THE EXUBERANT
SOLTI AT 75

A maestro is honored

Outside the Chicago Symphony's Orchestra Hall last week, banners hailed Sir Georg Solti on his 75th birthday. Inside, the orchestra's exuberant conductor seemed almost too busy to celebrate. In four days he led the orchestra through three separate concert programs. In the last, a birthday gala, he also appeared for the first time in the United States as a soloist—in a Mozart piano concerto.

Chicago audiences have been celebrating their maestro continually since the Hungarian-born Solti took over the orchestra 19 seasons ago. Not to hear Solti's Chicago Symphony on its home ground would be like not seeing the Colosseum in Rome, with the one difference that it is easier to get into the Colosseum. Ticket sales for the orchestra's home concerts, executive director Henry Fogel exultantly reports, average 98 to 102 percent of capacity—the higher figure the result of loyal subscribers donating unused tickets for resale.

That's all Solti's doing. Purists can pick out a flaw or two in his interpretive skills, especially a tendency to rush headlong through 18th-century music—exemplified by a Haydn-Mozart program last week, efficient but charmless. But the very sound of the Chicago Symphony is one of the phenomenal noises of our time, and that, too, is Solti's doing. In his time in Chicago he has whipped, cajoled, hammered, burnished and conjured an orchestral sound that manages to be two entirely opposite things at once. On the one hand, there is that seductive, mellow roar from the winds and brass; on the other, a meticulously controlled string tone whereby more than 60 players take on the crispness and clarity of a chamber ensemble.

Over Solti's conducting career he's been identified as various kinds of specialist. His early performances of Mozart—which included playing the glockenspiel in a "Magic Flute" under Arturo Toscanini at the Salzburg Festival—stamped him as a promising Mozartian. His phenomenal London recording of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung," with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and a dream cast, established him as a Wagnerian. Solti resists the notion of typecasting. "I want to be a music specialist," he says. He also sidesteps the temptation to overstep repertory chestnuts. This season's performance of Tchaikovsky's well-worn Fifth Symphony was, for him, a return to a work he had once recorded but had carefully avoided for 14 years. "If you do a piece too often," Solti maintains, "you make a cliche, a Xerox copy of your interpretation."

Hard act to follow: He has made no secret of his future in Chicago. In May 1991 he will step down after the orchestra's centennial celebration. He prefers not to discuss the choice of a successor; that will be the job of the board of the Orchestral Association. Musical street talk in Chicago favors two conductors who have appeared frequently as guests, Claudio Abbado and Daniel Barenboim, along with the less familiar Bernard Haitink. It'll be a prize job, but there will be a built-in booby trap: simply put, Solti's achievement in Chicago, most of all the orchestral tone that so clearly bears his imprint, will be a hard act to follow. "Whenever gets the job," he says, "will surely want to build his own orchestra. But not with force; it will take time."

On his actual birthday, Oct. 21, Solti will be back home in London celebrating with his wife, Valerie, their two daughters and "a few friends, maybe 200." What sustains his amazing flow of energy at 75? New projects, above all. His side career as a pianist, for example, took off after a crisis on a tour last season. In San Francisco, the truck carrying most of the instruments was delayed; so a few players filled in with a concert of chamber music with Solti at the piano. Will there be more? Solti pauses in an Orchestra Hall corridor, behind a closed door pianist. André Watts is warming up for his recital that night. "Poor fellow," says Solti with a grin. "It's a hard life being a piano player. I know."

Alan Rich in Chicago