

RACHMANINOFF IN PIANO RECITAL

Virtuoso Applauded by
Large Audience

Rachmaninoff's piano recital yesterday afternoon was applauded by an audience which filled Symphony Hall. Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata, Liszt's "After Reading Dante," a Chopin group, a Medtner "Fairy Tale," one of the pianist's own preludes, and one of Tausig's paraphrases of Strauss waltzes filled the program.

Altogether, outwardly impassive except when disturbed by late comers, the pianist looked his familiar self. His playing was in no way markedly different from what it has been at numerous previous Boston recitals. Everything that he did, was, as usual, rapturously applauded.

Rachmaninoff's interpretation of Beethoven's most popular sonata is a highly personal one. To him the famous adagio is seemingly a musical expression of utter despair and hopelessness, akin to the slow movement of Tchaikowsky's "Pathétique" symphony, though less hysterical in its outbursts of woe.

The artist did not succeed in making the other movement especially impressive. But here the fault was really Beethoven's. Heresy though it be to say so, the rest of the "Moonlight" sonata is inferior, not merely to the adagio, but to the general average of the early sonatas.

In the unfamiliar Liszt piece the pianist was at his best. A virtuoso of the Lisztian school now dying out rapidly, Rachmaninoff, with marvelous skill made the piano sound like a lesser orchestra. His splendid rhythmic sense and his musicianly grasp of the outlines of the piece lent clarity and dignity to music essentially bombastic.

Even a listener whom Rachmaninoff's playing has never stirred emotionally could not but admire wholeheartedly his playing of Liszt. His Chopin was played much as Liszt probably played it, in a heroic style suited to great halls and huge audiences. But Chopin, to some ears, sounds better played in a small hall by a pianist sensitive to the subtleties of tonal color that are the distinctive merit of the piano as a musical instrument.

There are few nuances in Rachmaninoff's playing. His tone is always hard and steely, often brittle. He can make the piano suggest the trumpets of a first-rate orchestra, but never captures for his instrument any of the mellowness of woodwind or strings. Too often in loud and rapid passages he drives the instrument so hard that all tonal beauty vanishes in a mere whirl and thud of sound.

That he is a first-rate musician is of course beyond question. But despite his often dazzling technique, one hesitates to call him a first-rate pianist. Perhaps it is fairest to say that he is among the leaders of a school of piano playing with which many musicians now under 40 do not find themselves in sympathy.

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