russia, as he says will not reach again her musical glory for decades.

Most grateful to the audience was the well remembered Prelude in C sharp minor, perhaps the best known and most played of all the Rachmaninoff compositions for piano. This, of course, held interest close riveted, and many were the suppressed exclamations and wonderments at the manner of the playing from the very fountain head. In

this he took the earlier time rather more in motion than we are accustomed, and he worked a tremendous variation of stress with it—now rising to a tumultuous tide of rich full chorded blazing and anon, toward the close, falling in its cadences to a misty echo of the preceding.

If the idea is that of bells then this "program" is alluring and stimulates ones imagination, for the thing persists in suggesting the might of ponderous deep throated vibrations. But in annotations regarding this, in one of the catalogs, it is stated that Rachmaninoff found the theme of the three notes on a prison wall—perhaps the work of a prisoner, in despair and about to be exiled to dreary Siberia. Anyway it was potent and it is an experience, to have heard it from his fingers.

The most interesting thing generally is the general impression of the performance. The giant composer is also a giant physically. He towered above our usually accepted height, and seemed way over six feet—and slender. His movement for so large a man, walk, position at the keyboard, and bow, were easy, dignified and accomplished with a reassuring grace. The expression of face was ever pleasant, though somewhat absorbed, and along toward the close he yielded to the enthusiasm of the audience and relaxed into a grateful smile, which sent a radiance through the room.

In general style and equipment Rachmaninoff is amazing in technical resources. His use of pedal was extraordinary. A strong characteristic of his playing is its most wonderful clarity.—Every note is heard clearly etched and ranges along with its brothers in orderly and clear cut definition, whether the passage runs at breath taking speed or whether it delays along in a spondaic solemnity, whether the procession is that of the ponderous masses of tone, or whether it is reduced to a whispering cadence.

Again, the stam of his style in its elastic eloquence as to stress. None of the great have so much employed the pianissimo, or have given the hearer greater tone beauty and swaying tenderness. The fingers seem imbued to the tips with sensitiveness. And then, too, the plastic utterance of phrases. They were invested with that subtle eloquence that comes from masterful co-ordination of mind and muscles and fingers. Tremendous power here, liting grace of melody so that the picture glowed with the merging and the variation of color, and of light and shade.

There was no moment that was lacking in interest—no second of time that the sway of the man's great personality was not felt. In some features this playing suggests Hozman: in some respects, in its freedom and emancipation from mere technic, it is like Grainger. But anyway it is very wonderful very individual and it has left the impression both of wonder and of gratitude.

Among the extra numbers were the Turkish Mozart; the Chopin D flat, known as the minute waltz; the Tscherkwowski Im Trolka and the Debussy gollywogs.