

RACHMANINOFF CHAMPIONS MUSIC OF NATIVE LAND

Greatest of Living Russian Composers, on Eve of American Concert Tour, Discusses the Tenets of His Musical Creed—Says It Is Too Soon to Tell About War's Effects on Art—Is Sure Culture Will Remain National in Character—German Classics Too Great to Be Shelved—Russia the Source of the Best in Modern Music

By DOROTHY J. TEALL

THE Russian school of music is today admittedly by far the most important and original, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, the latest and greatest Russian composer to arrive in this country, has exercised the greatest influence in the building up of that mighty structure. You will say that in view of his American appearances in 1909 there should have been no wonderings but only knowledge about his appearance and himself. But 1909 was an antediluvian era. A new generation of music-lovers has grown up since then, and they have been fed not on facts but on the C Sharp Minor Prelude, a piece which only a Titan or a romanticist could have composed.

Mr. Rachmaninoff is not a Titan. He is very tall, it is true, and quite broad of shoulder, but his scholarly stoop conceals much of his breadth and even some of his height. He is clean-shaven and pale of face, and his hair must be recorded as of the all-embracing category brown. Some imaginative persons have traced in his face the marks of his own and his country's sufferings, but though the downward droop of the muscles makes it a rather sad face when it is in repose, it brightens with smiles and good spirits as the great musician talks; one fancies that if this face were caught off guard it would display a constant gaiety, not to say cheerfulness, which would finally and forever prove its possessor a being more human than Russian, as the word has come to be misunderstood among us.

These details of physiognomy are important, because if Mr. Rachmaninoff is not a Titan, he must be—a romanticist! Mr. Rachmaninoff does not yet speak English, fluently at least; few Americans speak Russian at all. If the exchange of question and answer about to be recorded seems stiff and in the manner of a judicial examination, the blame should be laid on the difficulties of conducting the conversation. Unconsciously, perhaps, Mr. Rachmaninoff revealed himself as a nationalist, a patriot, a democrat, a conservative and a romanticist. There is critical ammunition for the concert-goers who will hear him in the coming months!

In the present war-induced dearth of creative music everyone necessarily wonders how the art will come to its own again; and how, when it does reappear, it will show itself to have been affected by the war. Composers are men like other men; any great tide in human affairs must sweep them along as it does others, toss them about and give them at least some of the same hard knocks. If, as statesmen have constantly maintained, the war's outstanding social consequence is to be an era of unparalleled internationalism, surely this all-pervasive internationalism must set its impress on music. Hence the first question which was put to Mr. Rachmaninoff.

"Do you think culture—and, in particular, of course, music—will be cosmopolitan in nature in the *postbellum* period, or must it always remain nationalistic? Must there always be distinct and separate musical literatures for Russia, France, Germany?"

A Bas Musical Internationalism!

"Musical internationalism? Never! Indeed, there must always be separate national styles. Artistic differences between nations will continue because of the immutable differences in climate, if for no other reason."

"Ah, you are an evolutionist!"



Photo by Mishkin

Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Famous Russian Composer, Who Will Be Heard as Pianist by the American Public This Season. His Latest Photograph

"My music is scarcely revolutionary, so I suppose I must be called an evolutionist." Mr. Rachmaninoff's face wore a puzzled expression which invited explanations.

"Yes, it is obvious that you are more evolutionist than revolutionist in music. But if that exclamation had been properly put as a question, it would have specified rather your sociological than your artistic views. The meaning was that you are a determinist, since you believe music to be the product of climate and similarly impersonal forces. Well, then, if nationalism is the eternal, unchangeable law in music, it may be profitable to characterize the various national styles. What, in a word, is Russian music?"

"Sad," Mr. Rachmaninoff answered with mirthful readiness. "The Russian is the greatest musical school to-day. I marvel that you Americans do not know more of it, for it has the universal emotional appeal which none can resist. But as time goes on, you will doubtless hear Russian music more and more, and—"

"Just a moment!" the interviewer implored. "Do you say we will hear more Russian music because it is sad and everybody is sad nowadays?"

"No; you will hear more of it because it is beautiful."

"But you said it is sad. What is it to be called if you discard that adjective?"

"I meant to say that it was predominantly melancholy in character at present. As to what it will be in future, how should I know? Everything depends on what great musicians happen to arise. It is all a matter of the individual. We have Medtner, who is doing very great work; his six piano sonatas are epoch-making, and his songs are the rich, full-voiced expression of a master-spirit. Stravinsky composed some excellent things for the Ballet Russe; as for the others—there may be many great men writing at this very moment, but while we may pick out the individual genius, or madman, and characterize his work, we cannot yet tell what is the lowest common denominator of all their work. Perhaps—but no, it is impossible to say."

"Well, then, German music."

"There is not much to say about that,

either. Strauss had written himself out by the time the war began."

"But on German music of the past the war is having a very obvious and clear-cut effect. We hear less of the German classics, and the spell of their prestige seems broken. How does that condition impress you?"

"Oh, it is sheer folly to shelve Bach, Beethoven, Mozart! A boycott of great masters like those can be injurious only to the boycotters. Nothing can alter the just reputation of those masters as the sublimest figures in music."

"Before the war there was a feeling, here in America at least, that because they were the most sublime, no others could be sublime in even a minor degree. Is it not well that such a despotism should be overthrown? For now that only the terms of peace remain to be settled, the works of the German masters are bound to be heard again, and thus no lasting harm has been done."

"Yes, if you put it that way, that the German classics were crowding all else out of the field in this country, that they were exercising a veritable tyranny, then certainly one might say that the war-time reaction against them was a rather good thing."

A turn in the conversation brought up the subject of opera, and rather amusingly in view of the fact that he himself has written in the operatic form, Mr. Rachmaninoff was asked whether he liked it.

"Of course I like it! Some of the greatest Russian musical works have been of that sort. But I forget; you do not know our operas here. It is very regrettable, for they are as rich and marvelous as anything in modern music. I said regrettable, but it is perhaps also reprehensible of you not to know them. Fourteen of Rimsky-Korsakoff's compositions were cast in that form; ten out of the fourteen were great. 'Le Coq d'Or' you know; of the rest you do not hear one note; nine of these tremendous works are closed books to you! Yet nowhere in the world are there fuller opportunities for producing great new works than here in your country. Why do you restrict yourselves to a diet of old Italian operas (which, however pretty they may be, are worn quite threadbare), and a few French works?"

Asks Why American Public Knows So Little of Russia's Music—Ten of Rimsky-Korsakoff's Fourteen Operas Were Masterpieces, but America Has Heard Only One—Thinks Music of Future Will Follow Lines of Accepted Forms—"Le Coeur" and Folk-Song Must Eventually Lead to Production of Great Art-Music in Any People

Especially now that the Wagnerian and other German operas are banished, I should think you would feel the need of new works."

"Not the least count in the indictment against us is our inability to name a reason for our neglect of the operas which you have mentioned, Mr. Rachmaninoff. It is a condition which the modest music-lover must accept as he does heat or cold; it is simply one of the things that are there, independently of his will or choice. At any rate, it is evident that you like opera. Perhaps you would be willing to make some statement as to the effect the war will have on other accepted musical forms."

A smile and a shrug. "I cannot tell. I dare not attempt prediction."

Evolution Rather Than Revolution

"Do you not think it likely that the germs of revolution which are afloat in the European atmosphere may establish themselves in the musical organism? Perhaps old musical forms will become obsolete along with old political forms."

"I hope not. I hope not. Still, hopes are vague affairs; if they could be counted on, with their force I would long since have checked the spread of political Bolshevism. It seems to me, however, that there really is ground for expecting music to adhere to the same general lines of form in the future as in the past."

"How about program music? Has not that revolutionary movement already set its standard awave over the musical field?"

"Yes, the use of a program, the introduction of an element of poetic interest, has come to stay; not program-mism as Strauss, for instance, has sometimes employed it, an attempt to translate into musical terms what are essentially visual perceptions; but program-mism as practised, though of course not under that name, by the early nineteenth century romanticists, Schumann and Chopin, for example. What I am saying amounts to this: that the composer not only *may* but to some extent even *ought* to have a program in mind, a thread of interest on which to string the emotions which he seeks to express in his work; whereas to put the program ahead of the emotions to be expressed is to follow a method illegitimate insofar as its results are bound to have a primarily unmusical interest."

"What about Debussy, Ravel and the other so-called futurists of France? Is there a new generative element in them?"

"Scarcely. They themselves acknowledge their indebtedness to the Russians and the influence of Russian composers."

"If we were to attempt to sum up what has been said, Mr. Rachmaninoff, would you agree to this way of putting it, that the heart should be the composer's guide through the labyrinths of accepted forms?"

"Yes, *le cœur* above all. Of course, *la tête* must aid in the building of great musical structures, but by itself *la tête* is impotent. If a composer is devoid of heart or hasn't his heart in the right place, it is impossible for him to conceal his deficiency. This explains why Russian music is so superlatively great; it speaks so directly to the heart. That is what gives it its vital beauty, its universality of appeal. You see now what I meant when I said that you in America would hear constantly more of our music because of its beauty instead of because of its sadness! Probably our music does carry the accent of sadness before all else; but if it spoke of sadness alone or of any one emotion to the exclusion of all others, it would be bad, and

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