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REVIEW / MUSIC

Impressive Rachmaninoff

MÍCEÁL O'ROURKE, PIANIST – In a performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, Harry Ellis Dickson, conducting, at Symphony Hall Wednesday night.

By Richard Dyer
Globe Staff

Míceál O'Rourke, an Irish pianist, obviously doesn't know the meaning of fear, for he chose the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto for his debut appearance at the Pops. This is a very difficult work and the scheduled rehearsal time wasn't much longer than what it takes to play through the piece. The conditions of performance weren't much better. In defiance of regulations the waitresses continued to serve during the first movement, a baby cried most of the time, the house Baldwin, an appreciable piano, is, in forte, a blunt padded instrument when what is wanted is a glinting blade. And in any case the density of the music places unusual demands on the attention of the usual Pops audience.

Nevertheless and despite all, this was an extremely impressive performance, the more so after I had fled to the rear of the hall after the first movement in order to hear properly; my assigned seat had been so close I could have reached up and offered a feebly helping hand in the treble. O'Rourke, who has studied with such diverse teachers as Marcel Ciampi, Joerg Demus and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, began that long opening octave melody with the simplicity of a child singing it; there was no fussiness here, just direct music-making. And that is the way it was throughout the performance. One had no sense of O'Rourke as a tremendous virtuoso because he avoided all the usual show-off effects. That big syncopated chordal pile-up in the finale hadn't much of the razory excitement Alexis Weissenberg brought to it in his performances with the BSO last spring. But a tremendous virtuoso O'Rourke must be, for he was able to make even the larger first movement cadenza, the one Rachmaninoff himself avoided, sound like music and not like an air hammer at work on the street. And long stretches of the performance were pure song; in their naturalness and avoidance of affectation they were in every respect superior to what Weissenberg offered. There were a few places where everybody involved probably felt like stopping and beginning over again, but on the whole Harry Ellis Dickson kept things remarkable well integrated – he really listened to O'Rourke – and a good bit of the orchestral playing, like that long chain of solos descending through the winds that ends the cadenza, was of notable beauty. O'Rourke, Dickson and the orchestra repeat the concerto on the Esplanade Sunday night.