A young pianist insures the future of fine music

WHEN MURRAY PERAHIA chose Mendelssohn’s Second Piano Concerto to make his Chicago Symphony Orchestra debut, one of two conclusions could be drawn. Either he was a very good pianist or he had received some very bad advice.

Of all Mendelssohn’s major works, this is possibly the least often performed. Thursday night, in fact, was the first time the Symphony had performed it, and for good reasons.

Some of them are historical: The Mendelssohn craze which swept England and spread to America in the Victorian era had largely died out by the time our orchestra was founded. Mendelssohn’s name no longer was sufficient to ensure a performance. And none of the Chicago Symphony’s music directors has been a particular Mendelssohn enthusiast.

IT WOULD HAVE taken a true believer to revive the D Minor Concerto. In contrast to the G Minor, which a select series of pianists, male and female, have performed repeatedly, it is a distinctly low pressure undertaking. Aside from a sedate assortment of broken chords, rapid octaves, and interlocking passagework, there is little technical display.

Even Schumann, an inordinate admirer of his fellow romantic, called it Mendelssohn’s most “casual” composition. Hardly a choice for a performer wishing to make his maximum impression the first time out.

But Peraulia is no ordinary pianist. At 27, he has considerably more behind him than the customary string of awards. Among his sponsors and teachers are such “musician’s musicians” as Arthur Balsam, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, Alexander Schneider, and Rudolf Serkin. The recordings that first brought him to local attention were impeccably restrained and intelligent performances of Schumann and Chopin that revealed an immensely talented musician who seemingly had everything.

AND SO HE HAS. Under his fingers, and aided by Georg Solti’s steady undergirding, Mendelssohn’s minor-major undertaking revealed unexpected subtleties of style and grace in design.

Matching his mood to that of the music, Peraulia produced a modeled performance which never asserted the performer’s ego at the expense of the composer’s. His identification with the music was so complete that it was only in retrospect that one realized how much had been accomplished.

Murray Peraulia: Unexpected subtleties of style.

Power is not what this music calls for, and power plays do not seem to be part of his strategy. An inner tension—that familiar but nevertheless rare electricity that proclaims a major talent—permeated every measure of his performance. Not the tension of the circus performer’s tight wire, but that which arises when everything—balance of dynamics between inner and outer voices, independence and spontaneity in phrasing, unflagging forward motion, precise control of all details—seems exactly in order and perfectly matched to the composition’s requirements.

FROM THESE ingredients an important category of masters has led us toward music’s inner depths. Peraulia insures that there is a future as well as a past.

For Solti and the orchestra, it was an evening of symphonic romanticism at its purest. First Weber’s Overture to “Der Freischütz”—an opera in sore need of local revival. Even the overture reminds us of its effectiveness and importance.

There are subtle hints of the Wolf’s Glen, tremolo strings for terror and agitation in the cellos. The four horns—hunters in the forest, of course—and solo clarinet paint a sound picture of the opera’s natural surroundings, and the “love triumphant” motive from Agathe’s aria brings everything to a suitable triumphant finish.

SCHUMANN’S Second Symphony, a Solti specialty that was played during that European tour, was the concert-climax. A bridge composition remarkable for its blending of 18th century design principles, Beethoven’s energies, and Schumann’s particular melancholia, it both reinforces and responds to Solti’s interpretative interests.

There were a few snags and one bad intonation slip in the performance, but the numerous woodwind solos in the rippling Scherzo were ample compensation.