Chicago Symphony’s Big Surprise

Instruments lost on the road, but the show goes on.

BY ROBERT COMMANDAY

The Chicago Symphony has been called the Emperor of Orchestras. Saturday afternoon in San Francisco, the Emperor had no clothes, also no instruments. The orchestra’s trucks had been held up by snow, gloom of night and a flat tire, their whereabouts somewhere between Needles, Arizona, and San Francisco. It was like old California times, the performance held up by the wagons hung up at the pass.

Thus it happened that a capacity audience in Davies Hall was treated to a Prelude concert of chamber music extemporized by Chicago Symphony musicians, including Sir Georg Solti’s U.S. debut as a pianist, and then a two-hour symphony concert played on borrowed instruments, for the most part. The upset was that the orchestra played like the Chicago Symphony but didn’t sound like it.

Though many of the instruments that were brought to the hall during the day by San Francisco Symphony members, and from the Youth Orchestra and Roland Feller’s violinmaker’s shop were doubled by extra players, some brief, hurried-up practicing was not enough for musicians to adjust to unfamiliar instruments. And they had to perform without the essential prior acoustics check and adjustment to the peculiar properties of the Davies Hall stage. Handicapped, they didn’t exactly blow their local “competition” away, but it was still good and a class act.

The Prelude chamber music introduced the audience to individual Chicago musicians, mostly principals, in performance distinguished by poise. Except for the musicians’ informal dress, it did not seem like something arranged in an hour’s time. All the above was explained from the stage by the executive directors of the two orchestras, Peter Pastreich of the host S.F. Symphony and Henry Fogel of Chicago, good-naturedly and received by the audience in the same spirit.

The 74-year-old Solti’s contribution was in the Rondo Allegro finale of Mozart’s Piano Quartet in G minor, K. 478, the performance prepared during the preceding hour with his concertmaster, Samuel Magad, principal viola, Charles Pikler, and principal cell, John Sharp. Solti played with all the grace and inspiration, his tone round and even, everything precise and clear, his nuances reflected by his associates. If, as is likely, he doesn’t practice piano diligently, he still has much of the keyboard skill with which he impressed Toscanini in Salzburg in 1938, the launching point of his career.

The first work was a probable first here, a Clarinet Quartet in E-flat, attributed to Mozart—a possible modern completion of fragments or a recently discovered piece. It is fascinating piece on many counts. It has an uncharacteristic way of interweaving the violin and viola parts (played by Nisanie Graff and Richard Ferrand). The slow movement is emotional and affective and has a wonderful, long Italian line that assistant principal clarinet John Yeh played with great refinement. The finale, involving dextrous passage work for Yeh and artful ensemble was deftly played.

The first movement of Schubert’s “Arpeggione” Sonata was played with a restraint and musicality that enhanced its eternal charm, by Charles Pikler on viola, with Mary Sauer, the orchestra’s pianist. She has a most exquisite gentle touch and sound. The Allegro finale of the Mozart’s E-flat Quintet for Piano and Winds K. 452 was part of a performance that actually had been prepared for, a recital at the S.F. Conservatory the same evening. Paul Hersh of the Conservatory faculty was pianist, playing with affectionate understatement that informed as well the elegant performing of Michael Heinrich, oboe, Larry Combs, clarinet, Gail Williams, horn and Bruce Grainger, bassoon.

Finally, after an hour of the unscheduled chamber music, the instrument, clothes and music trucks still not having arrived, the orchestra began with the “Prelude and Liebeslied” from Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde.” Solti led a lifelong performance distinguished by steady rhythmic integrity, breathtaking pianissimos, and grandness, nobility rather than passion.

Mozart’s Symphony in D, K. 385, “Haffner,” replaced John Corigliano’s Clarinet Concerto, the music for which the S.F. Symphony library could not supply. Solti’s way with the “Haffner” was distinctive for his concentration in the first movement on its extended transitions, achieving suspense, poise not dramatic suspense, also in the Andante. The woodwind playing that came off best throughout the concerto, unified and finely balanced, was subtle in the Mozart. This was a “Haffner” played less for brilliance, as is normally done, than for warmth of personality.

Finally there was Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which suffered the most from the handicap. The full-blooded playing sounded harsh, especially in horns and brass, the timpani insensitive in the Mozart as well. The first movement changed personality in Solti’s interpretation, being driven and in-tempo to start, acquiring a certain dramatic rhetoric by the end. While cello and other sections showed continual improvement of tone during the Fifth, it was the breadth and integrity of the interpretation and the orchestra’s ensemble and response that had to be admired, not the actual sound.

The missing trucks arrived three hours later, at 9 p.m. on Saturday so that the Chicago Symphony had a proper rehearsal yesterday for a presumably normal concert last night. It was reprogrammed so that Corigliano’s Clarinet Concerto would replace Haydn’s Symphony No. 103 as companion to Mahler’s Fifth Symphony. An unanswered question is how trucks loaded with millions of dollars of instruments, and with a big audience waiting, are not equipped with cellular phones. One would think...
SAN FRANCISCO audiences got more than they bargained for this weekend in Davies Symphony Hall, where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played Saturday afternoon and Sunday evening.

The earlier program was a succession of surprises, owing to the fact that the orchestral instruments were not in the hall when the concert bell rang.

They had been delayed by bad weather, bad luck and bad planning. First it was snow, then a flat tire, and then the agricultural inspectors at the Arizona-California border, who stopped the truck carrying the instruments for a routine check only to discover that the drivers didn’t have their paper work in order.

Preferring not to play on borrowed instruments, the orchestra decided to play on borrowed time. They began, 15 minutes late, with a chamber music program featuring members of the orchestra who had carried their own instruments.

Nearly an hour later, the chamber program was capped by the American debut appearance at the piano of conductor Sir Georg Solti, who joined a trio of string players from the orchestra for a delicately flavored account of the slow movement from Mozart’s G minor Quartet for Piano and Strings.

"I promise you, you’ll hear my orchestra," announced Sir Georg as he took the stage, and so we did, although the instruments still had not arrived.

Borrowing from the San Francisco Symphony, the Symphony Youth Orchestra and a local violin shop, the Chicago members took to the stage in running shoes, sport shirts and tennies, for a makeshift program of Wagner’s Prelude and Liebestod from “Tristan und Isolde,” Mozart’s “Haffner” Symphony (replacing John Corigliano’s Clarinet Concerto) and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, all with Sir Georg conducting.

Playing on someone else’s instrument may not seem like a big deal to a novice, but it’s a crisis to musicians who become very attached to what they put in their mouths, under their chins and between their legs.

The handicap took its toll on the orchestral sound, there was some intonation trouble in the Wagner and the Beethoven lacked the edge that it would surely have under ideal conditions, but the program worked, and the crowd, having been treated royally for its patience, responded enthusiastically.

For the real sound of the Chicago Symphony, however, you had to be there Sunday night. Playing on their own instruments and responding to the electricity generated by an excited audience, the orchestra created music at a level San Francisco audiences rarely hear.

What lore at the soul was Solti’s gripping account of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, which he shaped with all the skill of a Michelangelo: now wildly hammering away at a giant block of stone; now carefully shaping a delicate feature; now polishing the stone to realize the true potential of its beauty and color.

The orchestra responds to his leadership without question. They play — to the man — with a fierce intensity that results in giant blocks of sound that stand tall, strong and proud. Yet they are so in control of their instruments that the tiniest pianissimos shimmer.

It is an orchestra of virtuoso musicians with a deep, rich bass sound unequaled in San Francisco and an internationally celebrated horn section.

Solti is featuring one of the orchestra principals on tour, clarinetist Larry Combs, and because the Corigliano Concerto had to be cut from Saturday’s program (the music was on the truck with the instruments), Solti gave Combs the spotlight Sunday (eliminating Haydn’s “Drumroll” Symphony).

Written in 1977 for the New York Philharmonic, the Concerto is a brilliant work that pits the solo instrument against the orchestra as often as it brings them together in solo and accompanying roles.

It begins with an all-but inaudible clarinet cadenza over a pianissimo orchestral buzz that grows into heavy violence. As in the last movement, the clarinet is chased by an angry orchestra, only to be surrounded in the finale by horns stretched across the balcony and a percussion battery at the rear of the stage.

Combs’ command of the Concerto is absolute. He plays as though he relishes the opportunity, aggressively racing through scales and arpeggios, his tone in the upper registers as true and full as in the low.
SYMphony rights a sour note

EXAMINER STAFF REPORT

Davies Symphony Hall concertgoers got two performances for the price of one Saturday because most of the Chicago Symphony's players were without instruments when the curtain went up.

Ten string players and a clarinetist who had brought their instruments with them saved a sold-out audience of 3,000 from a long, music-less wait with a sprightly chamber music miniconcert.

The heavy-duty instruments were somewhere between San Francisco and Needles, where the truck hauling the instruments and the symphony's wardrobe had a flat tire.

Concertgoers took the news of the unforeseen program switch good-naturedly with laughter and applause.

They were rewarded with the first Mozart E Flat quartet for clarinet and strings, featuring clarinetist John Bruce Yeh, and Schubert's Arpeggione and Sonata.

Chicago Symphony conductor Georg Solti, who practiced backstage even as his chamber players performed, then made his American debut as a piano soloist.

Determined that the full show would go on despite the wayward truck, instrument-less musicians used the time the impromptu chamber music concert gave them to borrow instruments from the San Francisco Symphony and youth orchestras.

Their scheduled concert followed Solti's debut.

A second concert is scheduled Sunday at 8:30 p.m. at Davies Hall.

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Weird weekend for symphony

CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, Larry Combs, clarinet; Samuel Magad, violin, George Solti, conductor, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco. Program: John Corigliano, Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra; Mahler, Symphony No. 5.

SAN FRANCISCO — It was a weird weekend for the Chicago Symphony and its Northern California audiences. When the orchestra's instrument truck didn't show up for the Saturday concert, the full house was treated first to a little chamber music — including Solti's impromptu U.S. debut as a pianist — and then to part of the scheduled program, played on borrowed instruments.

On Sunday evening the scheduled Haydn Symphony No. 103 was tossed aside to make way for Corigliano's boisterous concerto — which had been bumped on Saturday — and followed by Mahler's usually loud and spirited symphony. This meant the Davies Hall audience heard an imaginative American work on its 10th birthday and Corigliano, who was present, got to accept the warm applause of most of those on hand.

The concerto is a complex, eclectic work which ranges from soft chamber sounds at the opening and in the second movement through screeches from fore and aft in the hall to passages that sound like one of Corigliano's much-admired film soundtracks.

Solti is a modern master at bringing out the rugged landscapes, the tragic throbbing, the soft and lyrical beauties, the bouncing good fun of Mahler's Fifth. Despite a few flubs, conductor and band lived up to their virtuoso reputations and won a long standing ovation.

— William Ratliff
Saturday’s misfortune worked to Sunday audience’s advantage

By Judith Green
Mercury News Music Writer

SAN FRANCISCO

WHEN a 103-member orchestra moves onto the stage, complete with piano, harp, percussion battery and five horns, two trumpets and two clarinets stationed around the balconies of Davies Symphony Hall, you begin to suspect it’s not going to play the Haydn symphony you see advertised in your program.

The renowned Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Sir Georg Solti turned misfortune to advantage at its San Francisco performance this weekend. For the sellout audience Sunday, sweet were the uses of adversity.

The orchestra’s trucks — with its heavy instruments, sheet music and concert clothes — were stranded by a snowstorm and mechanical troubles in the Rockies, somewhere between Tulsa, Okla., and the Bay Area. For its Saturday matinee, the Chicagoans played in street clothes, having borrowed instruments and music from their colleagues in the San Francisco Symphony. But the centerpiece of that concert, John Corigliano’s clarinet concerto had to be shelved, because the orchestral parts were in the trucks.

The music arrived Sunday, and the concerto replaced Haydn’s “Drumroll” symphony as the prelude to Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor. The program, in consequence, became a splendid, unabashed orchestral showpiece, for Corigliano’s concerto and Mahler’s symphony are about equal in the bravura department.

The concerto, written in 1977 for the New York Philharmonic’s Stanley Druckler, was played superlatively by Chicago’s principal clarinetist, Larry Combs. In 27 minutes, it shows off the clarinet wonderfully: its agility and range, its spice and sentimentality, its skill in sculpturing cool melodic contours, its bite and wit.

The clarinet flutters, birdlike, through a long introduction, as the orchestra gathers momentum by means of a slowly accelerating pavane in the low woodwinds. This soon becomes a walking jazz bass, punctuated by the low strings, carrying the listener into an energetic movement called “Cadenzas.” The title is plural because nearly every section gets some kind of virtuosic solo passage, including the percussion.

The slow movement is a luminous elegy, reminiscent of Benjamin Britten’s wide-open sea scenes; it was written in memory of the composer’s father, concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic for 23 years. The finale, “Andantino Potozza,” calls upon those upstair’s winds, which send showers of brassy sparks around and around the balcony, sweeping listeners into the vortex of this exciting music.

Combs got a prolonged ovation, which he deserved; and Corigliano, a tall, thin chap who looks younger than his 49 years, shambled out to a roar of bravos and a discernible minority opinion of encores. I overheard a woman ask her neighbor whether he liked the piece; when she said yes, she responded: “you must really be open-minded. I thought it was terrible.” She was right about him, anyway.

Solti, still tall and commanding though a trifle stooped, is a past master of Mahler; he has recorded the whole symphonic cycle with this orchestra, which he’s led for 17 years. The strong, somber Symphony No. 5, a landmark of the repertory, seems designed for the Chicago Symphony’s virtuoso strings, exceptional woodwind soloists and unequaled brass, the best in the world.

Nonetheless, the first two movements were — for this orchestra — splotty and careless, as though the players were not paying quite enough attention. The orchestra sounded rocky and ragtag through whole passages, though some of this may have been caused by the hall’s unfamiliar acoustics. Too many seams showed: In both movements, the ensemble seemed continually to be losing and then re-establishing equilibrium and tempo. Not until the scherzo did the orchestra seem to get control of itself, and the finale rose to exalted heights before exploding in a storm of Jovian laughter.

Between these comes the adagietto, that delicate, motionless elegy for strings and harp. It received as histrionic and molten a reading as we are likely to hear — in this life, anyway. Solti imperiously held his peace before the movement, waiting for all the coughs and rustles to expel, so the adagietto could come, as it must, out of nowhere. And, by God, he got it: absolute stillness in the hall. Davies Hall doesn’t often find itself nonplussed by an orchestra. One suspects that if the Chicago Symphony were in residence here, the acoustical clouds would have to be return to accommodate its sheer, brilliant volume.
For Chicago Symphony, show must go on

Musicians excel despite missing instruments

By Paul Hertelendy
Mercury News Music Writer

The mettle of the Chicago Symphony, as one of our elite orchestras was confirmed in an ordeal you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy: playing a concert in a sold-out Davies Symphony Hall on borrowed instruments and slapping together a presentable chamber prelude to boot.

Professional music, in its best sense, involves making the best of total adversity. And the Chicago Symphony's niche on most critics' Top Five U.S. orchestras lists seemed warranted after Saturday's hastily improvised program, made necessary when an instrument truck did not arrive until six hours after the scheduled concert time.

The symphony played without a rehearsal in town, but that was strictly according to schedule. After the Bartlesville, Okla., concert Wednesday night, no run-throughs were on tap before the Saturday matinee concert in Davies.

For the chamber portion, various permutations of players performed all or parts of an E-flat Quartet for Clarinet and Strings attributed to Mozart (an 18th-century transcription by parties unknown of Mozart's Violin Sonata, K. 380), the Schubert "Arpeggione" Sonata with viola, and Mozart's E-flat Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452.

Conductor Sir Georg Solti, 74, who began his career as a prize-winning pianist, made his belated U.S. debut in that medium most unexpectedly Saturday, performing gingerly, almost reluctantly, in the slow movement of Mozart's G minor Piano Quartet, K. 474.

The chamber pieces suffered a bit in polish, perhaps — the performances were virtually unrehearsed. Still, the quintet for piano and winds as played by the Chicago Chamber Musicians sounded of recording quality. And John Bruce Yeh's E-flat clarinet work in the Mozart quartet transcription was deft, spontaneous and infectious.

The orchestral performance was also a revelation. Despite the unfamiliar instruments, the players performed with the sinewy, robust and monumental dimensions for which Solti and his orchestra are duly renowned. The Beethoven Fifth Symphony was electrically vibrant. The Mozart Symphony No. 35, the "Haffner" (inserted in place of a clarinet concerto, the music for which was still on the truck), was effusively exuberant, and not as thick-textured as most of the Mozart on Solti-Chicago recordings, probably because the string section was winnowed down to 31 players). The Wagner Prelude and Liebestod from "Tristan und Isolde" were not very ardent but immensely epic and majestic.

The glow, the sheen and the unity of the texture certainly was hurt by the players' unfamiliarity with the instruments they borrowed from the San Francisco Symphony players. But some of the most glowing sounds came from the oboes, where the unfamiliarity could have been expected to create the greatest problems.

Solti is an imposing conductor. He is so tall that he dispenses with risers for his back-row players. His baton technique tends toward a nervous, twitchy, scarecrow style in a piece like the Beethoven. Though an old back ailment prevents his turning his head more than a few degrees right or left, he whips about the podium energetically, turning from violins to cellos and back again with rapt attention. He also played the program from memory, with just the title page of each score showing on the music stand.

The audience was exuberant, close to jubilant after three hours of audibles, delays and impromptus in the hall.

Snatching triumph from adversity is what the arts are about. The 3,800 people in the sold-out hall found an inspiration in this make-shift event, played without so much as concert attire, beyond what they might find in 100 uneventful subscription nights. Rising to the occasion, the players left an indelible impression. This is an orchestra of which Chicago can be very proud, and its performance under duress was a lesson for us all.