CSO gives trumpet work a dazzling debut

By John von Rhein
Music critic

If you are going to present an unfamiliar new score to audiences 12,000 miles away, you had better make certain beforehand that the score is good and durable. Fortunately, Karel Husa’s new Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra is both.

Georg Solti thinks highly enough of the work to feature it four times next month during the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s three-week visit to Australia, which begins in Perth on March 3. That is as strong a vote of confidence as he has given any world premiere he has presented during his Chicago tenure.

One’s impression after hearing CSO principal trumpeter Adolph Herseth give the Husa concerto its world premiere at the Solti-led subscription concert Thursday in Orchestra Hall is that the maestro’s confidence is well founded.

Husa, an expatriate Czech composer who has lived and taught in America since 1954, is a mainstream modernist who writes music that performers find gratifying to play and that audiences find challenging. The Trumpet Concerto is such a work—filled with prickly dissonances, tense sputters of solo virtuosity and hard, percussion-splashed timbres. For all that, however, the score is accessible in a Central European musical idiom clearly derived from Bartók.

There are the usual three movements—a rather mournful and intense Molto moderato flanked by two agitated Allegros that underscore the trumpet’s taut rhythmic gestures with clattering temple blocks, pounding drums and other obstreperous percussion. If there is anything disappointing about the work, it is that the solo material is not very interesting, consisting mainly of dry staccato figuration that moves in scale patterns or turns back on itself.

That criticism aside, one must respect Husa’s canny craftsmanship, expertly judged scoring and idiomatic writing for the soloist. The concerto is a worthwhile addition to the slim literature of 20th Century trumpet concertos; many a trumpet player will wish to add to his repertoire. Few, however, are likely to play it more vividly, or with more golden tone, than Herseth. He was remarkable.

Not everything in this performance went smoothly; there was some uncertain ensemble early in the third movement that should improve over the coming two concerts in Chicago, four in Australia. The enthusiastic audience brought the composer, soloist and conductor back to the stage for repeated bows.

Solti affirmed the concerto’s spiritual and musical links to Bartók by pairing it with Bartók’s “Miraculous Mandarin” Suite. As is his wont, the conductor seemed less interested in the score’s lurid, overheated expressionist atmosphere than in defining rhythm and structure. As a full-frontal display of icy orchestral brilliance, it could hardly have been surpassed.

The maestro’s approach to the Brahms Fourth Symphony has changed—for the better—since his last performances and recording here a decade ago. He still regards the slow movement as a kind of tragic elegy, treating it as deliberately as a Bruckner adagio. Now, however, his opening is more relaxed and flowing, less self-consciously molded. His scherzo is exuberant and life affirming, the finale beautifully cohesive. With orchestral playing of such splendor, how can the Aussies not love the Chicago Symphony?

• A photo of Rudi Lupu accompanying a review in some editions of the Feb. 11 Tribune was misidentified as Murray Perahia. The Tribune regrets the error.

• Richard Thomas, chairman of the Orchestral Association, said during a news conference Thursday that the orchestra has replaced the nine double basses damaged on tour in Texas a year ago. A $100,000 grant from the Field Foundation enabled the CSO to buy new basses, as well as seven-ply marine plywood cases made especially to withstand the rigors of travel.

He also brought us one step closer to learning the identity of the next music director of the Chicago Symphony, as of 1991. Thomas said the board will make an announcement as to Solti’s successor later this year or in early 1989.