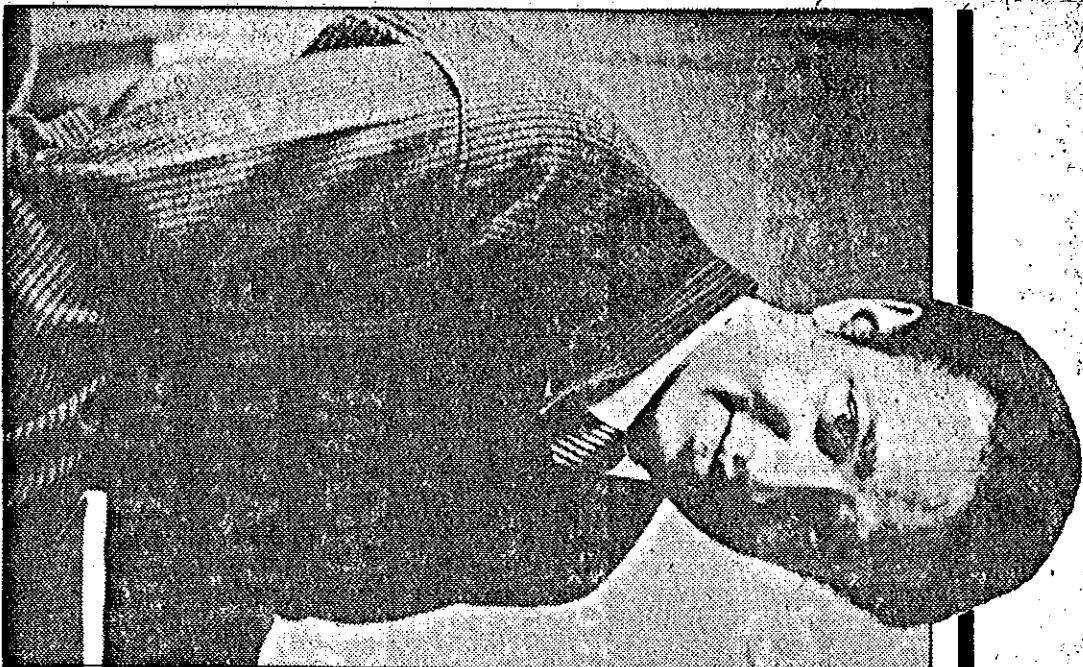


SHOW

Watts' performance shines

Pianist teams up with CSO for concert of Liszt, Tchaikovsky



At Orchestra Hall, pianist Andre Watts performed Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 and "Totentanz" with the deft hand of a seasoned professional.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

By Robert C. Marsh

A milestone in the Americanization of Georg Solti was passed at Orchestra Hall last night when the concert ended with a rondolet entitled "Bear Down, Chicago Bears" performed by Solti, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and what appeared to be irregular choral forces (yes, that was Margaret Hillis in green) but were, in fact, his familiar legions in a sporting guise. It was fun. If it brings us victory in New Orleans on Sunday, it will be all the better.

The concert was divided evenly between music of Tchaikovsky and Liszt, the latter scores employing the exceptional talents of pianist Andre Watts. He was heard in the first of the piano concertos and the "Totentanz," the dance of death, a work that appeals to the worst in many pianists but brought

out the best in Watts.

You had to remember that this was Liszt performed by two Hungarians (Watts' mother providing the essential link) and that the Lisztian style was not something Watts had to learn. It was in his blood, and he plays that way. His performance of the First Concerto is very different today from the one recorded as a teenager with Leonard Bernstein. That was a performance full of promise, but it was immature and overly strict.

Today Watts plays this music in a wonderfully free manner. All the virtuosic bits, the incredible trills, the flashing octaves and bold, rhetorical bravura, are achieved with the sure hand of a professional who has been before the public for more than 20 years. But the important thing is the spirit. He really enters into the rather special and private world of Liszt, and he makes it real for us.

The concerto, with the full assistance of Solti and the CSO, was achieved with

Chicago Symphony, Georg Solti conductor, with Andre Watts, piano. At Orchestra Hall, Thursday. "Romeo and Juliet," "Nutcracker" suite, Tchaikovsky; Piano Concerto No. 1, "Totentanz," Liszt.

great dignity as well as fire and passion. The quiet pages were given their full measure. The dynamic balance of the piece was fully appreciated and beautifully revealed.

The "Totentanz," in contrast, is a showpiece, but a showpiece that a distinguished artist can project with real aplomb. If you are going to play it, Watts shows you how it ought to be played: with a flair, with a bold, theatrical manner and with as few inhibitions as possible. Solti was right there in the spirit of these proceedings. Again we heard remarkable things.

Solti began the concert with a lean performance of Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet" overture that stressed the rivalry of the two families as much as the passion

of the youthful lovers. He closed the evening with the familiar "Nutcracker" suite expertly done with vitality and wit and ending with a particularly ingratiating statement of the "Waltz of the Flowers."

Anyone raised on the lush performances normally given these scores 30 years ago must regard Solti's approach as a refreshing contrast. The "Nutcracker" benefits especially from this new viewpoint.

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 Barry Douglas's fine performance of the Webern Variations in the Dame Myra Hess Concerts Wednesday at the Cultural Center was largely wasted on an audience of middle-aged philistines who were there to be entertained with romantic music. Douglas then shifted to the sort of keyboard music I have been hearing to excess, a Schumann Fantasy. He played that beautifully as well, but I am ready to declare a five-year moratorium on Schumann's keyboard music. Enough is enough.