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STOKOWSKI OFFERS SCHOENBERG WORK

Steuermann Soloist in World
Premiere by NBC Symphony
of Piano Concerto

By OLIN DOWNES

At the NBC Symphony concert of yesterday afternoon in Radio City Leopold Stokowski conducted first performances of his own arrangement of an aria by Marc Antonio Cesti from one of that seventeenth-century master's cantatas, and of Arnold Schoenberg's piano concerto, in which the solo part was discharged with great skill and devotion by Edvard Steuermann, who for years has been a passionate exponent of Schoenberg's muse. The concerto had its initial performance anywhere in the world on this occasion.

Mr. Stokowski, in a few brief words preceding the performance, made known his great admiration of the concerto, which he described as a work that it was very difficult even partially to grasp without study, but which he regards as "one of the landmarks of musical history."

The reader should bear this comment of Mr. Stokowski in mind, in case he does not like the concerto any more than does the present observer. Mr. Stokowski had given the concerto at least a measure of the study that it may well demand as its due; the reputation of Arnold Schoenberg is not one to be dismissed airily or angrily, or with condescension. The care and musicianship with which he has invested this his latest instrumental score are evident, even after one performance and repeated hearings of the work played on two pianos and a glimpse of the score, which latter privileges have been extended to this department.

The Concerto Analyzed

With such preparatory background, insufficient as it may be, we find the new concerto disagreeable and unconvincing. Its contents would serve excellently for the purposes of the analyst. It is in a single movement with subdivisions in close-woven, different tempi which circle about a very few principal tone-groups, variously dissected and manhandled. And there is apparently more than the purely schematic in the business.

The effect of the piece is highly nervous if not emotional; there are pages that glimmer strangely and other pages of a certain frantic intensity, augmented by the orchestra's part. And each instrument, or at least each different instrument employed is, as it were, a passionate agent.

Played From Memory

For all that, and the manifest sincerity and craftsmanship displayed, the ideas appear to have little to do with beauty or real music. Certainly the workmanship is concentrated and the form concise. The performance was excellent. Mr. Steuermann, playing his part from memory, showed himself a devoted and prodigious musician. His efforts were earnestly supplemented by those of Mr. Stokowski and the orchestra. So?

It is true that a new and problematic score was placed disadvantageously, for the concerto came after some of the most beautiful, simple, profound and compassionate music that ever has been written—the Schubert "Unfinished" symphony, played in a very moving way—from which it was separated by a speech on machines, tricycles and the like by Mr. Kettering. Perhaps some preferred this to Schoenberg. Others no doubt adjudged the palm to Schoenberg over Kettering. For ourselves, we confess to a preference, no doubt reactionary, for Schubert.