

The symphony

Hall acoustics betray Solti's Bruckner 4th

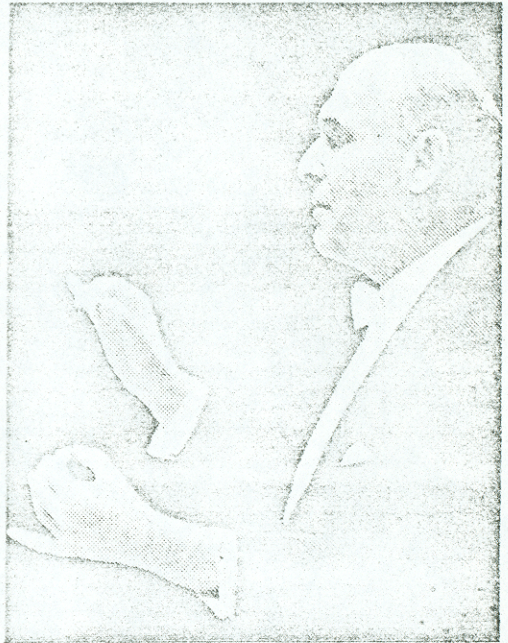
SIR GEORG SOLTI has been taken to task more than once, in these pages and elsewhere, for a tendency to depersonalize some music—occasionally even the late Romantics that are ostensibly his specialty—by pursuing technical perfection at the expense of searching out deeper, more introspective layers of meaning. But after hearing his account of the Bruckner Fourth Symphony Thursday night with the Chicago Symphony, I wondered if sometimes we pin the blame unfairly on the podium when the guilty party really is Orchestra Hall itself.

That the Bruckner was splendidly performed was not the question; it was. Solti, conducting the third and final program of his very brief autumn engagement, worked with a combination of demonic energy and rare expansiveness to build a symphonic cathedral whose every musical detail cohered with true architectural strength. The Chicago Symphony again covered itself with a glory that should be evident to all on the forthcoming recording.

BUT WAS IT the Bruckner we call "Romantic"? To these ears it was not. The sound Solti got from his orchestra had that "saturated," brassy physicality you associate with the Austrian composer's scores, and truly the CSO brasses presented a massive, mighty front. But Orchestra Hall and its dry acoustics conspired to rob that sound of a certain essential quality: resonance and, ultimately, spirituality. The great Wagnerian perorations that close both the first and last movements need space in which to bounce around. Orchestra Hall's dead sonics deprive that sound of its halo, and no amount of overcompensating from the musicians (for such effort was clearly being made) can clothe the naked sound in warmth, however virtuosic the execution.

It is a crucial point the orchestra trustees must consider when they decide by year's end how the stage is to be renovated to make room for the new pipe organ. Another unsuccessful spatial facial will just prolong our musical agony.

AS TO TEXTUAL matters, Solti chose the 1886 revised version of the score (Nowak edition), as opposed to the 1880 (Haas) edition that most Brucknerians seem to prefer. The former version brings the opening horn motif back at the end, and perhaps this is why Solti prefers it. In any case, the performance contained moments that not even a dead ambience could dim: the eloquence of the long cello line in the Andante,



Georg Solti

the wonderfully raging hunting horns of the scherzo. But it was the sustained sweep and majesty of Solti's finale that finally set this Fourth apart; 20 minutes in length, full of exposed seams, this is a notoriously difficult piece to get to cohere, but conductor and orchestra turned the trick.

Our problematic hall proved a more congenial site for the local debut of Anne-Sophie Mutter, whose appearance in the first half occasioned a kind of mini-violin recital consisting of Beethoven's Romance in G (Op. 40), and Mozart's Third Violin Concerto, K.216.

WITH HER CHERUBIC face and mass of curls, the 17-year-old German fiddler looks a cross between Broadway's Annie and Shirley Temple. Her playing of these Viennese works was tonally smooth, technically immaculate, musical, tasteful, but so carefully refined as to seem bland. It was clear that Miss Mutter (who is a protege of Herbert von Karajan) is a well-schooled musician who can spin a melting legato line with the best of them and make her bow do anything a series of double stops or brisk passagework demands of it. But it was also clear by the consciously "virtuosic" (i.e., 19th Century) way she dug into the cadenzas of the Mozart that she has not yet arrived at her own stylistic focus for classical works. The Beethoven, pleasantly lyrical if musically slight, inspired greater consistency. Solti tended to his reduced orchestra with more discretion than he is wont to bring to this repertory.

NOTE: Because of an injury suffered by Joseph Paratore, the duo piano recital by Anthony and Joseph Paratore scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday in Orchestra Hall has been postponed until April 26. Sunday tickets will be honored on the later date.

John Von Rhein