

MUSIC

SYMPHONY HALL

Boston Symphony Orchestra

The long-awaited visit of Sergei Rachmaninoff as soloist in his own Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini was brought to pass at the Boston Symphony concert yesterday afternoon. Nearly a year ago illness prevented the distinguished Russian pianist from introducing the work to Boston. So this admirable specimen of light symphonic music had to go unknown here for almost another twelvemonth.

Dr. Koussevitzky chose for the opening number on this week's program the D major Concerto for strings by Karl Philip Emmanuel Bach, which Maximilian Steinberg so cleverly set for small orchestra with wind instruments included. The final piece was Tchaikovsky's overwhelming Fifth Symphony.

Mr. Rachmaninoff indulged his sense of humor when writing his Rhapsody three years ago. Taking the same theme of Paganini that Brahms used for his formidable piano variations, Mr. Rachmaninoff employed it as the basis for 24 brilliant and displayful variations of his own. It is constructed with notable regard for symphonic style; the piano is bound closely to the orchestra, more so, in fact, than many a concerto for that instrument.

The Rhapsody might with justice be given some such fanciful name as "Kaleidoscope," for the mood and the character of the variations change capriciously. One variation is grotesque, another is a bit sinister; still another boils into a lyrical climax that recalls the slow movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Midway the composer has brought in—with delightful wit—an unusual harmonization of the traditional "Dies Irae." This same theme, uttered portentously by the whole orchestra, reappears toward the end of the last variation.

A first hearing suggested to one listener that no better light music has been introduced to the symphonic repertory in a long while. The solo part must be exceedingly difficult in many places, yet Mr. Rachmaninoff played with the sparkle of the music itself. The performance as a whole was superbly invigorating.

The Friday audience was plainly enchanted. Not only handclapping but a great deal of stamping brought Mr. Rachmaninoff back to the stage several times.

Once again Dr. Koussevitzky produced string sonorities of uncommon intensity in Steinberg's consummate arrangement of Bach's concerto. Many have remarked admiringly of the Boston strings, and well they may. Intensity is one thing, mellowness another. The Boston strings possess them both.

The passages for English horn in the slow movement benefited by Mr. Speyer's virtuoso treatment. Steinberg, by the way, was quite right to allot the part to English horn. With this instrument the music takes on an unmistakably antique quality.

Dr. Koussevitzky's tremendous reading of Tchaikovsky is now a familiar story. It could not, however, by custom become staled. In the case of Tchaikovsky, especially, Dr. Koussevitzky's ministrations are vitalizing almost to a creative extent. The music is "sung" and the passion, the emotional stress and ultimate triumph are magnified. No one else but Dr. Koussevitzky, in all probability, would think of so slight but effective a touch as drawing out the time value of the four notes that put so emphatic a conclusion to the E minor Symphony. Yet logic demands and emotion justifies it.

Next week the Helsinki University chorus from Finland will assist the orchestra in the first American performances of two choral scores by Sibelius: "The Origin of Fire" and "The Captive Queen." Dr. Koussevitzky will also conduct J. S. Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto, the Third Symphony of Brahms and Sibelius' "Finlandia." C. W. D.