

RACHMANINOFF, PIANIST, SWAYS LARGE AUDIENCE

BY O. B. KEELER

Sergei Rachmaninoff, greatest of all living Russian pianists and composers, laid his hand powerfully upon a worthy audience Wednesday evening at the auditorium; and for two hours held his hearers in a mesmeric grip. It is a fair question which is the more amazing—his command over his audience, or over the instrument on which he works his charms. And when it comes to sheer command of the piano, you would not be surprised—having fallen under his spell—to see him pick up the ponderous "grand" and tuck it under his chin and play it like a violin.

The loosely used term "color" must here be hauled out again; for what else can be applied to the warm and scintillant rush of notes from beneath his fingers? Possibly the greatest of all masters of the "stinging touch," there is something in a typical Rachmaninoff rendition that goes beyond the auditory sense alone and touches the visual centers with the curious charm of a Corot landscape—a thing that causes the eyes to sting, you know not why.

The man himself is an odd assemblage of contradictions. Tall and spare and loose-jointed, his figure is almost ungainly, with its scholarly stoop of the shoulders. His expression is serious—even solemn; his concentration while playing is absolute. In his eyes is the same far-away expression you may see in the eyes of a chess-master when he is exerting his full powers of thought.

No tricks of manner—not the hint of an affectation; no gymnastics—not a wasted move at the piano. Yet the easy elegance of his style is ample evidence that here indeed is one of the few perfect human mechanisms.

In this perfect mechanism, too, lives the soul of a poet. Atlantians enjoyed a rare privilege in the opportunity to hear the Russian so closely following Rudolph Ganz, a superbly brilliant technician, with strongly contrasting tastes and method.

Rachmaninoff's program led off straight into deep water with Mendelssohn's Variations Serieuses, opus 54—well over the head of the average music-fancier. More than 2,500 persons were in the audience—and the spell reached them all. The attention was hypnotic through the whole web of intricate variations.

Rachmaninoff, an unconventionalist himself, showed his fondness for that most unconventional composer, Schumann, by playing his famous Carnival, opus 9—a prodigious work; a string of gems; twenty-three perfect little compositions; one-minute pictures of a European street carnival; a work that requires twenty-four minutes in the playing and ranges from the light flicker of butterfly wings to the Stygian chords of the Sphinx motive.

The Chopin group included two Etudes and a Scherzo, opus 21; the last-named displaying the pianist's incredible power, sharply contrasted with the infinite delicacy of the first Etude. His own prelude in G sharp minor, shot through with the tragic melancholy that seems basic with all great Russian music, probably was a revelation to the multitudinous amateurs who have struggled gallantly with the same composition.

In his final program number, the pianist yielded a bit to the lure of sheer pianistic fancy and played the Liszt transcription of the charming little waltz-air in Gounod's Faust. "Light as the Morning Air," the little waltz is called, and it occupies only two or three minutes of the opera; the daintiest, prettiest waltz in the world, perhaps. But when Mr. Liszt was done working on it—well, if you heard Rachmaninoff play it Wednesday night there's no need to explain further, and if you didn't, you missed something inexplicable. The greatest of all pianist of the old school, Liszt was unparing in his piano composition; if Rachmaninoff desired to show his technical skill in a light and graceful combination with his poetic fancy, he could hardly have made a better choice—certainly not a more popular one.

After the program was over, most of the large audience moved straight to the front and got as near the platform as possible, and applauded raptly until Rachmaninoff, with never a break in the solemnity of his mien, played them three more perfect bits from his repertoire.

The recital was under the auspices of the Atlanta Music Study club.