Solti, violinist superb

SIR GEORG SOLTI'S first of two midseason programs with the Chicago Symphony — the Horowitz of orchestras when he conducts — proved to be more subtly planned than a cursory glance at its contents suggested in advance. Add Solti more relaxed, and therefore more self-possessed, than the tired giant who led three programs and several recording sessions at the start of this concert year.

Add further the downtown debut of a thoroughbred violin soloist, 25-year-old Kyung-Wha Chung from Korea, who was rewarded with a standing ovation from Saturday night's audience. The sum of these components in two workhorses of the standard repertoire, prefaced by Bartok's 1939 concerto grosso entitled Divertimento for String Orchestra, surpassed even the most indulgent expectations. One anticipated a disclosure in the Bartok of uncommon distinction and nationalistic identification, but Solti went further, and with him his strings.

BEYOND TRANSPARENCY of textures, astonishing delicacy of dynamics, and an innate "rightness" of tempi, Solti anticipated what was to come from Bartok after, without distorting the work in hand. The play of sunlight of Magyar plains of exiled memory was clouded by tensions and foreboding, even moments of black despair — unforgettably in the central movement, marked Molto Adagio, a premonition of his Elegie in the Concerto for Orchestra four years later.

At the same time, one was made aware [for the first time] of intervallic similarities — not to say harmonic procedures or folk-rooted idioms — between Bartok and turn-of-the-century British music. A glowing performance of Elgar's sturdy "Enigma" Variations at concert's close reinforced coincidence and served to bind these otherwise dissimilar works internally. By no means was this happenstance programming.

THAT ELGAR quotes a phrase from Mendelssohn in his Variations linked these, however tenuously, to the latter's E minor Violin Concerto which came after Bartok, and which Ms. Chung played with a physicality that may have distracted some from her musicality. If the tone is right now larger than beautiful under pressure, she does grasp and project the work's totality.

Personal reservations concerned the overreaction to Mendelssohn's every marking in his score by a young artist of extraordinary intensity and concentration. Sir Georg with the orchestra provided a model framework, furthermore of virtually flawless coordination, and the performance was for a moment bland — or, which Mendelssohn more often is made to be in this concerto, syrupy.