Honoring Sir Georg at 75

BY ROBERT COMMANDAY

L ast week the celebrations began for Sir Georg Solti's 75th birthday, appropriately in Chicago with its great Chicago Symphony, where he has reigned unchallenged for 18 seasons going on 19. The observance should be national.

Friday, the extended birthday party started with a concert he conducted at Orchestra Hall to benefit the Musicians' Pension Fund, with Kiri Te Kanawa and flutist Demetrio as soloists. He and Murray Perahia also played Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos, K. 365, Solti conducting from the keyboard. He received Chicago's Medal of Honor and was honored at a gala post-concert party and yesterday, at a ceremony in Lincoln Park where a nine-foot bronze bust of the conductor was dedicated, the first public sculpture of a living personage to be erected in the city.

The actual date on which he was born (in Budapest) was October 21. There is yet time for other orchestras to honor publicly a man who has touched classical music listeners everywhere. His discography is distinguished and influential, including, on London Records, the complete Brahms, Beethoven and Mahler Symphonies 1-9 (1 and 7 recorded twice), and the famous Wagner "Ring," among the 87 albums.

His appearance on the podium, straight erect, his tightly controlled gestures, and sharp, hawk-eyed look can give a misleading impression. He is not a martinet. An interview with him in San Francisco last January revealed a man riding the crest of his career, approaching 75 with enormous satisfaction, proud of his achievements but not needing to prove anything or display temperament.

Showers. A big thing with him is hot showers. "When I come to this country, at the Drake Hotel (Chicago), there was a great shower in the bathroom," he said, describing that unexpected theme further. "Wonderful. It lasted for a while and then it went bust for some reason and never could be made again so strong. Probably they built too many high rises in Chicago..."

The photographer arrived and said she could work with the available light. "With the available face and the available light," he retorted, then resumed with the showers. "Then I lived roughly ten years in the Mayfair Regent — not a good shower. But now, coming into this hotel (The Four Seasons), I find a wonderful shower, I am reborn, a new man. Wonderful. Ten minutes in the shower with hot water?"

With mention of the then recently deceased Oakland Symphony, he became serious, stating concern for the small or orchestra. "They are absolutely essential, one of the great beauties in the country," Solti said intently. "They spread the best and basically they help the major orchestras enormously, a great reservoir of talent. That's part of the success of the major orchestras and still part of what makes our orchestras the best in the world today."

"There is an old maxim that there are no bad orchestras, only bad conductors. That's true up to a certain point. The essential task of the conductor is to bring the maximum out of the existing talent at his disposal. But even if I were to work eight months with the Kansas City Symphony I wouldn't produce Chicago Symphony levels, naturally. But I would produce something that could be heard. It is very gratifying to bring out the maximum of an existing orchestra, a second-rate orchestra, 95 percent, as opposed to 99 percent of a first-rate orchestra. I am a great teacher, the best in the business."

"I am not saying I could make any orchestra as good as the Chicago. I work in Europe with orchestras which are not as good as the Chicago Symphony because I have a certain commitment playing with orchestras with which I have been connected in Germany and France, the London Symphony with which I was involved, and Covent Garden." Solti was music director of the Royal Opera House, 1963-71, the principal conductor and artistic director of the London Philharmonic in 1979 — now its conductor emeritus.

"I say with great pride that they don't have the quality of the Chicago Symphony. This orchestra, if it's good, be anything, it is that it seldom goes below its standard. They have an ambition to be good, a wonderful feeling of noblesse oblige. That keeps me going with them, and traveling two or three times a year over the ocean is terrible and I suffer under jet lag. But the musical joys with this orchestra are increasingly wonderful."

"When I arrived in Chicago, in 1969, I found not only a splendid orchestra but one which was created by Fritz Reiner entirely. And now, 15 or 16 years later, only one-third of those are left. Two-thirds were engaged by me. And in another four years that I was to stay with them, it will be 50 percent Solti orchestra." Henry Fogel, the orchestra's executive director, later noted that Solti has fixed only two Chicago Symphony players, at the beginning of his tenure, and not musicians he liked.

Solti is just as proud and mindful of his distinguished musical sources. He studied piano and composition under Bartok, Dohnanyi, Kodaly and Leo Weiner, and was Toscanini's assistant at the Salzburg Festivals of 1936 and 1937.

"The foremost impression in my life was when I was 24 and met Toscanini," Solti recalled. "I got to be his chance. All my life, everything happened by chance really. For a young person at that time. I was very poor and was just a bit of a lassief-faire, a bit of a Hungarian bungler. Music came easy to me. Toscanini taught me for the first time that you have to work very hard. He was 72 and when you saw someone who is 72 (when you are young), he is an old man. His whole life was just a fight with the material. I never saw him without the score close in front of him. He either worked or studied or rehearsed, did very little sleeping, maybe five hours, and the rest was work. That was medicine for me to see and since then I am a hard-working man."

"I met Furtwängler late in his life, after the war, the first time in 1948 when he conducted the Munich Philharmonic (Glanz Rosenthal had made it a first-class orchestra). I was amazed. At that point I was trained on the Toscanini model. Toscanini said — but I didn't understand him then — 'Everybody tries to imitate me but nobody is as good as I am.' Surely there was his speed and the intimacy but it was not his speed that made it great. So I was trained on that sort of precision, the rhythmic and dynamic elements more important than the spiritual elements."

"Then came Furtwängler, exactly the opposite. No rhythmic or dynamic precision but something spiritual. It was this Beethoven that struck me first and it was marvellous. I cannot describe the effect on me in any other way but that someone takes a medicine that is bitter but it eventually cures to spiritual effect. When I heard him first I thought it was too slow, impeccable. It took some time until I saw his really marvelous contribution to 20th-century music — but not Haydn, Mozart, Bartok or Stravinsky."

"Some of the elements that you can listen to in Furtwängler's interpretations are not on records because his freedom is sometimes disturbing on records; it didn't matter in performance. I felt very much in love with this music-making and it changed my outlook. I became freer, over a 10 to 20-year period until I arrived at my own style and outlook in making music with which I have been living for the last 25 years or so, rightly or wrongly. I learned to be more generous."

"Musical influence is a very funny thing to speak about. I always thought that I knew what happened in 1927 in Salzburg but the musicians were very young. I played the glenskiperieli in 'The Magic Flute' and I thought I knew every bar of that Magic Flute. Now we are skipping 40 years and a friend and I go to a blackboard and it is a知识产权 that I didn't know. And I said I'm dying to hear it. I heard it and everything on the tape was totally different from what I had in my memory, including my glenskiperieli part, totally different, 100 degrees different."

"With my own music I try to keep track through my performances, writing down metronome speeds, but it's changing. I learned that you don't do it that way anymore. If I repeat a piece five years later, there's a natural tendency to slow down. Toscanini got faster, Furtwängler got much slower towards the end of his life."

When I'm recording, I try to listen as good as I can; that's probably my major talent. I know what is wrong and I can correct it, and have the talent to hear the negative and the right points immediately. I should have been a music critic. It comes to the test when I say it's all right, and go back to the studio, listen to it and analyze it. But I never want to hear it again. After a year, I still retain my image of the music. I never play my old recordings, except under very exceptional conditions; that's when I can't hear it being played by someone else."

"If I were to do (Wagner's 'Ring') again, I would do it differently, this is natural. Every talented musician is developing all of his life. That development brings you to a different level. My 'Reingerd' recordings I don't want to hear anymore. It's a young man's 'Reingerd' and it would be a much older man. I couldn't do another 'Ring' and have the strength to do 100 rehearsals. Maybe some parts of it — I'm hating with the idea — but not the whole thing..."

Solti endorsed the superiority of the compact disc version of his 'Ring' recording, now remastered from the original tape. "You hear the dynamic range much more than on the LP. When I did the 'Ring', performance will always be better than a recorded performance provided that the live performance is good. Something happens, something in the actual music making that is such a God's miracle that you will never catch in any recorded performance. That spirit will always prevail and as long as people want to hear music."

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