

True Musicianship Achieved by Biggs

By EDWARD GANNON, S. J.

Wheeling welcomed the most exceptional of men last night at the Virginia, a true musician. E. Power Biggs, labeled by some the world's greatest organist, performed the new and the old with the symphony orchestra. The organ was not high-powered; the selections (a Concerto by Poulenc, and one by Handel) were not at all show-off numbers for the organist, but, with all that, genuine musicianship came through, unapologetic, professional, cool, perfect.

I suppose the easiest way to explain what I mean by the true musician is to say that he played what was written. There were no chords, no slurrings when slurrings would not have been noticed, no liberties in tempo, no delays in order to make sure that the changes in stops were correct, no swollen crescendos to steal the play from the orchestra. (Organists are notoriously guilty of things like that). Besides, the orchestra spoke as often as the organist did. But Mr. Biggs did the most unusual thing of playing the music - point! You cared for the selections or you did not; but since they were being done, they were to be done perfectly. And perfectly done they were.

As a matter of fact, this reviewer found the Poulenc Concerto for Organ, Tympani and Strings fascinating. Poulenc is unclassifiable anyway, except that he is probably more adept at sudden startling effects, and suddenly whipped up or suddenly sluggish tempo than any other contemporary. The thing was a perpetual dialogue between the organ and the strings, with neat punctuation from the tympani, all finding keen pleasure in being together. This was clearly the highlight of the evening. Special huzzahs to the young lady who handled the tympani part: tympani with strings and organ sounds like an odd combination on paper. The three did a magnificent job.

The other selection done by Mr. Biggs was Handel's Concerto for Organ and Strings, No. 10. Handel is Handel: the master here found his perfect interpreter.

The Orchestra

Possibly it is mid-winter slump. Possibly the reviewer himself needs more sun, and this could be stridently ONE person's impression. But it must be written (by the code of the commitment) that except for a highly unusual piece of work, again by a modern (Barber's Adagio for Strings, Opus 11) the other two offerings by the Symphony orchestra were unbrilliant, untaut, undistinguished, and at times downright shabby. The strings are clearly the secure part of the ensemble; but there was even there occasional heavy breathing (if that says anything) on stage right. The Variations on a theme by Haydn, which Brahms certainly

enjoyed writing (and it is intriguing to hear a composer write in at least five styles), were too chancy in performance for comfort. The first variation, for example, a Minuetish kind of thing, straight, clean, uncluttered writing, came across as a troubled mixture. I do not wish to delay on this phase of the evening: the orchestra has already proved it is far superior to this, and it was an off-evening, but it must be added that Beethoven's 8th was done as well, as something that had to be gotten through, and that's it.

The Barber selection, thanks he, was special. The strings again. They remain the most mysterious voice in any ensemble, and the rather perfect combination in this Adagio delivered an unanalysable thing of beauty. There was a constant rich flow of music, the conductor's command was perfect: this sounded rehearsed, sure, firm.

The hometown touch in collapsing four chairs so the organ would be more visible was, shall we say, regrettable?