Pavarotti quiets rumors, warms up well to 'Otello'

CLASSICAL MUSIC
By Wynne Delacoma

The rumors couldn't have been more rampant if the topic had been a Beatles reunion.

Luciano Pavarotti, scheduled to make his debut in the title role of Verdi's "Otello" Monday night with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Georg Solti, didn't know the part, according to the gossip mill. He was talking about canceling, something he's done often in Chicago.

But Pavarotti sang Monday night, along with Kiri Te Kanawa as Desdemona and Leo Nucci as Iago, and he seemed to know his part. A prompter's box was thoughtfully provided and Pavarotti popped through lines continually. But the show did go on, even though Solti, entering his final set of concerts as the CSO's music director, was exhausted from the fis and conducted supported by a chair.

"Otello" is being performed three more times, Friday in Orchestra Hall and recorded live in Carnegie Hall concerts April 16 and 18. By the time Solti gets over the fis and Pavarotti becomes more familiar with the part, it should be memorable.

Solti wanted to end his tenure as CSO music director with a blockbuster, and "Otello" was a logical choice. The forces Verdi deploys so expertly are the very ones Solti has nurtured during his two decades in Chicago.

The orchestral passages were full of color, though Solti's famous architectural shaping was net entirely in place. The opening storm scene was vividly realized, however, with its brassy crashes of thunder and the powerful CSO chorus urging describing boats battered by surging waves. The choral murmurs and outbursts created an ominous, restless undercurrent in Act III as Otello began accusing Desdemona.

Pavarotti's portrayal strengthened as he went along Monday, but this role is punishing both vocally and from the standpoint of establishing a character. Otello is typically on guard or on the attack. His melodies are often insistent, spraying forth like machine gun bullets, and Pavarotti struggled to find the music in them.

Leo Nucci painted a more complete portrait as the malevolent Iago.

Kiri Te Kanawa provided the most magical moments Monday. Her strong voice soared over the orchestra, yet she floated her high, soft notes with tender ease in the final scene. The drama, difficult to establish in a concert setting, sprang to life in Act 4 as she and Pavarotti created an intimate connection that had been missing until then.

Luciano Pavarotti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra will perform "Otello" again Friday at Orchestra Hall, and then twice more at New York City's Carnegie Hall next week.
Pavarotti, Solti team up in a challenging ‘Otello’

By John von Rhein

Music critic

Georg Solti on Monday began his final home week as Chicago Symphony Orchestra music director in Orchestra Hall by returning to the medium that had given him his earliest successes as a conductor: opera.

For his almost-valedictory gift to the city, the maestro chose a concert version of perhaps the greatest challenge in the Italian repertory: Verdi’s “Otello.” Lured by a stellar cast that included Luciano Pavarotti, Kiri Te Kanawa and Leo Nucci, patrons snapped up every seat (at $100 top), and at least one scalper, working the line of ticket-seekers outside the hall, was asking $500 a seat.

Pavarotti’s megapresence alone guaranteed that this concert performance—to be repeated here Friday night and twice next week in Carnegie Hall—would be an event. A plethora of out-of-town press descended on Orchestra Hall. TV cameras rolled. The platform was so crowded with singers, choristers and orchestra players that the stage had to be extended.

The singers, sporting normal concert attire, were lined up at music stands behind the orchestra, and the only handkerchief was the one Pavarotti at times applied to his golden throat. So much for dramatic verisimilitude.

Musically, this “Otello” belonged more to the lion of Budapest than the lion of Venice. From the opening storm music to Otello’s dying soliloquy, General Solti kept his legions of performers under firm control from his podium command post. Because he was said to be suffering from a cold, he directed the second through fourth acts while seated.

In the main, Solti’s Toscanini-style approach stressed taut dramatic momentum and high-decibel energy. Every phrase, every texture seemed to have been honed to blazing perfection. Still, it must be said that the maestro was more successful at maintaining his troops in close drill—note the extraordinary precision he brought to the concertato that closes Act III—than conjuring moonlight and stars in the love duet.

Still, Solti had his Chicago Symphony playing this formidable difficult score as if it were a seasoned opera orchestra; every opera house should have such a band of virtuosi in residence. No minor contributions to the evening were made by the Chicago Symphony Chorus, superbly prepared by the redoubtable Maragret Hillis (listen to the quicksilver clarity of choral enunciation in the “Fuoco di gioia,” for example), and augmented by the Chicago Children’s Choir.

The most accomplished singing came from soprano Kiri Te Kanawa as Desdemona. She sang with sweetness and delicacy of tone, floating the Willow Song and “Ave Maria” with an exquisite pianissimo shimmer.

Nucci’s first Iago was deft, subtle and intelligent but lacked the biting baritonal amplitude one associates with great previous interpreters of the villain’s role.

Still, the ultimate success of “Otello” rests with the heroic capabilities of its title tenor, and here Pavarotti’s performance—his first Otello on any stage—must be reckoned a work-in-progress. Vocally he sounded under duress much of the way through, seldom lifting his eyes from the text and a concealed prompter. Where Verdi asks for bursts of clarion tone, sung with unflagging ease, he gave it all he had, but the sound was forced, constricted, innocent of vocal nuance and verbal point. A valiant try, but not yet an Otello.

The secondary roles were decently cast, including Dimitri Kavrakos (Lodovico), Elzbieta Ardam (Emilia), Anthony Rolfe Johnson (Cassio) and John Keyes (Rodengo).
Despite a Cold, Pavarotti Takes On ‘Otello’

By DONALD HENAHAN

In Verdi’s “Otello,” as in Shakespeare’s tragedy that inspired it, an innocent handkerchief becomes a key player in the drama. The Moor’s gift to Desdemona falls into the hands of Iago, who uses it to incite the jealous warrior to murder and suicide. Desdemona’s handkerchief was not in evidence during Tuesday evening’s concert performance of “Otello” by the Chicago Symphony at Carnegie Hall. In another famous one, Luciano Pavarotti’s, certainly was. That fact frequently worked to the detriment of a remarkable performance led by Georg Solti.

Mr. Pavarotti — taking on the title role for the first time in this series of four performances, two in Chicago last week and two in New York City — labored under a handicap: a cold that, a Carnegie official said, forced him to “drink and eat continually to keep his throat open.” The great Italian tenor, obviously in distress, found it necessary to hide his medicating activities under his towel-size handkerchief, finally resorting during Desdemona’s touching “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria” to covering his head as if under an inhalator tent. He also had to sit much of the time while singing. Such eye-rioting activity could only weaken operatic illusion, although it testified to Mr. Pavarotti’s professionalism in going ahead under duress, or handkerchief.

The Chicago, never in our time less than a great orchestra, provided many thrills. In the stupendous opening scene, it and Margaret Hillis’s chorus unleashed every erg of sonic energy the hall could tolerate, vividly establishing the mood for violent events to come. Mr. Solti’s characteristic driving style brought out the Verdisian virility of such pages, although it missed the complementary magic in more delicate scenes like the love duet that ends Act I. In the opera house, atmospheric stagings and lighting might have tempered that impression; however, concert opera is a separate art form in which musical performance comes under lonely scrutiny.

Mr. Pavarotti sang better than one could have expected under the circumstances. The voice was recognizably that of our foremost lyric tenor. But it was not the trombone needed for Otello’s exultant first entry or for his subsequent demented rages, and thus it could not do the role justice. Verdi’s own requirement, as difficult to meet in his day as in ours, was for an Otello who, “now warrior, now passionate lover, now ferocious as a savage, must sing and howl!” Mr. Pavarotti, though probably preoccupied by his medical problems, managed to sing beautifully, if impersonally. Overall, his interpretation was neither tender enough nor fearsome enough. The mercurial Otello would seem to be outside his temperamental range.

As Desdemona, Kiri Te Kanawa gave the evening its most fine-grained vocalism and a bland but persuasive interpretation. Desdemona for Verdi was “not a woman, she’s a type... the type of goodness, of resignation, of sacrifice.” Miss Te Kanawa did not take the character beyond those narrow limits, but in her great penultimate scene, aptly dressed in white, she was the epiphany of selfless innocence, an uncompassing martyr to the male territorial imperative known as jealousy.

At the heart of a memorable “Otello” must be a memorably creepy Iago. Leo Nucci was hardly that. He made a stab at Iago’s nastiness but was never credible as that most sophisticated of villains. Nor did his colorless baritone consistently compete with the Verdiian drama painted by the orchestra. Mr. Nucci made Iago’s motives explicit and telegraphed every scheming move. He blustered through the “Credo,” as do most Iagos who misconceive it as a conventional aria rather than a chilling declaration of nihilistic philosophy.

Lesser roles, which Verdi was content to leave as stereotypes, were satisfactorily taken by Anthony Rolfe-Johnson (Cassio), John Keyes (Rodrigo), Dimitri Kavrakos (Lodovico), Alan Opie (Montano) and Richard Cohn (a herald). Kiri Te Kanawa was an unusually strong-voiced Emilia.

This “Otello,” the centerpiece of Mr. Solti’s final appearances as music director of the orchestra he has headed for 22 seasons, is to be repeated tomorrow evening. A Carnegie Hall official said that Mr. Pavarotti was expected to sing.
By John von Rhein
Chicago Tribune

NEW YORK—No music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra ever went out with greater eclat.

No conductor in history ever stepped down from a major post surrounded by so much media attention. Or by so large an adoring public.

And the exit was staged precisely in the manner that Georg Solti, ever disdainful of sad farewells, preferred.

For his very last concert as music director of the orchestra he has headed for 22 seasons, Solti on Friday night achieved what no demolition crew ever could: He brought down Carnegie Hall.

The 78-year-old maestro could have gone out with something safe and familiar, like the Mahler Fifth Symphony that has served as a talisman for Sir Georg and the CSO for more than two decades and which also figured prominently in their Carnegie concerts last week.

But Solti has long been a Promethean taker of risks, and Friday he ventured one of the most daunting challenges in the entire operatic repertoire, Verdi’s “Otello,” heard April 8 and 12 in Chicago.

The concert performance, honoring the joint centennials of the CSO and Carnegie Hall, was to be as much a bold new venture for tenor Luciano Pavarotti (who was singing the famously taxing title role for the first time) as a grand valedictory for Solti.

And while the megatenor was in fine voice—sounding noticeably more relaxed and much improved over the “Otello” he had sung under obvious duress in Chicago the previous week—he graciously surrendered the spotlight to the maestro who had coaxed, coached and prodded him through the initial rehearsals and concerts.

The lion of Budapest taking on the lion of Venice, at the end of his Chicago tenure: The symbolism and timing were perfect. For Solti, baton for the final time as CSO music director.

A mighty shout of approval immediately went up from the house. Audience members leaped to their feet, applauding vigorously. Solti—nearly dwarfed by the combined forces of his Chicago Symphony and Chicago Symphony Chorus, a children’s chorus and nine vocal soloists—bowed stiffly several times and quickly left the stage.

The first curtain call was reserved for the principal singers of the evening—Pavarotti, Kiri Te Kanawa and Leo Nucci. They took their bows from their platform at the rear of the orchestra, while Solti, CSO Chorus director Margaret Hillis and guest chorus master Terry Edwards acknowledged the cheers from the front of the stage.

By 11:23 the volume of applause could have rivaled that of the opening storm scene in “Otello.” Nobody, but nobody, was leaving the hall. Solti, returning for a solo bow, was given a huge bouquet and a fanfare from the brass section.

Four minutes elapsed, by which time the audience had added footstamping to its repertoire.

He might as well have tried to stop a tidal wave. The singers took yet another bow with Solti, who then elected to grab co-concertmaster Ruben Gonzalez by the hand and lead him off the stage—a sign for the rest of the orchestra to follow.

Reluctantly, the crowd began to disperse. Clearly there was enough gratitude packed into Carnegie Hall to keep the ovations going 15 more minutes. But Solti made sure he did not overstay his welcome.

He will, of course, return to Chicago in the fall, and for many years thereafter, as CSO music director laureate. But no Solti farewell will ever seem as emotionally momentous as this one.

Said Henry Fogel, CSO executive director: “Solti told me he had to leave the stage when he did, because if he had given in to one more solo bow, he might have broken down.”
Solti’s vigorous farewell flourish

Sir Georg Solti is saying a fabulously loud goodbye with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

The 79-year-old Solti is ringing in his retirement from the orchestra, which he brought to unprecedented prominence over his 22 years as music director, with a series of concerts, starting last week in Chicago and ending today at New York’s Carnegie Hall. And his intensity is ferocious even by his own Toscanini standards.

The Solti concert that has the limousines double-parked in front of Carnegie Hall, as well as crowds outside begging for ticket stubs at intermission, is a concert version of Verdi’s Otello with Luciano Pavarotti singing the title role for the first time. Nobody ever thought Pavarotti would sing this greatest Italian tenor role because it requires a much darker voice than his. And reports of his tentative performances in Chicago last week indicated he might have made a mistake.

By Tuesday’s performance in Carnegie Hall (which was recorded by London Records), he had met the role’s huge vocal demands with a darker, commanding sound — aided by a lingering cold. It took him awhile to connect the character’s psychology, but he finally did so with great theatricality and style. It could become one of his best roles.

Pavarotti’s co-stars often were letdowns: Kiri Te Kanawa sang Desdemona with a sumptuous voice but was dramatically uninvolved. Leo Nucci’s Iago was vocally undernourished.

But London Records is assured of an extraordinarily bold Otello because of Solti’s orchestra and chorus. Performances of such overall precision, richness and clarity of vision are so rare, this is an Otello to tell your grandchildren about.

Somewhat disappointing — at least in Saturday’s Chicago performance — was the 66-year-old dean of British composers, Sir Michael Tippett, who wrote Zygmunt for soprano and orchestra for Solti’s last concerts. Tippett is one of the few tru-
Leisure & Arts

Pavarotti's First Otello; Domingo's First Parsifal

By Manuela Hollett Hoff

Gutplag water, sucking lizards, chewing apples, his imposing frontage protected from drafts by a large, chewy scarf, Luciano Pavarotti sang his first "Otello" last week in a concert performance here with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

It was a milestone for both the tenor and Chicago. For 22 years this city's celebratory orchestra has been led by Sir Georg Solti. Now the 73-year-old Hungarian-born conductor was relinquishing his post to Daniel Barenboim, a cause for regret to be sure. It was partly to honor him that the tenor, afflicted with a cold and no spring chick either at 56, was trying out the toughest role in the dramatic repertoire.

He looked about as lost as a big man can, holding his score, sweating profusely, unlike the two cooler companions he'd brought along for the occasion. They were Leo Nucci, eager to offer his first at least-one-voiced-size-too-small Iago, and Giiri Te Kanawa, repeating her effortless Desdemona, a role she can sing in her deep, and sometimes even has.

But it was the tenor who was the main event for the crowds surging into sold-out Orchestra Hall. At an age when many singers edge glumly into German song recitals, the grim portrait of Othello is a mighty test, indeed. His roles are usually confined to甜美 vocalise 甜美 vocalise, and when he does try his hand at drama, it is the scenes of love or death. Earlier, he had been seen in Venice, but the steady baby born in Chicago is getting stronger.

It's a different sounding Otello, all right, from those we're accustomed to, but one whose possibilities were suggested long ago by the famous Paris tenor, Vincenzo Mura. He was Tamagno's Iago at the world premiere, and after years of getting his ears blasted by his booming colleague, he had words for the future. He would be a stunner, he said, if stentorian prowess became the basic condition of future Otello. There was also a portrait des accourels to consider. A nuanced, intimate portrait of a great idiot shuffling fantastic music in what Mr. P. can provide and probably would find easier to shape with a different conductor. There was the expected glutton from the orchestra, but Mr. P.'s virtuosos, athletic, buoyant interpretation was completely at odds with his mournful Moor.

One of the few performances taped by Decca/London will eventually find itself into the stores, though Mr. P. hasn't said when or where he plans to exchange that scard for a whole costume. I guess we can rule out the Lyric Opera of Chicago, though, In Chicago, Mr. P. told a local per- son that Arikis Brusnik could go jump in the local lake (or words to that effect). The opera chief and Mr. P. haven't gotten on since he called in sick for an opening night a few years ago, and he said he would never make her floorboards creak again.

Did all the rehearsals for "Otello" squeeze out Jesse Norman, who needed to practice a new work by Sir Michael Tippett? As a tribute to the orchestra's centenary and Carnegie Hall, the octogenarian composer had written "Byzantium" with the American diva in mind. But after setting on the score for many months, she decided shortly before the rehearsals—of which there were too few, she noted through a doorkeeper quoted in Newsday.

So a quicker study, Page Robinson, took her place, giving a lively, very appealing performance at Carnegie on Monday. It would be nice if some of Ms. Norman's original rehearsal fell on Ms. Robinson, an already skinny shoulders. A setting of the Yeats poem, "Byzantium" has shimmering, not particularly memorable music, though I liked the weirdly fancy evocation of the city's golden bird. Maybe Ms. Norman thought the gurgling sounds unadorned; maybe, too, she found parts of the score way too high. High is not where the Nor- man voice likes to linger these days. When Ms. Norman sang the witch-endures Kundry in a new production of Wagner's "Parsifal" at the Met Opera recently, the top register sounded so dainty and disconnected from the earthy middle, I thought I heard a punch hitting from behind a tree stump.

But Ms. Norman's fairly bizarre performance was just one of the problems in this extremely dour production by that antiquated duo, the director Otto Schenk and the designer Gunther Schneider-Siemssen, who, never one to let go of a bad idea once he's had it, recycled the ugly Good Friday meadow he'd blighted the Salzburg Festi- valve in 1968. Badly lit by Gil Wechsler, the Met's new "Parsifal" already looks a bit like Kundry, who turns old and worn along with the audience between 1911 and 11. Wagner most operas, in which a leechy foot brings salvation to a crepuscular mysticism, are to be performed in five hours, or longer, depending on who's conducting. Once upon a time in Bayreuth, 1 sat through "Parsifal" without wishing I were dead. The designs by Andreas Ruhlandt and the direction by Gotz Friedrich, neither of whom have ever worked at the Met, created a strange, top-turry world that seemed to exist outside of normal time and gravity. In that setting, the musica- cainly slow conducting by James Levine added another transforming element.

Not so at the Met, where the tempo often came off as accelerating because the stage antics were so slow. Levine fails to astonish me how Mr. Levine can prescribe over usual productions abroad and then curtail exaggeratedly stupid shows back home. Even years later, I can remember Bayreuth's Lohengrin atop its self-control tower meaninglessly working tele- scopes and spotlights. At the Met, the piano player, made by Ange Haugland, humbled with a shiny globe that looked like a Christian ornament for Hunding's hut, and like everyone else made to effort whatsoever.

Robert Lloyd drenched on Gunthermann whenever the well fed Eikehard Waschbusch wasn't walking about his waiting wound. The exception was Mr. Domingo, bravely modeling his new role and an old wig. He's ever so fine as to let Wagner's music sing in pretty Goltz, a rarity with pages, aultrina and a juicy tone. He never sounded or looked tired. He even stayed awake even during the endless first act in which Parsifal must stand still gazing with amazement (just the rest of us) at the tacky display of the Grail in a flutter of white light.

I hear that in "Otello" productions the straightly Ms. Te Kanawa keeps eyes and eyebrows to count the number of coughs (from the audience, not the tenor), and once got up to a hundred. I'd like to know Mr. Domingo's secret.
Glitter and Tragedy At Carnegie Hall


By Tim Page

ImAGINE: THE CURTAIN rises on a favorite ballet and, in place of the Swan Queen and her Prince, the stage is crowded with bodybuilders — gassed, pumped, flexing the most extraordinary muscles. It’s dazzling, of course, even awe-inspiring at times (how did she do that with her back?), but isn’t quite what we came for, is it? And when does the dancing start?

This hypothetical situation flashed to mind now and again as I listened to what was by any objective criteria a spectacular concert performance of Verdi’s “Otello” at Carnegie Hall Tuesday night. The word “spectacular” is chosen with care, for the evening was clearly fashioned for the history books — indeed, as one of the two or three principal highlights of the Carnegie centennial season. But it was an evening more notable for showy athleticism than for purely musical values.

To begin with, this is Sir Georg Solti’s final set of concerts as music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, an ensemble he has honed to an all-but-unprecedented virtuosity in the past two decades. Moreover, it is the first time anywhere that Luciano Pavarotti, one of the few “household words” in classical music, has taken on Otello, commonly acknowledged as the Everest of dramatic tenor roles. Kiri Te Kanawa and Leo Nucci were on hand to fill out the cast; the price of a good ticket was steeper than for the best seats at the Metropolitan Opera, and Decca / London was on hand to record the event for posterity.

And what will posterity learn from those silvered discs that will be leaping off the shelves come holiday time? Well, most immediately, that Solti’s Chicago Symphony is a superbly disciplined group, with a prismatic range of tonal color at its disposal, first-desk players the equal of any in the world and a brass section that has no parallel for power and majesty.

But what a loud, blatant, aggressively goal-oriented performance Solti led! It was all volume, brilliance and visce. A energy — thrilling at times, to be sure (what other orchestra could have made such a glorious riot out of the blaring, cataclysmic chord that sets Verdi’s tragedy into motion?) — but virtually devoid of grace, repose, genuine tenderness or germinal sympathy for the singers, all of whom were regularly drowned out. It is unfortunate that the celebrated Solti / Chicago partnership had to conclude with such a dispiriting performance.
Otello': Bravo, caro Luciano

BY BILL ZAKARIASSEN
Daily News, Music Critic

YES, VIRGINIA - Luciano Pavarotti can sing the title role in Verdi's "Otello," as the celebrated tenor proved Tuesday night in Carnegie Hall when he performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Georg Solti. He's got all the notes, he's certainly loud enough, and he interprets the words and music as powerfully and expressively as anyone else today. This was readily apparent, despite the fact Pavarotti is recuperating from a two-week bout with the flu - instead of his usual white hankiechief, he opted for a towel, in which he often buried his face when not singing. But brave, Luciano - it was worth the wait. Scarcely less impressive was Dame Kiri Te Kanawa as Desdemona. She likewise gave one of her most expressive performances, and offered the most beautiful singing of the evening in her last act "Salve" and "Ave Maria." Moreover, she easily rode and even dominated the ensemble in Acts II and III. Leo Nucci, however, was a comedown as Iago. His light baritone is best suited to such roles as Rossini's Figaro, but in heavier fare like Verdi's classic villain, he just doesn't cut the mustard in range of dynamics or expression - for instance, his "Credo" was underpowered, his "Sogno" too loud.

Solti's conducting was rather puzzling - often insensitive or way too fast, as in the "Requiem" duet and the Act III concertato. He certainly got the orchestra to play magnificently, though - the incredible unanimity of the double basses at Otello's Act IV entrance was but one awesome feat. All supporting singers were excellent, particularly mezzo Elzbieta Ardam, whose unusually potent voice made every line of Emilia count impressively. The Chicago Symphony Chorus and the Children's Chorus of the Metropolitan Opera likewise made solid contributions.

EXPRESSIVE: Kiri Te Kanawa

Luciano Pavarotti: His first performance of Otello proved a strain at times

New York Newsday 4/18/91 p.2

There was a time when musicians lived with a masterpiece for many years before venturing to commit their thoughts to the permanence of recording. Those days are gone. Pavarotti has never sung Otello before and insists that he has no plans to sing the role again - no time to learn from experience, no time to grow in the part. But his interpretation has already been presented at Carnegie Hall, and it will soon be immortalised on disc.

On the evidence of Tuesday night, the role of Otello is not for him. Pavarotti is, essentially, a lyric tenor - a lyric tenor of unusual power and depth, but still a lyric tenor while Otello demands a heavier, heartier voice. Pavarotti was at his best in softer, cantabile passages, when he could make the most of the vocal luxury and sweetly unaffected songfulness that have (rightly) won him world renown. But an Otello must be able to sing loudly without sounding hard or forced, and for much of the evening, Pavarotti was obviously straining his voice to the limit; one literally feared for his blood vessels in the crushingly difficult "Esultate!"

Kiri Te Kanawa may never be a particularly searching interpreter (and the icy-go "Hail dirt" mannerisms she affected at the beginning of the "Ave Maria" would have made Shirley Temple blush), but she has a voice of appropriate size and bloom for this gigantic "Otello" and made, in the end, a touching and convincing Desdemona. Leo Nucci was a fine Iago - deep, rich, silken and malevolent. There was effective support from Anthony Rolfe Johnson as Cassio, Elzbieta Ardam as an unusually empathetic Emilia, John Raves as Rodrigo, Dmitri Krvakov as Lodovico, Alan Opie as Montano and Richard Cohn as a herald.

Ultimately, those listeners who craved the biggest, brightest, most stellar and expensive concert opera in many years got their money's worth at Carnegie Hall. But the depths of Shakespeare's tragedy and Verdi's magnificent musical setting were left for others to explore.
Pavarotti Is 'No 'tello'

By Dennis Polkow

First, for the good news: if you were among the scores of people desperate, but unable to get a ticket to one of the recent Chicago Symphony concert performances of Verdi's "Otello," with Luciano Pavarotti singing the lead role, consider yourself among the lucky ones. Unless you're a fan of roller derby, plane crashes, or train wrecks, chances are there was little for you to relax to in this "Otello." One thing is for sure: if you're a lover of Verdi and "Otello," you would have been miserable most of the evening.

And that, of course, is the bad news: for Verdi or "Otello," it did, however, have a lot to do with giving Sir George Solti a grand farewell party for his last week in Chicago as CSO music director.

Concert opera used to be a regular staple of the Solti/CSO partnership during the years that John Edward was general manager of the orchestra (1969-84). That all changed dramatically when Henry Fogel took over after Edward's death, and this is the first full-length opera that the CSO has done since Fogel arrived in 1985. The reason was simply one of cost: Edward thought it was worth it, but Fogel doesn't. But as a farewell present, Fogel broke down and gave Solti his "dream" concert, "Otello," next to "Falstaff," Verdi's surprise masterpiece, and one of the highest summits of Western art.

No doubt, Placido Domingo was initially considered to sing the lead, as he had when Solti and the CSO performed a single act of "Otello" for Solti's 75th birthday gala in 1987. Wheeze? Domingo had proven himself the definitive "Otello" of our time, and the part was far too outside of the vocal resources of Pavarotti who, despite his enormous reputation and stature (literally), really is a bel canto or lyric tenor, not a dramatic tenor.

Asked Pavarotti about this in 1987, the summer before he was to have sung Verdi's "Il Trovatore" at Lyric Opera, another dramatic tenor role, although child's play compared with "Otello." ""Il Trovatore" is like running on full motor from beginning to end," he asserted, "without having any extra resources if you need them. What you are really singing is if I am a good enough singer to make these [(dramatic] roles credible. I think so, but there is no question that my voice is a lyric tenor voice. It can be pushed beyond that and it can do less than that, but for me, the ideal Verdi role is "Un Ballo in Maschera." The rest, as they say, is history, and Pavarotti wisely cancelled that engagement, citing exhaustion as the reason.

One couldn't even imagine Pavarotti considering "Otello," especially approaching his mid-fifties—if it weren't for Solti personally offering to coach him in the role, and the further lure of recording the work with him. Besides, wasn't "that other tenor" starting to do things outside the realm of his voice? Well, if Domingo could cover practically everything written for tenor, shouldn't Pavarotti at least be able to cover all of the major Italian repertoire? Pavarotti told Solti that he needed six months to decide if it were possible, and then gave the green light for the project.

Speculation abounded: Pavarotti didn't know the role. Pavarotti wouldn't show up. Pavarotti would ruin his voice. Pavarotti would end his career.

Arriving in town weeks before the performances, Pavarotti apes nearly every waking moment going over the role with Solti, and that was after considerable work with Solti in London and Italy over the last two years, in addition to work with coaches in New York.

There were reports of panic and depression, but ultimately, Pavarotti did show up, although not without some special modifications on the stage of Orchestra Hall.

Ordinarily a concert setting allows that singers can stand in front of the orchestra so that they can be heard better. Problem: how is a pressure in front of Pavarotti and still have him be seen—not to mention heard? Extend the stage a couple of rows and build a special central platform between the chorus and orchestra, complete with a prompter's box in front of it painted black. Don't forget a table of sliced fruit, beverages, and throat lozenges, and of course, a special throne-like padded chair, and, oh yes, a music stand and an open score. Are we ready to sing now?

One would have hoped so—but from "Otello"'s first grand entrance in the first act it was obvious that Pavarotti's usually golden-sounding timbre was strained. By Act II, he was cracking, losing and going falsetto in key moments. Act III saw him reaching his high notes, but with little weight to lean on. It was the same story for the climax of Act IV. Only in the Act I love duet was Pavarotti to have shining moments.

Of course, this "Otello" had other peculiarities, which didn't help. Solti was said to be suffering from the flu, and had been ready to cancel (a chair was brought out for him after the first act). His conducting was a mere shadow of his usual self, and the acts were quite hampered architecturally. Was Solti holding back to allow the singers to be heard? Perhaps, but it didn't help. Key dramatic moments, particularly the Act II climactic duet between Otello and Iago (Leo Nucci), were nearly inaudible over the strains of the CSO. In fact, Nucci, who like Pavarotti was also singing "Otello" for the first time, could rarely be heard well, and when he could, there was little depth to his singing—and none of the treachery one associates with his character. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa sang well for herself, which is to say, she had her notes and kept an even timbre (much darker than usual, however), but never penetrated below the interpretive surface of Desdemona.

The next morning the principals held a remarkably bizarre press conference where each was trying to excuse the other as to who had been the most ill the evening before; only Leo Nucci had been well.

Would Pavarotti sing "Otello" again? "Two years ago when I decided to do it I said I would do it four times here, and that is my thought more than ever today. Not because I was just in awful condition last night, but because it is not my cup of tea. It is not right for my voice and I cannot give what I want to. Even if I am better in the next performance, "Otello" is not my piece of bread. The music is nervous, and it is a special opera, but honestly speaking, it is not special for me. It is special just because I am here celebrating Maestro Solti and to [record] the opera for Decca."
Music/Peter G. Davis

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

"...As Otello, Pavarotti sounded scared out of his wits. Domingo’s concert was the musical equivalent of ‘Have a nice day’..."

WHEN LUCIANO PAVAROTTI AND PLACIDO DOMINGO teamed up with Jose Carreras last summer to form a new pop group called the Three Tenors and cut a best-selling record, it seemed as if opera’s two most illustrious overachievers had finally done it all. Not quite. Both divos were in town recently, trying out new projects, living dangerously, and stretching their talents as well as their luck.

Luciano Pavarotti, in fact, has just taken on what may be the most daunting vocal challenge of his career—Verdi’s Otello—and performed the role under the only conditions he is ever likely to: in a carefully prepared and controlled concert presentation. The setting was Carnegie Hall; the Chicago Symphony was conducted by Georg Solti, in his final appearance as the orchestra’s music director after a 22-year tenure; Kiri Te Kanawa sang Desdemona; Leo Nucci was Iago; some of Sir Georg’s favorite British singers were imported for the smaller parts; and naturally Decca/London was on hand to beat the drum and record it all for posterity. Musical glamour can hardly be ladled out more generously these days.

For all of that, Pavarotti’s first, and probably last, stab at Otello must be reckoned a mistake—not a foolish one like his insure Hollywood film, Yes, Giorgio, but a more serious misjudgment: Verdi’s score, after all, is one of opera’s supreme masterpieces. At no point did Pavarotti suggest that his basically light, lyric instrument had the proper weight, vocal color, and dynamic range the music requires, or that he even possessed the resourcefulness and imagination to adjust to the occasion. His mechanical, score-bound declamation of the role was even more disappointing—most of the time he simply sounded scared out of his wits. Perhaps he was. When not singing, the tenor sat next to a table with his face buried in a huge white handkerchief, nervously helping himself to an extraordinary variety of potables and refreshments laid out for his convenience.

Of course, none of these visual distractions will matter when the recording appears, and no doubt the microphones can disguise Pavarotti’s vocal shortcomings. The whole bizarre affair, in fact, seemed more like a public recording session than a performance, and the overall atmosphere had the same depressing sterility that characterizes so many opera sets nowadays. No one gave the slightest impression of being held in the grip of a tremendous music drama—certainly not Te Kanawa, with her beautiful but blank Desdemona, and Nucci, with his one-dimensional, woolly-voiced Iago.

What little energy there was came from Solti and the orchestra, and even that asset was soon swallowed up in the relentless glare, spiky instrumental balances, and slam-bang accents of an interpretation without a trace of songfulness or specific musical character. In no better form than before, Solti led a crude performance of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony that viciously hammered the piece into submission. The one redeeming merit of the Chicago Symphony’s visit was the opportunity to hear Sir Michael Tippett’s latest work, Byzantium: a gorgeous musical exploration of a Yeats poem by this ceaselessly inventive 86-year-old composer, sumptuously sung by Faye Robinson.

Perhaps Placido Domingo, today’s leading Otello, dropped by Carnegie Hall to hear what his new buddy would make of the role, although even Domingo, in the midst of his annual New York blitz, must be feeling pressed for time. I’ve already written about his latest Wagnerian experiment, the title part in the Met’s new production of Parsifal. In addition to that major undertaking, the tenor has been wielding the baton over a run of Tosca, starring in his own Carnegie Hall special—a salute to Spain—and shepherding a flood of new recordings into the stores: his fourth Radames in Aida (Sony), third Turridu in Cavalleria Rusticana (DG), and second Faust in Mefistofele (Sony), as well as a recital devoted to opera’s Roman heroes (Angel) and another of his oddly faceless pop albums, this one called Be My Love (Angel).

The current report on Domingo Industries, Inc., is pretty much business as usual. At 50, he sounds scarcely less fresh and secure than he did 25 years ago, and I often wonder if any tenor has ever been more blessed with such a natural ability to learn and sing so much music so reliably and so often. All that only makes the lack of imaginative engagement in Domingo’s work the more disappointing, but his characteristic detachment and careful husbanding of emotional energy might also explain why this hyperactive tenor has never been seriously threatened by vocal burnout. The genial blandness of Domingo’s performing personality may also partially account for his wide crossover
It was an Event, to be sure—in part the final New York appearance of Georg Solti as music director of the Chicago Symphony, but mostly the first Otello of Luciano Pavarotti (April 16), recorded for posterity by London Records. The crowd of opera buffs, critics and the very rich public responded favorably. This critic's answer to the big question is: yes, Pavarotti can sing the role (though he was suffering a vocal indisposition); no, he should not keep it in his repertory; and no, he is not at present a great Otello. His Moor was a straightforward, workmanlike traversal, mostly sung loudly and almost entirely without subtlety or attention to the text, particularly in the love duet. His reliance on squillo put pressure on the least attractive aspect of his voice, and whether by choice or because of his cold, the tenor rarely indulged in the kind of sweet singing for which he is famous. The big dramatic moments, moreover, largely went underemphasized, and “Dio! mi potevi” was self-pityingly sentimental.

The finest singing came from Kiri Te Kanawa. Desdemona is perhaps her signature role, because the fluttering beauty of her soprano at its best coincides perfectly with the incomprehensible (to her) wounded innocence of the role. Her “Salve!” and “Ave Maria” shimmered in Carnegie Hall’s spaces and were the evening’s expressive highlight, surviving even Pavarotti’s upstaging antics of draping his oversized handkerchief over his face.

Leo Nucci is a minor-league villain, ade-

quote at piano levels of singing; his “Credo” was overmatched by the music and the orchestra. Of the rest of the cast, Anthony Rolfe-Johnson made a strong Cassio, Dimitri Kavrakos a stentorian Lodovico.

Which brings us to the immense forces of the Chicago Symphony, Margaret Hillis’ 100-plus Chicago Symphony Chorus and the Metropolitan Opera Children’s Chorus. Rarely has Verdi’s opera been treated to this instrumental and choral barrage, and Solti conducted the troops with his usual blend of force and no-nonsense directness. What I missed—as I usually do in Solti’s work—was any hint of orchestral color, in which this score profusely abounds. There was a utilitarian plainness about the proceedings that left me unmoved. The concerto of the third act, moreover, refused to budge, and its solid vocal weight sat hulking on the stage, probably because of the size of the forces involved. P.J.S.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

June 1991
Otello

NEW YORK

It is 27 years since Solti last conducted at the Met. On Tuesday, in Carnegie Hall, he conducted a concert of Otello, with the Chicago Symphony, that was electrifying. At Covent Garden, of course, he used also be electrifying in this opera — but in Carnegie he had a greater orchestra, and the extraordinary power and intensity with which he invested the score was even more exciting.

Sure, some disapproving voices were heard in the intervals: "hard," "noisy," "driven." They are words, I confess, that I have on occasion used about Solti performances, but they were not apt to this one. There was hardness, there was drive, and sometimes the music was very loud indeed — but always where it was appropriate, never at the expense of the singers, and never in any show-off way. I've never heard Solti's famous excitability so completely harnessed to a disciplined, long-lined, marvelously vivid, engrossing account of the whole score.

For example, that strange, discordant blast of trilling woodwinds that accompanies the first clause of Iago's Creed was terrifying; as if for the first time one realised what Verdi meant by it; yet the Iago, Leo Nucci, remained clearly audible. A list of string passages superbly, intently, powerfully played would be long. There was also much tenderness and beauty.

The concert doubled as a Decca recording session. The soloists were raised on a bridge behind the orchestra, and behind them was the large and magnificent Chicago Symphony Chorus, prepared for this performance by Terry Edwards. Pavarotti was singing the title role for the first time. (He had not been well, and there was a great deal of carry-on with potations and pills and a yard of white silk; the Desdemona, Kiri Te Kanawa, must have been tempted to swat him as he and his outside hanky scene-steal during her Willow Song.) But when he rose to sing, he sang well. "Esiutte" was clear, ringing, heroic. In the love duet, his reluctance to be intimate, confiding, anything but stentorian, was a drawback. In Act 2 it was the ringing phrases that made most effect. But in the third-act duet he began to engage with the soprano and more fully with the role, and then "Dio mi potevi scaglir" was moving.

In Act 4 he was tremendous. He sang softly, tenderly, as well as loudly. Most of my Otellos have been burly-voiced, thick-toned, sometimes raw and sometimes hoarsely covered in their forced outbursts. Pavarotti represents a return to the lyrical tenor of exceptional, apparently limitless, power, with free, forward emission and words out on the lips. Onstage, he might be grotesque; in this concert, I admired him more than I have for years.

Dame Kiri, too. I never thought to write that her utterance of words would be in itself a keen, piercing pleasure. But so it was in the Willow Song and the Ave Maria. Bach consonant and vowel was beautiful. She made her New York debut as Desdemona 17 years ago. In Act 1, I thought that over the years her tone had hardened somewhat, and that her lovely middle voice had paled somewhat. But she got better and better. The dramatic fire that we admired in her student days, at the London Opera Centre, and the vocal radiance through the full range returned. The Willow Song and Ave Maria provided one of those adventures that listeners remember all their lives: a house rapt, silent and spellbound; the soprano, the conductor, the cor anglais, the flute, mutually inspired and inspiring; the whole a revelation of why music matters.

Nucci may be vocally hit-or-miss now, but he is not a dull interpreter; he always brings the text to life, and his Iago, despite some dubious intonation, was lively and trenchant. Elizbieta Aradus seemed a nice steady Emilia until in Act 4 she began to shout. Anthony Reale-Johnson made his New York mark as a sharp-cut Cassio, but made it by singing sometimes louder than necessary.

I nearly skipped this Otello; in another hall, another Hungarian artist, Adrienne Csenegy, was making her New York debut in Kurtag. I'm glad I went to the Otello. It's a performance I'll not forget. Solti conducts it again tonight in Carnegie — his last performance as musical director of the Chicago Symphony, and a glorious crown to his 22 years in the post.

Andrew Porter