Stern, Stokowski Combination
Dramatic In Rewarding Concert

By HERBERT GARON

An audience keyed to a high pitch of expectance regarding the subject of Isaac Stern, succumbed in no time to the ravishing mastery of the violinist’s playing at the end of his performance of the Beethoven Violin Concerto with the Houston Symphony last night.

THIS PERFORMANCE was first-class in every respect; it was a poised, mature reading impeccably played by the soloist and backed by firm, sympathetic support from an inspired conductor and orchestra. Stern’s art has mellowed and deepened since his appearance with the symphony two years ago; there is now a serenity and assurance in his playing which make him one of the most satisfying violinists now before the public.

It was evident from the start, right after the opening orchestral tutti, that Stern was completely the lord of every phrase of violin playing, that his larder of musical resources was brimming, and that here was an artist who was giving of the purest metal of his art without the dross of exploitation.

HE ASSIDUOUSLY avoided any manifestations of bravura playing to perform a perfect a performance of peerless intelligence and taste.

Some of the most gorgeous tonal fabric, ever evoked from the combination of crotchet and singing wood frame poured from his Stradivarius instrument, a fiddle from the master’s “gold-en” period. Its sumptuous sound was all the more remarkable for being unforced.

The Stern tone is free from roughness of any sort. Whether his concern is with cantilena or with rapid passage work, his tonal dynamics are gems of conspicuous purity and beauty.

There were brilliant runs and singing double-stops; and he treated the audience to a stunning low vibrato.

HIS VIRTUOSO gifts, however, transcend the high emotional fixation of his playing and encompass a well-governed technical expertise. A bow arm of admirable elasticity and freedom permits a massive full movement of the bow, and the perfection of his finger technique keeps pace with the inherent skill of his right arm. The mechanics of his performance are those of a finely wrought precision instrument whose clock-like detail is in cohesion with the whole.

In the communication of noble grandeur and glorious themes, Stokowski proved to be the ideal collaborator with the spellbinding solo work. The performance of the orchestra framed the wizardry of the master violinist and gave him full reign to follow the inclination of his heart. He surmounted the technical difficulties with amazing ease and throughout, incidentally, he uses Fritz Kreisler’s cadenzas.

THE ENRAPTURED audience which had remained completely silent suddenly rose to its feet at the exultant end to express its appreciation for Stern’s dedicated and matchless performance of this mighty concerto.

The Bach “Toccata and Fugue in D minor” opened the program. There was plenty of vitality and brio in the playing of this adaptation of the mighty double-score for organ in which the organ “registers” are distributed in intensified vividness throughout the various instrumental sections of the orchestra; but it was not an especially smooth performance. Roughness of tone was not uncommon and oftentimes the playing seemed ragged.

COUPLING imagination and restraint, Stokowski led the orchestra through a brilliant and eloquent reading of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony. The first movement was notable for freedom from over-sentimentality; movement was magnificently controlled, avoiding the pitfall of cloying sweetness; and in the finale, Stokowski took a furious pace which delighted us.

After the concert a part of the crowd rushed to the dressing room to gingerly touch a fiddle whose label: “Antonius Stradi- varius Cremonensis Anno Domini 1716 Faciebat” for once does not lie.