

THE HALLÉ CONCERT

Symphony No. 103, in E flat major—
" Paukenwirbel " (Drum-Roll) Haydn
Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra,
No. 1, in C major Beethoven
Three Nocturnes—
(a) Nuages; (b) Fêtes; (c) Sirènes Debussy
Rhapsody (on a Theme of Paganini), Op. 43, for
Pianoforte and Orchestra Rachmaninoff

Last night Rachmaninoff was his usual haughty self at the pianoforte. He looked as unsmiling as the Sphinx, yet during a considerable part of his performance there rippled from his fingers the happiest strains imaginable. His set face and military deportment belied him, for in the quick movements of Beethoven's Concerto his playing kept a sparkle, a vivacity of expression, a gay lilting rhythm, an infectious, carefree exuberance of spirit that started all the winsome little figures in the music dancing as merrily as if they had joined a fairies' festival. And from beginning to end the touch was feathery and the tone light. In this early music of Beethoven the expression of youth is just as radiant as it is in the finest English lyrical poetry, and in spite of his long and often sombre experience of life—or should we say because of that?—Rachmaninoff throws himself with delightful zest into the composer's revels. The happiness of his playing was unclouded on this occasion. If any people in the crowd that filled the Free Trade Hall last night were expecting that with this pianist at the keyboard the solo part in Beethoven's concerto would be placed against a background of Russian melancholy they must have been greatly surprised to find that the limpid, old-time work had an even more transparent effect than usual—that the emphasis given by many well-known pianists to certain passages which seem to carry the music beyond the range of typical eighteenth-century art was apparently not sought or desired. It was an interpretation which kept everything within a small range of tone without allowing miniature or small-scaled effects. Not all musicians would have agreed to the style, but Rachmaninoff made his entire performance sound convincing, we think, to last night's audience.

A far different and perhaps to a good number of folk—a still more attractive musical scene—was disclosed when the composer-pianist and the orchestra dealt with the "Rhapsody based on a theme of Paganini." Here a series of brilliant flashes light up, after a now familiar manner, a romantic yet darkly tinged landscape. Not much real gaiety prevails. The composer suggests that the figures that come dancing into this work are never wholly free from the fear that a sinister presence awaits them round the next corner, and indeed the feeling of dread is proved to be well founded when

the "Dies Iræ" tune is first heard muttering and at last heard crashing its way through everything else. The two themes used here hold a strange fascination for composers. Liszt took the Paganini subject for a set of variations; so did Brahms; and the "Dies Iræ" has been brought into all sorts of works from Liszt's time up to the present age.

During several sections of this rhapsody the solo instrument and the orchestra are engaged in dialogue fashion, and no doubt some younger pianists would get a more exciting effect in such passages and in the full climaxes than was achieved at last night's concert because they would go to more drastic lengths in their acceptance of the orchestra's challenge. They would not hesitate to employ sheer power at whatever cost to beauty of tone. Rachmaninoff never allows the piano to strive for effects lying outside its natural limits, yet the immense vitality of his touch, the sonority of his legato, and the sting of his staccato playing are wonderfully telling. His style is so clean, bright, and mobile that we seldom feel the want of a greater volume of sound. It is strange that he has not been persuaded by English admirers to give the variations for piano and orchestra which he wrote just before the Paganini ones. The earlier set is based on an air by Corelli which Kreisler has popularised among violinists and their audiences.

Dr. Malcolm Sargent was alert with the soloist's accompaniments, and he had the orchestra well in hand throughout the later work; but at times the rhythm became heavy and the general effect rather inelastic during the Beethoven concerto, and we wondered if he was entirely in sympathy with the pianist's reading. To our ears the solo part, often sounded, as if it were inspired by ideas not shared by the ensemble. Even in Haydn's "Drum-Roll" Symphony the playing occasionally went short of the finesse it could have had, but the performance of this work as a whole was vivid, finely balanced, and delightfully free in utterance. Later on the three French nocturnes were given with considerable success. The more elusive movements of Debussy nearly always provoke hackneyed comparisons with Claude Monet and the other impressionist painters, yet in its occasional tendency to realism the tone-painting done by the musician may not have pleased the Parisian artists who wanted to claim Debussy as their staunch ally. Sometimes into his evanescent music are thrust not only sharply outlined patterns but broadly coloured, richly harmonised strains that describe tangible features as clearly as do the pages of Wagner or Strauss, albeit not as strongly. After such adventures Debussy retreats, of course, to a dream-world that seems to be more remote than ever. The playing last night in "Nuages" was not sufficiently seductive in the opening notes; it improved afterwards.

"Fêtes" brought the whole orchestra into action, and the piece was presented in all its bravery of rhythm, colour, and piquant scoring. "Sirènes" would have sounded better if the small chorus of women's voices had been a little firmer with one or two of its leads—though in that matter it could have had more helpful guidance. A dreamy, elusive song is wanted all the time, but the song should never lose its alluring elements. Almost certainly a much larger body of voices is needed in this movement, for the pianissimo of thirty or forty singers is often more expressive than that of half a dozen.

G. A. H.