Herseth doesn't have to blow his own horn

By Howard Reich

W hen Adolph Herseth takes his bows Thurs-
day night in Orchestra Hall, he likely will be
thinking back on the 40 years he has been
performing on that stage.

And despite the gifts that have made him
one of the most enduring first-chair trumpeters
in America, he still will be a little incredulous
that his career turned out the way it did.

"Did I ever think I would be first-chair trumpet
this long? Are you kidding? I never thought I'd be
first chair to begin with," said Herseth, who at 66
plays with a brilliance and assurance that remain
the envy of most trumpeters half his age.

Herseth's gifts will be more to the fore than usual
during the Chicago Symphony Orchestra subscrip-
tion concerts Thursday through Saturday as he solo-

Arts at large

in the world premiere of a trumpet concerto by
Czech composer Karel Husa.

"All I ever wanted to do was play in an orchestra.
The world's greatest music, you know, is written
for symphony orchestras and opera. But to sit in a
band like this? To play this stuff under these great
conductors? I'd do it another 40 years if I could," he
said. "I was a very young conductor. He thinks I'm
too young. I should have seen this guy. But he was
ever too young to work with; he loved music, loved
to hang around telling stories, swapping salty tales.

"Of course, I played under Fritz Reiner—
everybody said he was a tough guy. You know. Of
course he was; all he wanted you to do was to play
well all the time. What's wrong with that? That's
what you're here for.

"Pierre Monteaux was fantastic. This guy had such
a cosmopolitan repertoire.

"Carlos Maria Giulini was really special in his own
way. He was the ideal contrast to Coti, who also has
been great for this orchestra.

Yet few of these conductors did more to define
the particular brilliance of the CSO more than Her-
seth. Although other orchestras rival the CSO for
overall splendor of sound, such as the Berlin Phil-
harmonic, with its deeply burnished tones, or the
Philadelphia Orchestra, with its infinitely subtle
phrasing, Herseth's brass section remains the wonder
of them all.

"I'd bet that you could switch around the mem-
bers of our brass section, and people in the audience
wouldn't even know unless they looked," Herseth
said. "Everybody carries their weight, and that's why
we sound the way we do.

Still, Herseth's trumpet has set the tone since
1948, when he joined the orchestra at age 27. It was
Herseth's first orchestral job, and he got it by fortu-
nate coincidence and a lot of chops."

"Arthur Rodzinski [CSO music director from 1947-
48] wanted to make some changes in his trumpet
section here, and a couple of Boston Symphony
players with whom I had been studying gave him my
name," recalled Herseth, who was working toward
his master's degree in music at the New England
Conservatory in the late '40s, having received an
undergraduate degree in math from Luther College
in Iowa. "So I was invited by telegram to play for
him at his 5th Avenue apartment in New York.

"I didn't know much of the orchestral repertoire
yet, so I just went to the New England Conservatory
and said, 'Give me the first trumpet parts for
everything you've got.' Then I went down to Rod-
zninski's apartment and played and played.

"And when I was done he said, 'Now I will tell
you that you are the next first trumpet of the Chica-
go Symphony.' Can you believe it? And here I
wasn't even sure if I was auditioning for third!

"So I said, 'Sure, whatever you say.'

"'You have passed summa cum laude,' he said.

"'Now you must go talk to the management about
the details—and hit them for all you can, you've
got it.'"

Anyone who has been to a CSO concert has seen
Herseth—he's the fellow in the back of the orchestra
whose face turns crimson each time he puts his
instrument to his lips. The hue is especially striking
against his sheaf of white hair.

"I've been that way since I started playing trumpet
at the age of 7," Herseth said. "I'm not aware of
any extra feeling of strain or anything like that.

"My internist has talked to me about it because he
comes to some concerts and gets concerned when he
sees me turning that color. But I'll tell you, I've
worked with people whose faces turn white when
they play, and they're the ones who black out, not
me."

Indeed, Herseth can recall only one time when he
was a shade less than thoroughly confident as CSO
first trumpet. In 1952 a major auto accident
dipped six teeth and rearranged his facial features.

"I still remember how dumb I sounded the first
couple of notes I tried to play after that," Herseth
said. "It was so bad I broke up laughing.

"When I came back to the orchestra, I couldn't
get above 'F' on the staff, so I felt a bit shaky. But
you know what? Once the concert started, I was
good as ever. When you're out there playing, you
don't think about anything else.

So Herseth carries on, still getting the charge out of
playing in a "great band" that he got from the
beginning. He isn't sure how long he can continue
to defy the laws of aging, but he is pretty sure of
how he will feel during the final days of his career.

"I've said to my wife [Avital]," said Herseth, who
has lived in the same Oak Park bungalow since he
moved to Chicago, "that if it's all over next week, I
had a marvelous ride.

"If it's all over next year, terrific, I don't have a
complaint in the world.

"And if it goes another five years, great. I'll keep
myself in good shape, I'll practice. If I can make it
for a few more years, wonderful."

Opening tonight

DANCE: American Ballet Theatre performing "Bolero Imperturbable" with music of Maurice Ravel, 7 p.m., Auditorium Theatre.

MUSIC: "Ludwig 2.0/1.5" with music of Ludwig van Beethoven and Joseph Haydn, "Robert Schumann: A Schoenberg Project," 8:30 p.m., Orchestra Hall.

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