

Makes 'Sphinx' Speak Lovely Mysteries

By George O'Neal

AT BEST this will be merely an impression. Only musicians can write intelligently about music, but most of the time they won't. Sergel Rachmaninoff gave a concert Wednesday night at The Auditorium. The concert was perfect, but the audience was inadequate. There was nothing near enough people in the audience. When The Auditorium is no more than a third full it resembles a farmer's barn the year the crops failed. Managers make a mistake crowding so many celebrated artists together.

Rachmaninoff is an arresting personality. He has no conventional mannerisms, and his hair is cut as close as any imperial colonel's. Somehow or other he seems more like an ambassador than a musician—until he begins to play.

He made such an inconspicuous entrance at first there was a thought he might be an attendant sent to raise the top of the piano or adjust the seat. No, he was Rachmaninoff. He wore evening clothes of European cut and a black waistcoat and, besides, the piano top had already been raised. He acknowledged the enthusiasm of the audience without a flourish. There was an odd, faraway smile on his face that seemed to indicate he was only vaguely aware of his audience and was listening already to the music he was dreaming, rather than to the applause.

His piano seat was distinctive. It was square and had no back, and was thick upholstered in leather.

A piano is an awkward appearing instrument when it stands alone, a mutilated sphinx with only one wing. That piano was not complete until Rachmaninoff touched it.

The severe form of the piano and the clean lines of the player's body were merged. There was glorious animation and the "sphinx" spoke of incredibly lovely mysteries.

What do the other people in an audience think about when they hear such music? Certainly thousands of irrelevant things. The thoughts go up, up, up, like the notes of music, and under the spell they are harmony.

Rachmaninoff's program was beautifully grouped. The most formidable number, Beethoven's Sonata, opus 26, came first. There was no intermission, but after the first number, Rachmaninoff left the stage for a moment, and quickly returned. His own compositions, Two Etudes Tableau and the renowned Prelude were grouped next to the last number.

Before his own composition he played four short numbers: Funerailles by Liszt, Two Etudes by Mendelssohn, Etude Symphonique by Schumann and Fairy Tale by Medtner. The last number on the program was a Strauss-Tausig waltz.

When the program as announced was completed, Rachmaninoff himself did not seem to be ready to stop playing. As usual some members of the audience wanted to hear more and others didn't. He played four encores. The audience was shifted about like sand. The crowd grew smaller after each one, and each time he returned people sat quickly in the nearest seat. The most devoted remained to the last and tried even then to persuade him it was worth while playing just once more.

But he would not. His last encore had been Beethoven's Turkish March from "The Ruins of Athens," and the fire of that was an appropriate conclusion.

Rachmaninoff's Prelude, the one every ambitious amateur learns to pound, is quite another thing when Rachmaninoff plays it. It is music and not noise.