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THE SYMPHONY CONCERT

MR. RACHMANINOFF FOR UNIQUE IMPRESSION

His Fine Poise and Grave Sincerity—His Double Function as Conductor and Pianist—The Musician That Was Uppermost in Both—His Concerto and His Playing of It—His Tone-Poem of "The Isle of the Dead"—Its Pictorial Atmosphere and Poignant Suggestion — The Suggestion in the Man of His Music

For the first time, yesterday afternoon, since Mr. d'Indy paid his visit to Boston four years ago, a conductor other than its own and outside its own ranks led the Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Hess and Mr. Wendling had their turn when Dr. Muck fell ill, and Mr. Strube has conducted in his own pieces. Otherwise, until Mr. Rachmaninoff came yesterday, no leader has stood for the moment in Dr. Muck's or Mr. Fiedler's place. Mr. Rachmaninoff is a composer, but he does not conduct in most composers' blind and errant fashion. He has had, it seems, his experience in Russian opera houses and in orchestral concerts in Germany, too. Still less does he conduct like a virtuoso conductor, expressly summoned to exhibit his methods, his "readings" and his temperament. Mr. Rachmaninoff's pose was quiet and self-contained; his gestures were sparing and unemphatic; they tempered oftener than they enforced; there was nothing graphic in his ways; but he clearly imposed his will upon his band. And it was the will of an expert, discerning, imaginative, unobtrusively commanding musician. From their first encounter with him, the men had respected Mr. Rachmaninoff's abilities; quickly they came to like him; they did their best for him and his music; and he, like Mr. d'Indy before him, will probably go back to Germany and Russia to tell how expert and responsive instrument the Boston orchestra can be. He impressed his audience as favorably. Since Mr. Rachmaninoff is a Russian by race, if a German by residence in recent years, some in it expected an exotic presence. They saw instead a very tall figure, long of leg, neither slender nor thick of body, with slightly stooping shoulders, a largish head, a smooth, oval face, grave of expression and lighted by gravely contemplative eyes—a figure that might have come almost as plausibly out of New England as out of Russia.

Mr. Rachmaninoff's bearing had not an "effect" in it. He seemed wholly sincere in his unconsciousness of himself, in his quiet absorption in the work before him. He came, with equal poise, to conduct in his own tone-poem and to play the piano part in his own concerto. With equal gravity, he acknowledged welcoming and rewarding applause. The whole impression was of a rare personal reticence, of a man sincere with himself and with all men and things else. There was need only of the quick-coming spur of the music to divine the fine intellectual and imaginative fibre underneath. The gravity of Mr. Rachmaninoff's music is in his presence; its quiet accomplishment of its deliberate ends speaks in his bearing. The quiet of its coloring, the reflection that shapes it, the deep but unemphatic moods of it are in his personal presence. It is as sincere as he. It is long since so stilte a personality has so impressed an audience at the Symphony concerts. That it should do so was finely creditable to its instinctive discernment, and the unusually hearty and reiterated applause that followed the end of the tone-poem and the end of the concerto was surely for the man as well as for the composer, the conductor, and the virtuoso. If a few in the second balcony were clamoring vainly for his hackneyed prelude, no one else thought of it in the newer and the larger aspects of the composer.

The concerts in which Mr. Rachmaninoff palyed the piano part was his own in C-minor, the tone-poem, in which he conducted was his own "Isle of the Dead" to—as the title runs—Boecklin's like-named picture. The concerto, though it has been played elsewhere in America and with the Symphony Orchestra was new to Boston, and only Chicago of other American cities, had previously heard "The Isle of the Dead." Of Mr. Rachmaninoff as a conductor enough, for the time, has been said. He was no less the musician when he turned pianist. A virtuoso he surely is by right of technical resource and the expert employment of it; but in all else he is the antipodes of a virtuoso. He left his hearers without thought of such skill for the skill's sake or rather for the sake of display of it. He did not bid the audience heed the individuality and the temperament of his reading. Still less was he the composer displaying himself, and making double effect since he was a conductor withal. He was the musician who sank himself in the playing of the music before him—music that he understood the better and the expressive each of which he gained the more fully and pervasively because he himself had written it. Always his tone had an exceeding felicity, whether it marched in broad progressiveness, sang immoving and melancholy wise, figured a cadenza in the mood of quiet and contemplative play with tonal fancies, whether it became as one with the softer voices of the orchestra or marshalled the whole choir with its own. It was tone that never turned strident, nor hot, nor brilliant. It kept always its crystalline quality, its fine clear, cool shadings its intimate suggestion even with a great orchestra in a great concert-room.

It is already the custom to speak of Mr. Rachmaninoff's concerts as virtuoso pieces, because he was a practicing pianist before he was a composer. Other pianists may indeed make them such. As he himself played this second concerto, it seemed rather a piece of gravely meditated and reflectively written music for its own sake in which the piano had its place, not for the display of itself or of the pianist, but for fitter voice to his ideas and imaginings. Rather, it is absolute music in the true sense of the words, because the musical ideas whence it springs touch the imagination in themselves and being endued pleasure, while in the evolution and the play of them there is continuing resource, continuously, invention and fancy. Mr. Rachmaninoff accomplishes these things indeed reflectively, but with reflection that in its sober depth of mood becomes emotion. His melodic ideas are not of a dried and evaporated Brahms, as some of his detractors will have it, but of the true vein of the contemplative and melancholy Slav. His own moods and mods and their own suggestions play upon them to give them more large and telling but always composed force, to turn them soberly songful, to touch them here and there with a quick fight fire. The listener hears for the pleasure and the beauty of sound, now tinted with thought, now vigorous with power, now warm and supple with emotion. He hears and enjoys as gravely, as sincerely as Mr. Rachmaninoff wrote. It is music of a temperament that is rare in the strenuous fashion and impulses of music nowadays. It has caught an impulse of its days. It has caught the action, the detachment of Brahms and added to them the Slav intensity of feeling even when the particular Slav has masked and tempered it.

"The Isle of the Dead," at a single hearing, at once baffled, interested and impressed. Mr. Rachmaninoff has worked long upon it; he is not sure even now that he imparts the mode that Boecklin's picture kindled in him and the suggestions that it brought to his imagination. The length and the minuteness of his labors upon it has made it music of very fine and adroit shadings and often of very finely subdued and poignant voice. The little waves of a still sea lap the low rocks on the steep, bare cliffs of "Boecklin's Isle. A faint, still wind stirs in the tops of his thick cypresses. The air all about the isle is still, yet when it stirs plaintive voices or the phantoms of voice sound faintly in it. These sounds, this air make the atmosphere of Boecklin's picture; they were perhaps the essence of its grave suggestion to Mr. Rachmaninoff's grave spirit. He has sought in his music to give these sounds their shadowed, their phantom, their iterated quality. He holds the voices of his orchestra low; the music moves to subdued rhythms; the harmonic background is of tenest wan; the voice of the music seems very faint and far. Yet the lip of still sea and the rustle of the cypresses is not quite changeless, and the plaintive voice of what Prospero would have called the spirits of the isle stirs out of changeful shadows among them. The voice is oftenest the poignant voice of longing, a plaint as of souls that are restless—that know not either the joys of Elysian fields nor yet the pains of an under and torturing world.

They are in the ish of the dead, yet the memory of the life behind, of the pleasures and pangs still haunts them. The old existence, in phantoms as shadowy as themselves still vexes them. Perhaps it is out of such imaginative scheme that Mr. Rachmaninoff has wrought his tone-poem. The beginning is surely of the isle, the sea, the cypresses, the stillness. The plaintive phantom voices stir in the pale air and light; they turn poignant with the memories of earth, with the pleasure and the pain behind, the state of things remembered that were dear though they hurt. The voices rise an outfry. Yet here grief and longing must turn slowly. The voices fall and are still, and again the sea laps the cliffs and the cypresses quiver, and there is footfall of new souls at the gates, and in the wan and changeless light, the wan and the changeless air, the music end. Perhaps it is idle and futile fancy so to make Mr. Rachmaninoff a "programme" for a tone-poem in which he has been content with a title. Yet, time again yesterday, his own music, and in its substance and its mood and above all in its instrumental coloring seemed to infuse it. As we wrote in absorbed and deeply touched mood to fine issues, so may his hearers dare and try to listen to him.

H. T. P.

"IL TROVATORE" AGAIN

A Revival That Was Pictorially Set, and in Which the Chorus Became as "Principals"—The Chief Singers and Their Qualities—Italian Ardors, Tempered by Vocal Shortcomings and the Lapsing Years

Nowadays, nobody takes "Il Trovatore" for much more than an energetic and popular concert in costume, with occasional histrionic, and semi-occasional scenic, decorations. In its palmiest days few could ever untangle the drama that Verdi was theoretically clothing with his music, and sensitive and foreboding spirits have suspected that, once penetrated, it would prove as sombre and terrific as the dramatic skeleton upon which Rossini has hung the lively tunes of "Semiramide." Few, either, thought of Manrico, Azucena, Leonora and the moaning Count of Luna as any more than costumed voices—the more agreeable if romantic and pictorial presence happened to go with them, and when some presuming singer, like Mme. Homer with the gypsy, has dared to try to characterize one or another of them in her tones and action, the labor and a good artistic conscience have usually been the only general reward of her pains. Custom and themselves, and the ways of at least three generations of operatic singers have fixed the personages of "Il Trovatore" as so many "fat tunes." Manrico stands for "Mal Reggendo," "Ah! Si ben Mio," and "Di Quella Pira"; the count for "Il Balen"; Azucena for "Stride la Vampa" and the duet of the prison scene; Leonora for black velvet, and her share in the scene of the Miserere. Thus and again, too, the chorus has its rich inning, and becomes for the moment even as are the "principals."

The emotions of Verdi's opera and of its personages are the emotions of its melodies and of the fashion in which they are sung. The singers may sing them as do Mr. Slezak or Mr. Caruso, Mme. Homer or Mme. Nordica in her prime; they may sing them in the conventional Italian fashion, with colors and vocal artistry that had their limitations, as they were sung at the Boston Opera House last night; they may sing them in far worse fashion, as they have been sung more than once in this town; but their melodic power, the impinging force, the everlasting and universal tang of Italian operatic song when there is such a vitality as Verdi's behind it, survives any and all handling. The youngest and the most contemptuous of "ultra-moderns" listeners forgets his beloved declamation and may not hide his emotion when Manrico's voice behind the grated window of the castle swells into "Ah! Che la Morte," and his rhythmic instincts will answer spontaneously to what he tries to call the jigging orchestral introductions to nearly every tune. One condition only is imperative—there must be ardor in all the singing. Each singer must sing the music as though he believed in the bill in it. Fortunately most Italian singers do, and then do the gray heads and gray beards that dotted the house last night have their olden joys, and then do the youngsters forget the smart speeches that they were preparing to use in the intermissions for the pleasure of their "ultra-moderns" brethren and for their own.

It was almost a council of perfection for the Boston Opera to mount "Il Trovatore" as becomingly as they did last night. For once, and for a rare once, the scenery that framed Verdi's opera had general illusion brought even its particular atmosphere of cloister and castle court. It was not, however, a council of perfection to train the chorus to such full-voiced, animated, accurate and expressive song, as it brought to every one of its numbers; while the women added vocal finesse, besides, in the scene of the cloister and the men had their touch of it in the song of the camp. True, the chorus sometimes needed the prompter's heartening voice, but otherwise, in the quality of the singing, it offenest excelled the "principals." It spoke—or rather it sang—for itself, and the electric sparks that it struck from the anvils, and the pageantry of horse, foot and supply wagons in the camp became but as rewarding decorations to its vocal prowess. As for those same principals, they sang with as much ardor as voices that were somewhat worn, occasionally unsteady, and often uncertain in intonation permitted them. Mr. Martin, for example, clearly "knows how," as his singing of "Ah! Si ben Mio," which is worth a dozen "Di Quella Pira" proved; but his tones in their present estate may not touch high C's or send them reverberating over an excited audience. Yet a voice that might once have brought its thrill and a skill that sometimes is still expert, flicker occasionally in his still ex-

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