

"HELDENLEBEN" AT SYMPHONY CONCERT

Strauss Tone Poem Heard, in Vivid Performance

Richard Strauss' tone poem "Ein Heldenleben" was the chief number on yesterday's Symphony program. Koussevitzky's performance seemed quite as vivid in its way as that given here three years ago by Willem Mengelberg, to whom the music is dedicated, and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The Boston Symphony has not played this piece since 1910. It was coldly received yesterday by an audience not cordially disposed toward 20th century music.

Rachmaninoff, as soloist, gave a superb performance of his own second concerto, a performance almost eloquent enough to convince one that the music is a work of genius. The only other number on a curious and not too fortunately arranged program was Arnold Bax' "Garden of Fand," played here previously only by the Chicago Symphony, which again left little impression.

His enemies will have it that the "hero life" depicted in this tone poem "Ein Heldenleben" is that of Richard Strauss, a theory the copious quotations from Strauss' earlier music in the section describing the hero's experience of the world may or may not support. After all the scraps from "Don Juan," "Till Eulenspiegel," "Don Quixote," and so on, cleverly woven into the polyphonic texture of this tone poem may merely mean that every hero has love affairs, is a bit of a buffoon, and sometimes quixotic; and not that Strauss has these tone poems as trophies of heroism to display.

There is one fundamental and hopeless defect in "Ein Heldenleben," which not all Strauss' prodigious knack at every trick of the composer's trade can mask successfully—the themes are insignificant. Now there can be no great music which is not based upon one or more fine themes, bits of melody which have come to the composer by inspiration or perspiration. He may snatch these themes in full perfection out of the unknown sources of creative imagination. They may just "come to him" as we say. Or he may like Beethoven toil patiently over many revisions of his themes until what was in the first sketch a rather banal bit of tune becomes in about the seventh sketch a supreme creative achievement.

But every great composer in musical history has had this power to create melody as the first essential of his genius. Strauss has shown it in some of the themes in his earlier work, notably one in "Don Juan," and two in "Till," but his creative talent has always been puny compared to his musical craftsmanship.

"Heldenleben" is well made music of the school of Liszt and Berlioz, whose influence one feels strongly in it, more strongly than that of Wagner. But it is essentially mediocre.

Arnold Bax is an English composer nowadays taken with some seriousness by his countrymen, and even by some outside the British Isles. The three-tone poems, assorted songs, and piano pieces of his heard in Boston offer to the listener nothing beyond a pretty talent, wilful and undisciplined, for juggling chromatic harmonies, using bits of pseudo-Gaelic folk tunes and being "atmospheric" in the fashion of musical salons just before the war.

It seems preposterous to name Bax in the same breath with composers of real creative power, such as Holst and Elgar. The performance of "The Garden of Fand" was a bit heavy-handed, as though Koussevitzky were warping the fabric of the music in a vain search for profound emotionalism.

Rachmaninoff played his concerto better than one ever remembers hearing him play anything else. For once a listener who has never strongly admired the pianist felt that after all he is a performer to be numbered with the great. Koussevitzky's admirable leadership in the orchestral accompaniment notably aided the performance. There was prolonged enthusiasm on the part of the audience after the concerto, and also, to the obvious and justifiable displeasure of the pianist, between the movements of it. P. R.

BY HEROT ADWFO