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FRIEDMAN THE RADIO ITEM AND FRIEDMAN THE MAN

An Appreciation After His First Public Performance

IT is almost sufficient to listen to Friedman playing on the air; but radio sets are poor things of wood and wire. There was a good deal of comment after his first two broadcasts in this New Zealand tour: comment in extremely learned technical terms about "muffling" and "pedalling." For one who has met the man and hears Friedman when Friedman plays Chopin, it was only possible in such circumstances to reply just as vaguely with obscure but hopefully impressive comments about high-frequency microphones and how quickly valves deteriorate.

There always will be people who cannot resist the temptation to find fault with whatever is perfect. For me, Friedman was perfect. I know nothing about music except what the signs mean on the score, and that these instruments with long black and white keyboards are called pianos. And I liked Friedman—if I make make such a hopeless understatement. Perhaps this appreciation is coloured by knowledge of the man. But you must know Friedman's personality to appreciate his interpretation.

I fancy that those who deigned to comment after the broadcasts and who were bold enough to test themselves by seeing Friedman himself playing in Wellington Town Hall for his first public performance in this New Zealand tour, discovered some reluctance to sing anything but praises.

On the Concert Platform

The radio set cannot hope to tell listeners what manner of man is playing for them. On the concert platform Friedman appears himself.

He is not far off sixty, not very tall, and thick-set in his body. His legs are not heavy, and he walks back for his encores with an old-man-little-boy walk. He was a splendid head, with white hair growing now well back from a wide, high brow. After he has brought one masterpiece to a close he slumps back on the chair. Tired he seems, and old. But his face is the face of a young man, its youth given him by the music that is everlastingly going to be young.

He uses few gestures. Occasionally his right hand will flow through the air above the treble keys as he picks out the prettiness above a rolling bass; but in his most characteristic pose at the piano, if it can be called a pose, he sits almost hunched over the keyboard, with his short, flat, almost stumpy fingers working in a fury of energy, and his left leg thrust back beneath his chair as if he would drive himself almost into the heart of the strings.

When He Played Bach

Thus did he play "Chaconne" in his first recital. It was his third item. His first had been an arrangement by himself of one of Gluck's operatic ballets. The second was Hummel's "Rondo." Compared with his playing of Busoni's

arrangement of Bach they were finger exercises, rare and wonderful in their way, but tinkling memories of happy days for the Friedman of the nineteenth century.

Bach progresses with mathematical exactitude until the small harmony becomes in regular progression the grand chord that transforms the piano into a magnificence no other instrument can manage, save the organ Bach intended his music for.

Bach by himself was not enough for the scope of the modern piano. Bach decorated by Busoni, as legendary a pianist now as Friedman may be in forty years, is as technically perfect a medium for a master as the Schlieffen plan was for the German generals this year. Friedman plays like a strategist handling a perfected weapon.

I think this was almost the only item in his programme which really carried Friedman away.

Two Conservatisms

His interpretation appears to me as a mixture of two conservatisms.

There is the conservatism that looks back to the days of pomp and flourish, when pianists leaped wildly about the keyboard and artists poisoned themselves with ultramarine, not having access to gas.

And there is the conservatism which respects the music as a perfection in itself.

Friedman's startling, sudden, slashing contrasts are an example of the one. His audience winced once or twice when he roused himself to throw one hand at a shrill staccato treble and the other at an explosive bass.

At other times he played bar after bar with scarcely any variation of emphasis. He played as a man might read Romeo's plea to Juliet, engrossed in the euphony of the words, so taken up with the poetry of the situation and its expression that he cannot bring himself to mar the situation with accents of his own.

When you think of Friedman as the landmark he is, between one century and another, and when you hear him play like this, you think of an utterly charming personality somewhat regretfully showing the new age how beautiful the old age really was.

If anything will prove this point, in which those who really do know something about music may not concur, I think it was his playing of Bach. More than any other's, Bach's music stands by itself, and scorns decoration. It is the same sort of stuff as made Rupert Brooke write ecstatically about

*the keen unimpassioned beauty of
a great machine.*

It is the perfection of simplicity, just as two plus two equals four is the perfection of a similar simple statement of realities; and just as Friedman's playing was throughout his concert a statement of the romantic reality and simplicity which is the man himself.

—THID