Wagner’s ‘Dutchman’ flies high for Solti, Symphony

By Robert C. Marsh

Thursday night at Orchestra Hall, we had Wagner’s "The Flying Dutchman," in concert form with Sir Georg Solti pouring out the high voltage that powered the full-hour music drama in a shatteringclone. The audience responded with a triumphant cheer that couldn't have been louder if the Cub fans had won a World Series.

But you can speculate that other reasons we had the Dutchman in the evening is that the great buffalo caviar, scheduled for earlier in the day, had been a flop. A full-grown bull buffalo, one of the more cantankerous beasts, has been donated to the food-ranking marathon at the Wagner's Annex of the orchestra is staging later this month, and the grand design was to bring the cattle to Orchestra Hall, corral it in front, and have Solti photograph it.

I take a dim view of all public events of this type, but especially those that prey animals in traumatic situations. My vivid imagination pictured Solti's conducting arm impaled on a curved buffalo horn, or a Midwestern Air buffalo pondering in traffic. My fears were in vain. The buffalo arose Thursday morning, looked at the weather and declared it wasn't going anywhere. And the smoke of the corralled cattle filled the air, and there Solti photographed it.

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The original intention was to give "The Flying Dutchman" in an otherwise season of access, but those who calculate orchestral overtimes decided that money could be saved by inserting the usual interludes, so they were observed. For the recording, to be made the week of the 15th, the original plan can be reversed.

In effect, this was a dress rehearsal, the first time Solti had been able to combine all the elements of the score and take it straight through from the top. Thus there were a few obvious mistakes lingering, and the implication clearly was that the performance would continue to improve. I hope that Solti slows down a few passages, removes the exaggerated accents from Sena's belting, and solves the problem of the same male chorus representing Townsend motherboard with the Dutchman's accented crew the next. The potential recording, herefore, is up against severe competition from Otto Klemperer and others.

How does "The Flying Dutchman" work as a concert opera? Wagner inevitably puts everything Possible into the music by way of stage cues, so a little imagination carries you a long way, but still, this is an opera that can produce spectacular visual effects. I remember a performance in Kiel where a huge ship sailed both in and out the stage in Act I. Some moments, such as Sena's first sight of the Dutchman in Act II, simply do not work without staging. With a hand less confident than Soli's, this is not an opera well suited to concert format.

Solti, however, made it work. He did so by grabbing your attention and never letting you lose contact with exciting events in the orchestra, choral and solo voices. At first glance, it looked as if Herbert von Karajan was part of the cast. Yes, it was Werner Kiefer, an able singerman. Martti Talvela is the best Dalzel around and Norman Bailey found the full range of emotions the Dutchman must project.

I was rather disappointed with Janni Martin's Sena until the voice was fully warmed by, but Rene Kollo got all there was from the ungrateful role of Erik. In a word, "The Flying Dutchman" was well achieved. The chorus was once more Margaret Hill's pride and joy. But Solti and the orchestra were thesuperstars first to last.
Solti leads 'Dutchman' on flight of unequaled precision

The Symphony

RICHARD WAGNER'S "The Flying Dutchman"—all 2½ hours of it—swept into Orchestra Hall Thursday evening with Sir Georg Solti at the helm. For sustained sweep, surge, and thrust forward motion, this concert-version of Wagner's tempest-tossed musical legend has not been equaled here in many seasons. The ebb and flow of its Gothic romance created a tidal pull which lasted from the initial horn call to the final transformation.

A stellar cast, splendid sound, intense drama, and the sea so strongly in evidence that you could almost see, taste, and smell the salt spray—this was one of those rare performances with everything to recommend it.

In so many ways it is the perfect opera for Solti. He is a romantic, but not sentimental; Wagner's youthful excursion into the Fantasy world of a German literary renaissance fails the moment it becomes choppy, Solti relishes drama for its own sake, preferring the surface reality of action to the psychological, spiritual, or supernatural of all Wagner's operas, "The Flying Dutchman" survives best with such treatment.

MARTTI TALVELA enforces all present with his magnificent voice.

on the shifting surface terrors. Even the two characters with important inner lives—the Dutchman and Senta—project best in fully lighted emotional surroundings.

The three men in the quartet of principals were as perfect in their roles as can be found today. Norman Bailey, who is remembered for his John the Baptist in the symphony's earlier "Salome," is a singing actor of enormous concentration, energy, and understanding. His Dutchman captures our sympathy with the monologue's opening line.

He is the achy, chronically displaced person granted a momentary home, the prisoner, allowed out to exercise, the hapless man momentarily hopeful. When he reaches the climax of his narrative—"Nowhere a grave! Never Death!"—we experience his exultation with him. Every phrase is colored with emotion, each word tuned to the proper feeling. And although we sense his sorrow always, the mood is never gloomy.

THAT GIANT of baritone, Martti Talvela, is unequaled in the operatic opera world. As Dalibor, the Norwegian 'captain who trades a daughter for the promise of wealth, he exudes all present in the breadth, beauty, and power of that magnificent voice, a voice is a counterfoil to the Dutchman, of course, opposing him with a buff, practical realism.

As Talvela is at the crest of his career, so is Rene Kollo, the tenor who sings Erik, the innocent hunter. It is not a large role, but his declamations of love and hatred are shaped in pure Lohengrin gold. Kollo's voice is a miracle blend of freshness, pleasing artistry, and flexibility. Each inflection of voice or consonant is exactly where it belongs, making listening a continuous pleasure.

Janis Martin was not the ideal Senta, although her Virtues are unmistakable. The dream-struck daughter who chooses to redeem a supernatural love rather than marry the boy next door is almost impossible to bring off. Martin sings with conviction and on pitch. Except for the highest and lowest phrases, which speed into shrillness, she is easy to listen to, and her duet with the Dutchman had the near magic which the rest lacked.

THE SUPPORTING roles of the Steersman and Mary were ably discharged by Warren Kream, a sweet voiced, somewhat tentative tenor who was making his American debut, and Nora Jones, who once again proved she could hold her own in the best company. As spinners and sailors, the symphony chorus sounded as though German were its native tongue and Tone and Trinklieder preferred forms of expression. Solti brought in the extra glees along with the ghost sailors and produced a monumental melodic-symphonic climax. A few orchestral beginnings were shaky and intonation among the woodwinds was an occasional problem. Otherwise, it was a stunning virtuoso display.

Thomson Willis
'Dutchman' flies high, if not fast

By Karen Mosses

Orchestra Hall turned into a rocking ship, a haven for romantic and salvation, and a lover's leap Thursday night as Sir Georg Solti conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus and soloists in a concert performance of Richard Wagner's "Das Rheingold." Naturally, it was the highlight of the musical season. What else would one expect from our resident virtuosos and their distinguished guests?

The cheers and the horn calls are probably still echoing in the corridors of the hall. Saturday's repeat performance undoubtedly will have the same effect, and we can be sure that when "Dutchman" flies to Carnegie Hall next Friday he'll leave the New Yorkers screaming wildly.

We can hope, too, that subsequent performances will find lower mileage in the brass, and reiterates attacks all around. From the great Overture right on down the line, our brass-playing stars had their problems Thursday night, and there seemed to be nothing they could do to court and please Lady Luck. They'll rest before Saturday, and so will their cohorts. This was a performance into which everybody poured each last drop of energy. That's what made "Dutchman" soar.

Technically speaking, though, the "Dutchman" didn't fly as fast as he might have, and he made some time-consuming pit stops. After an intermission separated Act I (32 minutes) from Act II (35 minutes), Solti broke briefly before Act III (28 minutes).

With the extra music that opens and closes the acts when the opera isn't performed without a break, as Wagner intended and Solti planned, our forces made it to the wire in 2 hours and 15 minutes. If they keep that pace when they record the piece for London, that is not only appropriate, but crucial to the mood.

Thursday's soloists recognized the importance of their assignments. Partly through hard work and partly through physical quirks of fate, they gave the music much more theatricality than one might expect from an unstaged reading.

At noon a man Bailey somehow managed even to look like the Dutchman — poised but eager, slightly pale and quite thin, haunting and haunted. The British baritone, the Jokanoff in our December 1974, "Ela- nire," sang exquisitely on Thursday, especially in the treacherous, unaccompanied beginning to his duet with Senta, "Wie aus der Ferne."

His bearded, bear-like basso colleague, Martti Talvela, also looked good as Daland, Senta's seafaring father. Even the people in the gallery could notice Talvela's eyes lighting up when he sang about jewels and treasures, and it was difficult to keep from applauding after his masterful delivery of the aria "Moest du, mein Kind."

His "Kind." daughter Senta, was Janit Martin, whose performance was perfectly adequate, but not inspired. Rene Kollo was Erik, the romantic lover. Tenor Werner Krenz introduced himself all but inaudibly as the Sturmann, and Isida Jones served well as Mary.

All across the back of the stage were the sailors and their girls, otherwise known as the Chicago Symphony Chorus. They had a great deal of fun singing their dance and risping "Hoe, hoe, hulians."