

The symphony

Brahms Requiem falls into place with CSO, Solti

CURIOUS HOW musical tastes change.

It was only 78 years ago, we must remind ourselves, that the respected Boston critic Philip Hale wrote the following ho-hum assessment of Johannes Brahms' "Ein Deutsches Requiem" ("A German Requiem"): "Page after page . . . is saturated with indigo woe, and the consolatory words are set to music that is too often dull with unutterable dullness." And Hale wasn't alone. Such invectives as dry, discordant, unmelodic, and chaotic were regularly leveled at Brahms' scores when they still were relatively new to the concert public.

"A German Requiem" long since has become one of the pillars of the choral literature, and Brahms has, of course, been enshrined in the pantheon of untouchable composers. What is interesting, however, is how many contemporary performances—and not all of them by amateur musicians—do their utmost to turn this contemplative masterpiece into exactly the sort of solemn, ponderous bore Hale believed it to be.

THE BRAHMS REQUIEM which the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus offered under Sir Georg Solti Thursday night in Orchestra Hall served as a welcome corrective to this revered-to-death view. It was as

healthy, vigorous, and forthright as any performance in memory, and, of course, precisely and brilliantly executed down to the last chrome-plated detail. Everything fell into place so well that one almost longed for a few technical flaws to add a bit of spontaneity to the occasion. But then, Solti is too painstaking a musician to permit that.

If the conductor's basically ex-verted approach did not reveal Brahms' deeper currents of serene resignation as poignantly or as overwhelmingly as it might have, it nevertheless made a strong impression through the splendidly committed choral-orchestral and solo contributions of Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano, and Bernd Weikl, baritone.

Predictably, Solti responded most fully to the more overtly dramatic aspects of the score. When the chorus sang of death being swallowed up in victory (the closest Brahms ever came to composing a "Dies Irae"), the maestro underscored each triumphant syllable of the text with thrilling fervor. When "the word of the Lord" rang forth in the second section, the effect was like a great outpouring of celestial light.

And Solti never treated these big moments as ends in themselves but as properly scaled expressive checkpoints in a great arching structure. He obviously understood the tempo relation-

ships of the Requiem, moving the music along steadily while allowing enough room for the choral statements to expand and soar in all their rich-textured majesty.

ONCE AGAIN, the quality of the choral singing reflected nothing but glory on the expert preparation for which director Margaret Hillis is justly famous. Regardless of dynamic level, the sound produced by the 204-voice body was full but never heavy, smooth-flowing but always rhythmically articulated. The women's voices floated serenely over the central chorus, usually translated as "How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place."

Typical of Hillis's attention to detail was the special care shown the expressive little swells and diminuendos in the opening chorus. The German diction, moreover, was remarkably good for such a large aggregation, although one wishes American singers could learn to pronounce the second syllable of "*Herlichkeit*" as it should be pronounced instead of turning the word into "*Herlishkeit*."

Miss Te Kanawa and Weikl, both making subscription-series debuts, were a beautifully matched pair of young, fresh-voiced soloists. She seemed a mite cautious at the outset of her solo, but her message of consolation had a bil-

lowing purity of sound that was irresistible. Weikl's expressive, pliant baritone dug into the words of his two solos with considerable force, yet always tastefully.

Add to this the dependably solid, impeccably styled playing of the Chicago instrumentalists, and one had another Solti spectacular that should elicit the customary rave responses when he and the company take it, along with other works from their Brahms cycle, to Carnegie Hall and Washington's Kennedy Center next week. Recording sessions for "A German Requiem" and the Second and Third symphonies are scheduled for the week after in Medinah Temple here.

The program opened with a rather strenuous, if loose-limbed (in the mid-section) account of the Brahms "Tragic Overture" whose execution, particularly in the brass, was not as polished as one might have expected.

NOTES: The Chicago chapter of the National Association of Composers will have its second Chicago-area composers' concert at 3 p.m. Sunday at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center. Music by Joseph Annunzio, Will Gay Bottje, M. William Karlins, and others is scheduled.

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