Stokowski Begins Sixth Season with Bach Concertos, ‘Eroica’

By HERBERT GARON
The Houston Symphony began its panoply of music Monday evening under the direction of Leo Stokowski in a concert which made a bid for general appeal and gave a bright forecast for the new season.

The orchestra in its sixth season under Mr. Stokowski’s capable hand revealed greater maturity and a positiveness of approach over even its favorable impression last year. Clarity of purpose and expression characterized by its playing dominated the evening with few reservations. The consensus of the audience was in effect highly favorable, and it gave unqualified endorsement to the symphony for its efforts.

FOR THE MAJOR orchestral portion of the program, Mr. Stokowski chose the Beethoven Third Symphony, the “Eroica,” which legend has identified as a musical portrait of Napoleon. This is popular fallacy, however, for the gargantuan hero of this symphony is all Beethoven.

Mr. Stokowski brought a dignified, intelligent reading to the score, and, barring an occasional disturbing note from the horn section, the symphony emerged with musical clarity and absolute fidelity to the composer. The familiar second movement, with its funereal chant, was played with due regard for its intense restraint, and the animated scherzo that followed was a graceful dancing movement with actual resonance, not just the sound of dead strings. It was a well integrated performance.

THE CONCERT opened with three compositions by Bach, transcribed for orchestra by Stokowski. Transcriptions are music’s illegitimate children. Some critics habitually treat them with disdain unless made by the composer himself. In justice to Stokowski it should be said that both his transcriptions and his performances of Bach’s music have varied widely in merit. But regardless of concepts of stylistic rectitude, it was hard to resist being moved by the majesty of the organ chorale-prelude, “Aus tiefer Noth,” or the austere beauty of the essay, “Schafe koennen sichere weiden.” On the other hand, we would prefer to draw the aural veil over the flatulent version of the Prelude of the Partita in E Major for unaccompanied violin; this solo instrument is sufficiently dazzling. Nevertheless, these works did much to “pulverize” the popular conception of Bach as a dull, dry composer in the minds of many in the audience and revealed a music rich in melodic and harmonic beauty.

FOLLOWING intermission, the orchestra played a work by Boris Blacher, a contemporary composer of the new Berlin school; it was entitled Orchestral Fantasy. The work depends on responses from various batteries of the orchestra according to a rhythmic system which is contrived and atonal. The over-all effect of the work as presented by the symphony was one of futility. It seemed a mere exercise for divisions of the orchestra and in last night’s context was curiously juxtaposed among the loftier offerings which filled out the program.

In conformance with the Maestro’s penchant for programming at least one number of popular appeal, the concert closed with a lush and ample reading of the delightful waltzes from that “masterpiece of Viennese confectionery,” Richard Strauss’ “Der Rosenkavalier.” The “joie de vivre” with which the Houstonians invested the lilting themes of the score provided an ingratiating performance. Altogether this was a rewarding concert.