Symphony spins old-time magic

By Karen Monson

The old-fashioned program that the Chicago Symphony presented Thursday night in Orchestra Hall could have been played 130 years ago.

In a candlelit concert hall of 1845, Schumann’s Second Symphony would have been the novelty. Mendelssohn’s Second Piano Concerto was then 8 years old. And the Overture to Weber’s “Der Freischuetz” had already been around for 24 years.

But that poor coach-and-buggy audience of the mid-19th Century wasn’t lucky enough to hear this music performed by our orchestra, Sir Georg Solti and pianist Murray Perahia. They blew all the dust off these time-honored works in fresh and exciting performances.

Not everybody can make the Mendelssohn exciting. It takes a pianist like Perahia, one who cares more about making music than about bringing down the house. He shaped phrases with ingenious care, and let the melodies sing out easily.

Solti and the ensemble followed the soloist’s lead, offering an elegantly refined accompaniment.

Elegance and refinement waned in the performance of the Schumann symphony. The orchestra and its music director represented themselves better when they played the work in Munich and Zurich during last September’s European tour. But, in compensation for the hypertension and uproar, the Adagio soared with such intense sweetness it was almost painful.

The evening opened with the eerie tension that raises the curtain on the magical happenings of Weber’s opera, “Der Freischuetz.”