A superlative craftsmanship on 'Oedipus Rex'

Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Sir Georg Solti conducting at Orchestra Hall Thursday, with Sarah Reilly, Josephine Veasey, and Donald Gramm soloists in William Walton's 'Façade.' Reilly also conducting for the performance of 'Oedipus Rex.' By Stravinsky with Robert C. Marsh as King. Donald Gramm as Tiresias and the messenger and Mason Benefit as the shepherd. The narrator was Mortimer Hilsen. The Orchestrail staged the chorus.

Igor Stravinsky regarded his 'Oedipus Rex' as an act of homage to Sergei Diaghilev on the 20th anniversary of the great impresario's death in Paris, but the present was not appreciated. Diaghilev, like Stravinsky, was an austere, neoclassical score, a union of Sophocles and Jean Cocteau, mixing the language of the audience with a ritualistic setting of a Latin text, did not set his imagination spinning.

Diaghilev staged the work in 1927 with the singers in modern formal dress against a background of simple draperies, essentially the same approach with Sir Georg Solti employed Thursday at Orchestra Hall when he presented 'Oedipus Rex' for the first time in the Chicago Symphony subscription series. Narrating the work (in English) was Werner Klemperer whose father, Otto Klemperer, was the first to present the music in operatic form, an event that took place in Berlin in the season following the Parisian premiere.

What is good about 'Oedipus Rex' does not need staging to put it across. What is bad, staging won't help.

What is most seriously the matter with the work is its static quality as drama. Stravinsky realizes, with Tiresias, that his characters are playthings of the heartless gods. They do not act. They are acted upon. There is no character development. Each player his role and, at the appointed time, confronts his fate. This is an attitude the Greeks could view more easily than we.

The best thing about the work is Stravinsky's musical invention, which is one of his finest. Examples of setting a text to melodic lines and rhythmic pulses that emphasize both the meaning of the words and the sounds of the syllables. Jocasta's aria, Oedipus' affirmations, the prophetic music of Tiresias and, most of all, the choruses, are filled with superlative craftsmanship.

In this performance, Stravinsky was always the central figure. Solti's approach was reserved, precise, self-effacing. The excitement came from within the music, in the ability of the listener to accept Stravinsky's ideas and methods and follow where they led.

Part of the plan was that we should retain some sense of human contact through the narrator, a task Klemperer managed most successfully. This was a strong cast. Josephine Veasey's Jocasta was excellent, and Peter Pears found all the changing emotions and the final pathos of the title role. Donald Gramm, long associated with this music in this country, was ever the able singing actor.

Listening to the local premiere of Roger Sessions' 'The Dooryard Bloom'd' at the start of the program, I could not help contrasting the manner in which the contemporary chamber players of the University of Chicago had introduced four new Israeli scores last weekend. The Chicago group not merely gives lip service to the familiar verbiage about the need for critics to learn new works before reviewing them; it also takes steps to facilitate the process. Scores are readily available for inspection. Rehearsals are open.

The story downtown is very different. Performance material is controlled by the symphony and the procedures for making it available for study by critics appear capricious. Although under the contract with the musicians' union certain rehearsals are open to the press, no effort is spared to make you feel unwelcome.

But music as complex as this Sessions score requires study and several hearings before any intelligent attempt at evaluation can be made. Sessions is a major composer and this is clearly a major work with an abundance of good things. The performance appeared to be carefully achieved. Further remarks will follow in due course.