

Russian Pianist Surprises Audience by Rare Performance

Rises to Highest Points in
Bells of Kremlin and
Liszt's Rhapsodie.

BY RICHARD SPAMER.

Firstly, the large audience at the Odeon last night was beholden to Sergel Rachmaninoff, the Russian pianistic genius, for a masterly rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner"; secondly, for a never before even approximately equaled presentation of Liszt's Twelfth Rhapsodie. The former precluded and the latter concluded the stated program.

Recurring to the national anthem, it is proper to say that after listening to several hundred perfunctory playings of America's best popular air, Rachmaninoff's manipulation of it on that scientifically responsive keyboard partook of the nature of a musical revelation. It's a grand old song the way he made the piano sing it; not only sing it, but almost articulate it. Here is where our visitor who does not know our native tongue showed not only his artistry but his musicianship. He eschewed our stentorian version, but by impromptu employment of counterpoint in the bass and broadly resonant chords in the treble, imparted to the chorale a truly spiritual power.

Probably to give his program the classic introduction, Rachmaninoff began with Mozart's Theme and Variations in A major; following this with the somewhat extensive Beethoven Sonata, opus 10, No. 3. Playing upon a strictly up-to-date concert grand piano of largest format, it behooved the artist to simulate short, sharp schellenbaum (or bell-tree) tinklings, so that we might hear the spinet tintinnabulations of Anno 1776-1825. Right here Rachmaninoff characterized entirely the very height and front of his pianistic art—he is not only the master of the keyboard, but he has a wizard-like staccato control, a touch which enables him to release the keys within a fraction of an instant after striking them. Those in last night's audience (made up largely of professional musicians and inveterate concert-goers) will recall another wizard, Leopold Godowsky's, achievements in staccato. Not for either disparagement or comparison, but merely to state a fact, audible to trained ears, Godowsky's most precise staccato was soft and mumbling as against rippling, glittering touch-and-let-go style of Rachmaninoff's. Neither is there any mystery about the production of this wonderful effect. The amazing Russian, tall and spare of body and thin and long of limb, plants himself angularly on a low chair, braces his knees under the instrument with a wedging motion, digs his heels close to the pedal, giving his feet just room enough to work in, and thus cantilevered, as it were, is enabled to impart muscular rigidity to his forearms and yet leave his fingers flexible and free. Enfin, as we say in French, unless one is built like Rachmaninoff nothing like the production of the Rachmaninoff staccato is possible. He has the perfect physical alignment to the chief percussional instrument, and this is most of his good fortune and 99 per cent of his art.

In the three Chopin numbers, the C-sharp minor Nocturne, the A-flat Valse and the C-minor Polonaise, we had further examples of the artist's penchant for staccato. The Valse was played with a crispness and distinctness that would rival the best of the imported Swiss spieldosen or music boxes of tonal commerce.

After these numbers the audience got into a breathless state while awaiting the Rachmaninoff tour de force, the world-renowned and student hackneyed Prelude in C-sharp minor, that apothecosis of the Bells of the Kremlin at Moscow. The visitor's vision of many years ago was made apparent to the understanding of last night's audience when he gave us that startling piece of work. It is indeed a prelude to the dire combustion and confused events thick-hatched upon a woeeful time that now engulf his beloved homeland. No wonder men and women in all sections of the auditorium arose and cheered when the last solemn measure of that turbulent composition had died away.