



Tribune photo by Michael Fryer

Placido Domingo (left) and Georg Solti during rehearsal Friday before the evening performance.

Solti takes center stage for a boffo birthday gala

By John von Rhein
Music critic

Mayor Harold Washington presented the maestro with the Chicago Medal of Merit, the city's highest honor. No less than 64 eminent musicians and colleagues sent touching testimonials. TV cameras were everywhere. At the end of the festivities, a sea of white balloons descended onto the flower-festooned stage as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra struck up a fervent rendition of "Happy Birthday" and all of Orchestra Hall rose in applause.

It was Georg Solti's night all the way.

Perhaps no conductor in history ever had his birthday celebrated by so many people in so gigantic a fashion. And Sir Georg, who will reach the ripe young age of 75 on Oct. 21, seemed to be enjoying every minute of it.

Of course, the Chicago Symphony's pension fund tribute to its music director Friday night honored more than a birthday—more, even, than a Solti tenure that is approaching the 20-year mark. It honored one of the great conductor-orchestra collaborations of modern times. When Washington said of Solti, "We cherish him—he is our cultural excellence," the clear implication was that Solti and the Symphony made that excellence happen together.

The birthday bash, in which Solti was joined by guest artists Kiri Te Kanawa, Placido Domingo and Murray Perahia, had been sold out for months, although thousands of others were able to join in via a live radio broadcast. The social mavens turned out in glittery force. Domingo even waved a stick in front of our band and out came the "Fledermaus" overture.

The program book identified Sir Georg as "conductor and pianist"—a dual role he had never fulfilled in Chicago until Friday night. And, indeed, the most anticipated segment of the concert was when Solti and Murray Perahia settled down at adjoining Steinways to play Mozart's Concerto in E-flat for Two Pianos, K.365.

Solti was reported to have been frightfully nervous about his local keyboard debut, which no doubt accounted for a somewhat heavy touch and one or two punchy attacks. (By comparison, Perahia, who took the more demanding *primo* part, was all lightness, fluidity and bejeweled elegance.)

But if the pianists were not ideally matched in style, their musical skills were complementary, and Solti's ability to coordinate things from his piano bench was that of a crack field commander. Hopefully he will favor us with more keyboard excursions over the next few seasons.

For my taste, Solti's finest moments came after the intermission, when he took charge of two works central to his repertory, Strauss' "Don Juan" and excerpts from the first act of Verdi's "Otello." Both got blazingly dramatic performances.

The Strauss tone poem seemed appropriate in the hands of a man who, with a rich and celebrated career largely behind him, remains full of the life force, with many more conquests yet to come.

The wondrous CSO Chorus sang its "Otello" music with a fervent majesty to rival the La Scala forces, with various chorus members taking supporting roles. As for our Otello and Desdemona, Domingo and Kiri Te Kanawa looked sexy and glamorous together.

Their singing was less than memorable. The tenor sounded tight; the soprano floated lovely but meaningless sounds. Indeed, this Desdemona was so disengaged that she barely looked at her Otello during their ecstatic love duet. If not for Solti and his splendid orchestra and chorus, Verdi's moonlight and stars would have had to be taken on faith.

No "thank you" to a 20th Century musician would be complete without some 20th Century music. Thus, as the opening piece, CSO

composer-in-residence John Corigliano contributed "Campane di Ravello" (Bells of Ravello), from whose hazy, bell-like sounds amusingly emerged the "Happy Birthday" tune. It was directed by assistant conductor Kenneth Jean.

Happy birthday, Sir Georg. If I may borrow a line from CSO members committee Chairman Donald Koss, long may you wave!