

BRUNO DAVID USSHER

Speaking of Music

THE STIRRING MR. STOKOWSKI

Certain people have a stirring effect; others cause those around them to bestir themselves. Leopold Stokowski, one of the super-lords of the orchestral domain, does both. He is a great conductor and a great personality, and the fact that he is not always great of manifestation should not be chalked in large letters on the front wall of his large house of achievement. From Homer's "Iliad," via Dante and Shakespeare to Handel, Bach and Beethoven, to Mahler and Sibelius, the great always have been marked also by imperfections. Goethe has written things of decidedly passing value, so have Schubert and Heine, Emerson and countless others. It is not necessary to labor that point in order to prove it.

Stokowski's magnificent obsession is improvement of sound, and I have no doubt that, when in many years to come he is wafted on high in that fiery chariot reserved for biblical prophets and orchestra conductors of his visionary leanings, he will upon arrival in the Valhalla for musicians call in the major domo, order a cloud-load of celestial cellotex, make the angels hold their wings differently or stiffen that feathery gear in order to obtain more resonance and color. For the first concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra at Pantages Theater in Hollywood, Maestro Stokowski made everyone bestir himself or herself, from Manager Florence Irish down to the traffic policemen and parking-lot attendants on the boulevard.

By Their Seating Ye Shall Know Him

It was an extremely successful event, this first pair of Thursday-Friday performances of the Philharmonic Orchestra at the roomy, comfortably equipped and acoustically well shaped Pantages Theater. Ticket seekers were turned away for days, and those who had been wise enough to become subscribers, if they were not moved by what they heard, were impressed and made to talk music, Stokowski and Philharmonic Orchestra. It was a complete Stokowski success stirring and bestirring.

The status of Stokowski as a conductor is beyond debate. Those who do not enjoy some of his gestures by which he seems to claw sound out of his ensemble, simply do not like them and are invited to close their eyes. Quite often a conductor does not like the looks or attitude of an audience.

The orchestra, increased to 100 players, the brass lined up on the left and right, the wood winds in V-shape seated in front of blocks of strings which were braced by a cross-stage phalanx of 10 double basses, sounded magnificently quite often, not seldom tense and muddled on more than one occasion. Stokowski makes a great point of seating his players in an open square, the brass and percussion never smashing directly at the audience.

Frequently one was fascinated by the sheer beauty and blend of sound; at other times, one was made aware as much as ever of sectional location of instruments. It is a re-seating which had its virtues and those virtues, especially that of putting the strings in the rear, depended of course on the stage enclosure. At the Pantages, the "shell" is constructed of solid wood (pleasant on the eye in its dark blue), and, of course, the resonance is far better than that of the battered canvas enclosure, unpleasantly bright to see and tempting orchestras to blare, when actually they should sound rich of quality as well as of volume of sound.

Not Really Profound

I did not have the feeling that Stokowski was in a profound mood or that he fetched up deep readings. The G-minor organ fugue of Bach, played by itself, passes by too quickly to create its due impression on a night such as this. The fifth symphony of Beethoven proved and disproved some of the Stokowski contentions of orchestral re-seating. The forward wind-instruments sounded well. The brass, too, sounded well and on occasion broke in with too prominent goldenness of color. The strings were benefited most. They were the chief gainers seated farthest back in this cone of a sound-reflector, but it was evident that they strained for volume.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's appearance as soloist in his famous C-minor piano concerto topped even the general sensation-stiffened atmosphere of the concert. It was sovereign playing of a lastingly beautiful concerto. Then came Stokowski's piece of orchestral pyrotechnics in Stravinsky's "Fire Bird" suite, and it abounded in superb effects, some of which one never heard before in this score. It was a stirring performance.

Everyone bestirred himself to a point when all the lights of sound were blazing, dimming, winking, radiating. And with it all, in all its excitement, this performance, too, was limited by an undertone of the soberly calculated. The bestirring Mr. Stokowski has directed performances which were more stirringly imaginative.

Stokowski in Pasadena