

MUSIC

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Recital.

By H. C. COLLES.

There is apparently an unwritten law that the giver of a Sunday afternoon recital no matter how high his personal prestige may stand, must not test the concentration of his audience too severely. Mr. Rachmaninoff acknowledged it at the beginning of his recital yesterday by playing only three movements of Bach's "English Suite" (op. 2 in A minor) instead of the whole. This illustrated another unwritten law, namely, that it is legitimate to play selected movements from a Bach suite but not from a Beethoven sonata; yet Bach's suites are in reality quite as much consistent wholes as at any rate the earlier Beethoven sonatas.

It would have been good to hear the whole of this suite which Mr. Rachmaninoff plays beautifully, and there seemed to be no reason why he should submit to any of the unwritten laws, all of which are unthinking conventions, of the concert room. He had Carnegie Hall packed with people ready to hear whatever he gave them. He might have used his privileged position to give them the chance of enjoying Bach's work whole.

Mendelssohn's "Variations Sérieuses," some Chopin, Liszt and his own attractive pieces made up the remainder of the scheme. Mr. Rachmaninoff composes like a pianist and plays the piano like a composer. The latter is sometimes said of composer-pianists by way of excuse for technical shortcomings. It does not imply that in his case, for he is one of the most finished technicians of his generation. It means, however, that he plays other men's music, whether the other man is Bach or Mendelssohn or Chopin, primarily to show what he finds in it, to recreate it through his own mind. The unexpected therefore happens.

He dwelt on the chromaticism of Mendelssohn in a way to give it more than usual importance. One forgot how many of these variations are mere decorations round, rather than developments of, the melody, because of the earnestness he imparted to the decorative details. He lingered over the trio of Chopin's scherzo in C sharp minor and risked breaking its continuity by doing so, but in the end seemed to justify himself by making the whole more than the brilliant show piece it is in the hands of less creative pianists.

His own piano pieces on the other hand are almost always based on some special problem of piano technique which he solves perfectly, both in the composition and performance. His manual control is in itself fascinating.

In his official program he gave two études (B minor and G minor) and followed them with his transcription of Moussorgsky's "Hopak," which he had to repeat. Probably the unofficial program contained many more, for his audience seemed determined to get from him all he could be persuaded to give.

International Composers' Guild.

The success of the entertainment which the International Composers' Guild gave at the Vanderbilt Theatre last night was proved by the fact that at quite an early stage every one became lighthearted and some became lightheaded. Even staid newspaper reviewers had cast care aside before the second part, in which Mr. Stokowski conducted the music to Stravinsky's burlesque on Russian folk tales, and had been heard joining in the demand for a repetition of Arnold Schönberg's "Herzegewachse." When newspaper reviewers call "encore" it is a sure sign that the temperature has been raised above the normal of the ordinary concert room.

It did not happen quite at once. While Miss Eva Leoni was wandering vaguely through some songs by Maurice Delage in a voice which reminded one of a certain peculiar whistle with a wobble in it used by jazz bands, there was just a fear that this performance might have to be taken seriously; that it might be necessary to say exactly what one thought of it all. But Mr. Claudio Arrau and a piano saved the situation and banished that dismal sinking feeling which so many concerts of the very latest in music produce.

He plunged at once into a set of pieces called "Syntheses," by Arthur Lourié,

who, the program notes, informed us was lately head of a music commission organized by the Soviet Government of Russia. In them all notes are equal, none is dependent on another or related to its neighbors. No doubt this is the logical outcome of the well-tempered clavier. Who shall say that an augmented fourth is more dissonant than a major third when both are out of tune, as they necessarily are on the piano. So Arthur Lourié writes notes, notes and more notes, some quick, some slow, some in handfuls, others scattered freely in cascades. They leap and tumble from one end of the piano to another while we wonder how Mr. Arrau can remember them all and whether he does.

At any rate there is nothing to criticize, nothing to express any opinion about. It is quite good fun while it lasts, and it does not last long. After it came two movements by Hindemith, one a march in a sort of Schubert-cum-Sullivan rhythm, but redeemed from too much obviousness by its blessed "wrong notes," the other a "Nachtstück" with an altogether uncontemporary touch of sentimentality which we had to get past quickly if we were not to find ourselves once more in the realms of ordinary music.

Bela Bartók's "Improvisations" on some simple folksongs of his country brought us back from the dangerous tendency toward reflection which no German composer can be relied on to avoid. Of course we all know now that Hungarian music has nothing to do with the rhapsodies of Liszt or the Dances of Brahms, but is the soul of a people suppressed until Bela Bartók taught it to gyrate on a piano.

Thus Mr. Arrau tactfully led up to Schönberg's "Herzegewachse" for soprano voice (Miss Leoni again), harp, harmonium and celesta, the piece which evoked so remarkable a demonstration. Possibly the demonstration was partly a tribute to the unique qualities of Miss Leoni's high notes in combination with the groan of the harmonium, the tinkle of the celesta and the twang of the harp. It recalled Gilbert's lines:

Strike the concertina's melancholy string,
Blow the soul-stirring harp like anything,)

which indeed might have made a more suitable text for Schönberg's muse than the gentle poem by Maeterlinck. After all, what has Maeterlinck done to deserve it? However, as in two hearings we never discovered whether Miss Leoni was singing in German or French, or even thought to try to catch a word, so irresponsible had the atmosphere become, it does not much matter about Maeterlinck. The repetition showed what pains Miss Leoni had taken to memorize it accurately. That evidently is her gift.

Finally the concert was wound up with Stravinsky's music to "Renard," in which Mr. Stokowski conducted a detachment of the Philadelphia orchestra, and the vocal parts representing the conversation of the cock, the fox, the cat and the goat were taken by José Delaquerrière, Harold Hansen, John Barclay and Hubert Linscott. Stravinsky is a conscious humorist, and that at once places him apart from the others.

This little ballet was produced at the Paris opera last year by the Diaghilev troupe and one can imagine what a delightful thing they would make of it. Stravinsky, whether he knows it or not, and if he knows he probably does not care, has a precedent for its style in Vecchi's sixteenth century music-drama, "Anfiarnasso," in which the parts mimed on the stage were sung by singers off it. Like Vecchi he does not keep one voice strictly to a part but uses his basses and tenors in conversation according to his convenience. They combine wonderfully with the instruments, reiterating those incisive rhythmical figures and breaking out into fragments of tune which he always uses so skillfully whenever he is writing for the ballet.

It is extraordinarily funny and musically exhilarating at the same time, and even without the stage its effects come off brilliantly. Mr. Stokowski with his singers and players achieved a wonderful ensemble and the audience made a vigorous effort to get them to repeat their success. When we left Mr. Stokowski was trying to refuse, but he may have relented.

English Trio Play at Matinee.

The English Trio, a new group in local chamber music, was heard yesterday at Aeolian Hall in a matinee program largely duplicating that of its début in London, where the Messrs. Melzak, Manucci and Krish have recently been identified as the Modern Trio in performance of works by living English composers. One of these was in the present list, that closed with the C-minor "Phantasia" of Frank Bridge. The pianist, Krish, dominated the Bohemian Dvorak's F-minor trio, also repeated from their season abroad, where the players' surnames had inspired a poem in Punch. They added from the modern French school a trio in A minor by Ropartz.