

Music

Rachmaninoff's Concert of Pianoforte Music

By H. E. Krehbiel

Frivolity is not as rampant in the concert rooms of New York as are affectation and arrogance. That is one thing which makes even poor recitals at least halfway tolerable. The music cannot all be silly. Nor is a recital hall a place for touch-and-go jocularity. Even those who affect to discourse music without a worthier incentive than the gratification of self-conceit cannot plead that the world is mad and wants to be deluded (as Schick-aneder is made to sing in "The Impresario") or that flippancy ought to enter into the treatment of all things from the laws of creation to the lawlessness of chaos. And so every concert program invites some seriousness of thought to a music lover. But he is a brave man who will venture to open a concert with Beethoven's Sonata in D minor (Op. 31, No. 2) and Mendelssohn's "Rondo Capriccioso" in a cityful of pianoforte students who think that pieces technically less difficult than Liszt's transcendental studies or less comprehensible than the lucubrations, if they are that, of mountebank pretenders to creatorship are beneath the dignity of their attention.

Yet that is what Mr. Rachmaninoff did yesterday, and he followed the compositions which conservatory kiddings smile at contemptuously with some of the most familiar pieces by Chopin—the E-flat minor Polonaise, F minor Ballade, A-flat Impromptu, D-flat Waltz and B flat minor Scherzo. He did what he did because he is an artist and a musician, not a mere virtuoso. He did not flagrantly make proclamation of this fact. He insinuated it into the consciousness of his great houseful of listeners. He did not even make parade, as even some truly great players do, that he was striving to keep himself in the background so that the composer might come to the fore. He simply re-created their music made it a vital proclamation by merging himself in it, effaced all of the performer except that which was essential in order that the music might be heard.

When he played Beethoven the style was that of the musician who thought more of the music than of the instrument which gave it voice. When he played Chopin his hearers felt the newer idiom which had come in with the composer who thought as much of the sensuous charm inherent in the tone of the pianoforte as he did of the beauty of the musical idea. The Polonaise was rhapsodic, varied, full of picturesqueness. The Sonata told of the ideal struggle which forms the psychological program of so many of Beethoven's compositions in which the tragedy of human existence is played in the heart and not in the external world. The struggle was not dynamically stressed. It was reflected in the moody questioning of the opening motive contrasted with the impetuous protest of the principal theme of the allegro.

New developments, new significances came with every iteration of the phrases. It was marvellous to hear how many voices sang the song of resignation which is the slow movement—emerging out of the harmonies, distributing light or deepening the sweet melancholy. There was not a motive which was not woven into the fabric. The little figure which opens the Adagio, when once the song was begun, did not sound like a query or an answer, but like a gracious efflorescence, unfolding its petals over the melody—stealing and giving odor. The performance was more than a lesson in interpretation because an interpretative purpose was never apparent. Here was music for music's sake, and an afternoon of lofty pleasure.