

A new record for Solti with Bruckner Fourth

Chicago Symphony, Sir Georg Solti conductor, with Anne-Sophie Mutter, violin, at Orchestra Hall Thursday. Romance for Violin and Orchestra, Op.40, Beethoven; Concerto for Violin in G, K. 216, Mozart; Symphony No. 4 ("Romantic"), Bruckner.

Music/Robert C. Marsh

A stopwatch is not a particularly useful tool in criticism, although I always carry one these days. The important thing is not how long a musical phrase is extended in time, but what happens within that phrase as it unfolds.

Nonetheless it is instructive to note that Sir Georg Solti's performance of the Bruckner Fourth Symphony at Orchestra Hall Thursday night broke the recent house record for that score. Solti took 66 minutes, 41 seconds. The previous record was set by Rafael Kubelik in 1973. He lagged behind Solti by about a minute and a half.

I CANNOT RATTLE off the top of my head the length of the recording by Otto "Speedy" Klemperer, but I bet it's the shortest timing of the three. And Klemperer is the conductor notorious for his slow tempos.

What is important on a practical level about this Solti timing is that the work was planned for recording later this season and unless it speeds up, it will take some doing to get it on the two sides of a single disc, the usual format for this work. If it goes over into a two-disc set, sales will suffer.

What is important in terms of musical esthetics is that Solti has once more refined away any trace of nationalism in a score and made it, as much as possible, a study in sonority and form. Just as Bartok's Hungarianism were carefully removed from the Concerto for Orchestra last Thursday, so the distinctive Austrian flavor was been carefully removed from Bruckner's work. It could have been written by a Buddhist monk.

And if you ask of this performance why Bruckner chose to call this symphony, of all his works, the "Romantic," there is no clear answer. The lyric warmth that other conductors explore to produce this romantic effect was notably repressed in this Solti account of the score.

BUT THE CHIEF problem was the essentially static quality of the performance. There were intense rhythmic outbursts. The scherzo was nearly all of this character. But through the long unfolding of the other three movements there was neither a sure heartbeat sustaining the music nor an unbroken thematic arch to lift one phrase into another. And one reason for this was the very slow pace that minimized the contrasts between the thematic material and made the central focus of the work the progression of the harmonic changes rather than the interaction of the musical ideas.

The evening began with a chamber-sized orchestra joining Anne-Sophie Mutter in the Beethoven Romance and the Third Mozart Violin Concerto. It was a debut for Mutter, strangely enough for the Beethoven as well. And it was a happy one. She is a remarkable young artist with all the technique in the world for music of this character, a clear, pure tone, and a well developed skill in phrasing and nuance. Solti matched her all the way with beautifully scaled accompaniments and extremely graceful ensemble playing.

Another record for the evening was the number of irate latecomers, about 60, who missed the Beethoven because of delays at the Michigan Avenue and Wabash Avenue bridges. Had the program been held two minutes, most of them could have been seated. Had it begun at the traditional time, 8:15 p.m., rather than the new one, 8 p.m., all would have made it.

Those who missed Luciano Pavarotti's Opera House recital Wednesday should remember that it will be broadcast on WFMT at 3:30 p.m. Saturday.