Symphony’s Opening Effort Termed ‘Unbearably Familiar’

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Only the displacement of the orchestra was new as Leopold Stokowski led the Houston Symphony orchestra in the opening concert last Monday night. The music and the approach were both unbearably familiar.

Handel’s “Water Music” led the program, in a special arrangement by Stokowski that did everything possible to destroy the spirit of the music. In place of the regularity and purposiveness that characterizes Handel, Stokowski substituted an over-dramatic, dawdling approach.

Watery “Water Music”
The “Water Music,” relying as it does upon French horns, was also an interesting commentary on the special weakness of the Houston Orchestra in this area. Stokowski also used a full orchestra, including a large string body, that destroyed the customary Handelian clarity without a corresponding increase in richness of sound.

Mozart’s “25th Symphony,” a product of that composer’s seventeenth year, suffered from the same lack of clarity. It is a continuing puzzle why conductors, especially one with the musical sense of Stokowski, insist on playing Mozart or Handel with over-sized orchestras. The effect is smothering.

Brilliant Rachmaninoff
The single bright spot of the evening was Stokowski’s rendering of “Three Symphonic Dances” of Rachmaninoff. These dances, written three years before his death, reflect Rachmaninoff’s assimilation of a specifically American approach. The pronounced rhythmic impulse of the first dance reminds one of a Crenston or Riegger rather than the moody Rachmaninoff of the Second Piano Concerta.

Stokowski obviously has a strong affinity for the music of Rachmaninoff, something approaching his empathy with Richard Wagner. He managed to convey this to the orchestra for a notable performance.

Ravel Genius Missing
This was not the case in the Mussorgsky “Pictures at an Exhibition.” In place of the customary Ravel orchestra, Stokowski uses his own which is deficient in every sense of the word. Ravel’s special genius in his transcription was his ability to keep the different sections as part of a unified dramatic whole.

Stokowski never attempts to do this, and we are left with a number of fragments, incidentally set side by side. Suffice it to say that Stokowski wins two or three rounds, notably in the “Polish Oxcart” and “Catacombs” numbers, but Ravel’s more methodical jabbing enables him to retain the crown.