

PIANIST RENEWS OLD MUSICAL FURNITURE

Rachmaninoff's Exquisite Technique Delights Throng, Despite Stale Program.

By RICHARD L. STOKES.
ONCE more, in his recital before a near-capacity house last night at the Odeon, Sergei Rachmaninoff might be observed at his craft of refurbishing up secondhand wares and hawking them for new. Since the Russian pianist is an artificer of genius, one sometimes forgets the frayed and worn—often musical furniture he was renovating. In the interest of watching with what address he applied a coat of gilt here, or patched a rent there, or plied the vacuum cleaner upon the grime of some ancient tapestry.

The virtuoso's lack of enterprise in program-making may be due partly to the apathy of a composer naturally absorbed in creative work, who finds himself compelled to play the piano in public for a livelihood. Partly, also, his temperament is respectable. He has boasted of being "as old-fashioned as Haydn." To him, it seems, Chopin is a modern. The new currents of music have passed him by, and likewise the cosmopolitan spirit of his own country. So, at his recitals, we may hear some piece of Tchaikowsky—whose style was as much Italian as Russian—but never anything of Mussorgsky, Borodine or Rimsky-Korsakoff, to say nothing of Stravinsky, Ravel, Schoenberg, Debussy.

A Familiar Program.
 As last night's fare, then, he professed Weber's "Rondo Brillante," an exercise for generations of boarding-school misses; three of Chopin's most familiar works, the Nocturne in F-sharp Major, Op. 15, No. 2; the Valse Brillante in F Major, Op. 24, No. 3, and the Sonata in B-flat Minor, Op. 10, besides the inevitable "Minute Waltz" as an encore; Moszkowski's "La Jengleuse," Liszt's Etude in A-flat Major; and finally, for a show-piece, the Schulz-Evler version of Johann Strauss' "Beautiful Blue Danube." In addition, the pianist played two of his own compositions, "Melody" and "Serenade," and, as extras at the end, a Tchaikowsky waltz, the inescapable Prelude in C-sharp Minor, and the Schumann-Tanz "Contrabandist."

Many anticipations were aroused, though traitorally, by the opening number of the program, "Improvisation," Op. 31, by Nicolai Medtner. If memory serve, this was the first appearance of Medtner's name on a piano program in this city. On his earliest visit to St. Louis, in March, 1919, Rachmaninoff delivered himself of the dictum that "of all living composers the greatest is Nicolai Medtner."

Medtner's Career.
 Medtner was born Dec. 24, 1873, at Moscow, of German parents. He was trained at the Moscow Conservatory, won the Rubinstein prize for piano playing, and toured Germany and Russia as a concert virtuoso. Later he became professor of the piano at the Conservatory in Moscow. He has written many striking songs, but has composed mostly for the piano. According to Ernest Newman, "his work shows virtually no trace of Russian nationalism."

So, instead of a modernist work, pungent of the Slav race, we heard in the "Improvisation" a piece with some delicate dissonances, but one historically classic. It had beauty and power, with melodic distinction; it was sincere in its spontaneous mood; but it might have been written 20 years ago.

The pianist was not in his deepest reflective disposition last night. We have heard him thinking aloud at the piano, probing to the bottom of every bar, illuminating old passages with the light of his commentaries. His Prelude, of which he must be heartily sick, was played with an air of suffering; and he dispatched the Strauss waltz with dutiful resolution, showing a mild interest only now and then in some phrase of graceful melody.

But his playing, on the technical side, was ravishing. Few other pianists command so elegant and subtle a pianissimo, such feather-light faintness of touch, so airy a rub of whispering tone. To the waltz his most successful piece was the Chopin sonata, with its curt and brusque opening movement, its taut Scherzo, its stately funeral march and its chattering finale.

The funeral march, in particular, became pictorial. We saw "gorgeous tragedy, with scyathed pall, come sweeping by"; we heard the song of victory over death soar to the sky; and then the plumed cortege melted, with drum rolls, in the distance. However, this performance by no means effaced the memory of Paderewski's playing of the same march several years ago at the Odeon—a rendition harsh and terrible with its clangor of iron funeral bells and its inexorable trampling of rhythm, like the tread of Fate.