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A NEW RUSSIA

RACHMANINOFF AS PIANIST AND COMPOSER

His Playing Yesterday of Familiar and Unfamiliar Music of His Own—His Admirable Qualities as a Pianist—Music That Was More German Than Russian—"Rigoletto" at the Boston Opera—Miss Farrar to Appear as Tosca—The Return of the Symphony Orchestra

It must be a dozen years since the concert halls and the practice-rooms of the country began to resound to the sonorous periods of a prelude in a large and grandiose style. It figured alike in the repertories of virtuosi and on the programmes of Conservatory graduates. It has met with hard usage in its decade, and yet by some vitality of its melody or some haunt of its romantic theme, it has always survived the ordeal. Played by the composer yesterday afternoon in Symphony Hall, Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor emerged with something the brightness of knightly armor, keeping its polish by wear and buffets.

The company which greeted Mr. Rachmaninoff was frankly summoned by an eager curiosity as much in the personality of the man as in his work as a composer, and his individual style as a performer of his own compositions. They came, the players, the artists, the students, the amateurs, to satisfy their eyes as well as their ears. They were rewarded. Visually, by a figure which approached audience and instrument with a diffidence that suggested scholarship out of its native library, a figure which was spare and tall whether standing, bowing, or sitting at the keyboard. At the instrument there were no graces, no concessions to the tradition of fine frenzy; but only a bending of rather Mephistophelian brows, and passionate absorption in the task. Aurally what greeted the gathering was a voice of the pianoforte more incisive than deep, that imbled to emotion more by its sense than its sound, that was always clear but never very brightly colored. It never failed to "sound," never failed to go rolling the length of the hall in undiminished sonority, but it had at no time the herculean resonance of such another of the younger Russians as Lehvinne.

The definition is important since it furnishes the scale by which to measure the whole performance, which was, throughout, that of a composer turned pianist. And Alexander Pope's excursion into philosophy furnishes, in reverse, the analogy. A wit of the period said the poet "thought in order to be able to write." Frequently, composers write in order to be able to play. Mr. Rachmaninoff plays because he has composed.

Of the fruits of that work there stood on yesterday's programme a sonata, in G minor, Opus 28, a group of four preludes (the one in C-sharp minor concluding the performance), a Melodie, a Humoresque, a Barcarolle and Polichinell. Steadily, then, from the declamatory measures which open the sonata to the quietude at the end of the final prelude, came the revelation of a quality in all these pieces that may be stated with mathematical exactitude. Mr. Rachmaninoff's gift of melody is in exact proportion to the speed of the tempo. Let the pace be deliberate, we lose the melody precisely as a sail in light air loses steerage way. In bravura passages, with the bow breasting white-crested rollers, dashing spray mast high and standing up to the stiff blow "gallantly firm in commotion," the melody rolls forth with the throb and exultation felt by the hardy helmsman. It was rarely that the pieces sang, so to say, with one finger. They never once failed to sing when given ten. So insistent is this trait that Mr. Rachmaninoff's melodies keep turning up in the most unexpected quarters, eluding the single steed he would have them bestride, to go driving a chariot and four in something designed to serve as mere embellishment. Accompaniment rebelliously turns theme, and theme accompaniment. Nowhere was this more conspicuous than in the Melodie. During measures which were indulging in rather wire-drawn distinctions sounded, on a sudden, from a hand lightly brushing the treble of the instrument, the soft indrawn sighs that respond to a caress. There, on the instant, gleamed the melody, the yearning and the poetry. The movement ceased, and as swiftly they faded.

But by just so much as Mr. Rachmaninoff's lento is arid of melody, in his allegro it flows and pours in abundance. Loose the reins on the backs of the four, shake out the long lash, give them their heads, and listen to the harmonious thunder of the chariot wheels, every flying hoof striking out sparks of melody, rhythm in the long leaps of the four, and in the ear the song of the wind. Such is the bravura which Mr. Rachmaninoff writes and plays, as if the glow of composition quickened his invention to melody. In such wise came the sonata, alternating its pompous recitative with jubilations from resonant bass to thrilling treble in the first movement, dragging its weary length of wounded Brahms along in the lento, in the final allegro springing to new life under the magic touch of a quick rhythm. Its glorious theme, coming in quick gusts, passing before dissonances in the bass, to come again, made the instruments sing with a dozen throats. So with all his impetuous piano figures—open the cage door of their tempi and they sing themselves. They wind their melodies as naturally as a skilfully thrown whiplash winds to the final snap. And the spinning little tunes of the Humoresque and Polichinell had their snap. Here, again, in the Humoresque spoke the dazzling treble which Rachmaninoff, the composer, summons and Rachmaninoff, the pianist, commands. It rang its silvery gongs till they buzzed in the eardrum—not with the shrillness of Liszt, but with a cry of separate voices blending into a shock of bell notes.

This group of short pieces, especially the Barcarolle and Polichinell, revealed Mr. Rachmaninoff cutting free from the bonds of the formal ending. Here worthily he wears the badge of leadership. The ultra modern symphonic writers will die content if they can end a season of troubled modulation with a strong C-major close. Mr. Rachmaninoff, not worrying about "the C-major of this life" stops, very rationally but quite unlyaely, at the end. There is no groping for the chords of a final periphrasis; no formal "Q. E. D." not even a "thus it was"; but the simple end of the sentence, and a period. Or, in a bolder vein, a string of dots . . . Thus in the Barcarolle, faint concluding chords in two quaint modulations were as someone thinking aloud just ceasing to speak. Hardly a joint was felt in the smooth transition from sound to silence.

The prelude, it has been said, emerged unscathed from the ordeal by Conservatory. It came from the composer's hands robed in sombre splendors, with grave deliberation of its opening chords, with firm emphasis on the melody of its flowing rhythm midway in the piece, and with a down dropping of concluding phrases like a series of the afterthoughts which follow weighty discourse. Hardly the swashbuckling prelude on which we have been brought up—sword and cape exchanged for a volume of old romance in a lonely orie, lighted in the sober hues of contemplation.

The company which heard the Rachmaninoff of yesterday's programme will wait with impatience for the Rachmaninoff of the piano concerto. For the moral of the afternoon was, quite legibly, that the composer who invents so naturally those melodious sonorities in piano figures, is the composer to work in the concerto form. If this was hinted in the preludes and the Humoresque, it was openly declared in the sonata. Its finale is a concerto sitting with back bent and limbs cramped in the narrow limits of the sonata form. Those meagre legato passages, hard to place in relation to the rest of the movement, are the interludes, intelligible, even pleasing in contrast, when given to strings and a wind choir. Those passages of tumbling bravura would draw a deeper breath backed by an orchestra singing the principal themes. What was heard yesterday afternoon was the Allegro vivace of a sonata. Its rudimentary largeness, its grandeur made one wish for a knife to cut the thongs which bound it into sonata form. It was a manacled concerto.

L. T.

News of the Day

According to present purposes, Verdi's "Rigoletto" will be sung at the Boston Opera House next Monday night, with Mr. Baklanoff as the jester, a part in which he should be interesting; Mr. Constantino as the Duke; Mr. Nivette as the outlaw, Sparafucile; and Miss Alda of the Metropolitan Opera House as Gilda, for her first appearance here. Again, according to the advertisements, Miss Kirsten, a débutante, has been withdrawn from the cast of "Cavalleria Rusticana" on Saturday afternoon, and Mme. Bonnisegna substituted for her.

Word comes to us that the scenery for "La Bohème" and "Lakmé," at the Boston Opera, was "designed, painted and lighted" by Mr. H. Logan Reid, one of the most skilful and imaginative of American scene-painters, as for years his work has proved him. Since warm praise has been written in this and many another column of the settings of "Lakmé" and "La Bohème," there is the more reason that Mr. Reid should have, and explicitly, the just and high reward of his work. Had the programme at the Opera House been more specific, we should have been more specific too. As it is, it is a pleasure to know that Mr. Reid has other work in hand for the stage of the Boston Opera.

In Baltimore on Friday and at the Metropolitan Opera House next Monday Miss Farrar will make her first appearances in a part in which she has long been ambitious and which she has studied eagerly—Floria Tosca in Puccini's "Tosca." Now, seemingly, she has more than ever before the physical vitality and the broadening style that the part demands alike on its musical and histrionic sides.

Mr. Campanini, the conductor, who set and maintained the standards of the Manhattan Opera House for three years, and whose work stirred his audiences to admiration here in Boston last spring, is to be the chief conductor and the general organizer of the new opera in Chicago. He remains through the winter at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples, to which he passed from the Manhattan. Then, first in Europe and next in Chicago, he will take up his work for the new opera house. A fitter man, alike in knowledge, experience and industry, in the quality of his standards and in fine loyalty to them, it would be hard to find.

The Symphony Orchestra, after an incidental concert in Hartford on Monday, returned to Boston yesterday after the first of its monthly visits to New York and other cities to the southward. In New York, in particular, the orchestra was warmly received alike by its audiences, which were more numerous than ever and of exceptional quality, and by the reviewers who were quick to discover the new qualities in Mr. Fiedler by which he has become a more refined, sensitive and discerning conductor and by which he is now maintaining and enhancing the excellence of the band. The Times, for example, says: "The Boston Symphony Orchestra has rarely played better, with more brilliancy, delicacy, richness and variety of color, more transparent clarity, more perfect suppleness under the hand of its conductor, than it did yesterday afternoon at its second concert in Carnegie Hall. To hear such playing was a transporting delight. Mr. Fiedler has earned the gratitude of everybody who appreciates such a performance for demonstrating, at the beginning of his second season with this extraordinary organization, that he has kept it to its highest level of efficiency; and there is none higher anywhere in the world—perhaps even none other so high."

In the course of the winter, Brahms's double concerto for violin, violoncello and orchestra will be revived at the Symphony Concerts, with Mr. Hess and Mr. Schroeder to play the solo parts.

The New Theatre in New York had its first test as a concert-room on Sunday, when Mr. Damrosch and his orchestra began a series of concerts there. Inevitably curiosity ran highest as to the suitability of the house for music. The general impression seems to be that which Mr. Henderson records in the Sun: "The New Theatre stage," he writes, "is deep in proportion to its width and this was accentuated by the addition for this concert of a removable platform in front of the stage proper, covering the space usually devoted to the sunken orchestra pit. This platform, which extended along the entire width of the stage from just in front of the proscenium arch, was itself deep enough to hold comfortably two rows of violinists, and at its centre was the conductor's stand and a space for the soloist. The stage yesterday was set to represent a lofty hall, opening at the back upon a balustrade and terrace and upheld on either side by gilded columns and marble walls, repeating the architectural motives and coloring of the auditorium and attaining a handsome and dignified effect. The sides of the stage were closed in by the scenic panels so as to prevent the diffusion of sound in the wings.

So far as the concert indicated—and the programme contained no music of rich modern coloring—the acoustic qualities of the building for orchestral music appeared not to favor great brilliancy of tone. The general effect, especially of the heavier string tones, in comparison with what listeners have become accustomed to in Carnegie Hall, was slightly veiled. From the orchestra floor of the auditorium already there was too palpable an atmospheric cloak over much of the music. This was less noticeable in the upper parts of the building, the sounds being materially more incisive when heard from the balcony and the second balcony."

"DARE-DEVIL" JOCKEYS

[From Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News]

Absolute "dare-devilness" often wins races—riding for a fall, lifting a horse over the last fence when he is blundering at them, and so on. It is frequently suggested of jockeys who have lost some of the dash (or recklessness) that they have lost their nerve. This is hardly a fair conclusion.

No one has ever suspected that Mrs. Kate Douglas Wiggin's stories were dramatic; but last night in Springfield a pretty little idyllic piece made by Charlotte Thompson from "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" came to the stage for the first time. The telegrams do not give much account of it, beyond its keeping of some of the familiar episodes of the book, like the party with the stage driver, the picnic, the soap sale, and the flag-raising. By all reports the piece made a pleasant impression.

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