Symphony Premieres Martinu Concerto

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Curious night at Symphony

By Karen Monson

The concert that Georg Solti conducted Thursday was curiously insubstantial. Flash and flair it had, and pretty moments. But the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave its subscribers precious little musical protein.

Most satisfying was an impromptu prelude evidently not to be repeated Saturday with the scheduled fare. In memory of Pablo Casals, who died Monday at the age of 96, Solti and the Orchestra began the evening with the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

The performance may have been technically flawless, but it was emotionally rich and beautifully shaded. And it was an apt tribute from the Chicago Symphony to a great musician and humanitarian.

The WORLD premiere of Bohuslav Martinu's first Violin Concerto gave Thursday's event stature. Unfortunately, it wasn't hard to deduce why the composer never promoted performance or publication of this opus during his lifetime.

The Concerto No. 1 (or the Concerto, Op. posth.) was written in 1932-33, more or less, for violinist Samuel Dushkin. Somehow, Dushkin got the Suite Concertante instead, and the manuscript of the early Concerto passed to contrabassoonist Boaz Filler, then to musicologist Hans Moldenhauer. Moldenhauer, in turn, housed portions of his archives at Northwestern University. There the Concerto was hiding in 1971, when the musicologist, the composer's widow, Solti and soloist Josef Suk planned the unveiling.

Believe it, the history is the most interesting aspect of the Concerto.

The three movements (22 minutes) were without tempo markings: Solti and Suk opted for Allegro moderato, Andante and Allegro—safe enough. The interminable first movement grabs vitality from syncopations and obfuscates uninspired harmonies with unsophisticated chromaticism.

The Andante extends thanks to Debussy for its texture and to Prokofiev for its melodic noodlings. The final Allegro does hold rhythmic interest and appealing hints of antagonism.

But throughout, the composer admitted aimless passages and allowed dense scoring to blanket the solo instrument.

Though the Concerto challenges the soloist, it remains a thankless vehicle. Suk, when he could be heard, played with tenacity and gusto. Solti stuck with careful time-beating and kept the orchestra together.

Three short works that haven't turned up on these programs for years filled the concert. Berlioz' Overture to "Les Francs-juges," an unwritten romantic opera, makes up in amusing, brassy bombast what it lacks in subtlety.

"Macbeth," hardly one of Richard Strauss' better tone poems, gave the brass another chance to belt it out. And here the orchestra affirmed its virtuosity.

The best performance went to the "Dance of the Seven Veils" from Strauss' "Salome." Flutist Donald Peck and oboist Ray Still contributed sultry solos and the orchestra played with a golden sheen. Even the heftiest Salome would have been inspired to hoist thee veils.
Super sounds from symphony lack substance

By Robert C. Marsh

The Thursday night program of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti conducting, was (as one had every reason to expect) splendidly realized musically. Moreover, it was welcome simply as a chance to delight in the extraordinary sounds Solti and the Chicagoans produce in Orchestra Hall.

Its shortcomings were emphasized by the fact that the best work of music played, the Adagietto from the Mahler Fifth Symphony, wasn't originally included at all but was a last-minute addition to honor the memory of Pablo Casals. It was a splendid gesture.

Apart from this, the concert was made up entirely of third- and fourth-rate works by talented people whom, everyone knows, wrote better things. An entire evening of this can become tiresome.

Repertory expansion and exploration of this sort is perfectly in order. But there is also a need for balance and perspective.

The really new work of the evening was the first of the two violin concertos of Bohuslav Martinu, composed in Paris some 40 years ago, once believed lost, and brought to the public by way of the Moldenhauer Archive at Northwestern University. It is a work typical of its time and place, vaguely reminiscent of Prokofiev and impressive more for its craftsmanship than its content.
Solti and soloist Josef Suk made this belated world premiere a thoroughly sympathetic account of the material, but this could not disguise the fact that the work lacks striking thematic ideas and the orchestra is given far too little of interest to do. You can understand why the composer withheld it from performance.

Still, it was appropriate that a work of this character in a local collection should be played by the Chicago Symphony. But not, please, between Berlioz’ “Frances-Juges” Overture and Richard Strauss’ “Macbeth,” two examples of juvenilia kept alive by greater things from the same men. Those greater things from Strauss, alas, do not include “Salome’s Dance” — which closed the evening.

Indeed, of the discoveries provided, “Macbeth” may be that remembered the longest. For a start, it shows the enormous speed with which Strauss mastered the task of writing a symphonic poem. From this work to “Don Juan” is a giant’s stride although the time span is hardly a year.

Solti spared nothing in putting the work across, and his enthusiasm was easily appreciated. But the last word of the evening should have gone to a masterpiece.