Music

Singers scale the ‘Missa’ summit to score another Solti success

By Thomas Willis

IT IS THIS season's strongest musical weekend. First the Lyric Opera's "Rigoletto," repeated tonight, and now the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus' Missa Solemnis which opened Thursday and is being repeated tonight. A double play to convince even the most skeptical of our capacity for excellence.

There will be a tendency to call this Georg Solti's Missa. This is his Beethoven time—recordings of some of the symphonies and an overture are to be made next week, with others to follow. And the strength of his individuality, a combination of furious energy, high contrast coloring of structure, strong accents, and a constant attention to articulation details, was on each measure of Beethoven's impassioned score.

But for all of these interpretive imitations, the evening's astounding success was in major part due to the singers, as soloists and choristers, found the inner resources to cope in nearly all instances with almost impossible demands. Paced with a work full of performance problems as 8 stands, Solti proceeded to superimpose still more difficulties.

They included the minor one of Germanized Latin pronunciation — making all the "g's" hard and converting ordinarily half-sounded "cha" into "cha" and "cha." From the music's viewpoint, it is a good idea, for melodic lines come out more clearly without "cha" and "cha" and a good strong gale. attack midway In, say, the "Agnus" of "Agnus Dei" puts the phrase in sterner perspective.

A second requirement of the music's director's conception focused on the balance of vocal forces. The usual treatment favors the chorus, allowing the soloists to comment and comment as the chorus mass texts are continued by the larger group. Solti opted for a reversal, softening the underlay wherever possible in favor of the soloists. The procedure makes a musical accent and occasionally antithesis, but the resultant clarity was indefensibly worth it. One heard more of the music Beethoven created that at any performance I can remember.

Intensity of expression permeates every measure of the Missa, from the fervent "Lauda, mune, tristibus et in "Agnus Dei"; its climax builds up the scale into near experience — particularly for soprano — heaven. The Crescendo builds into mystery for the incantation, affirms humanity, then, in Solti's thinking, relaxes its drive as it enters the "Beecham" section. The Agnus Dei's operatic pleading for deliverance and forgiveness are pressed by the deepening introspection of the Bantons—humans contemplating the obscurity of "Beneant.

The solo quartet was different in two instances from the one chosen. George Shirley replaced the ill Peter Schreier a week or so ago and Karl Gürzenich was replaced on a day's notice by Theo Adam, in town to sing Paul's replacement of a performance at that performance.

OF THE FOUR, Julia Hamari was a clear standout, matching the orchestra and chorus in expressively and skill. On a better night, I expect Wendy Frenz could match her in the crucial soprano part, for she has the even, perfectly focused quality to carry and cap the climax as necessary. This time she was in pitch trouble above the staff and instead of two high notes almost completely.

Missa Frenz's apparent indisposition left the Missa's breathtaking moments to Victor Alley's Benedictus violins. In all his years, as concertmaster, I have never heard him play better — a double benediction if there ever was one.
‘Missa’: from Solti with love

By Karen Mannen

Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" commands respect. But it is a difficult work to love.

George Solti proved Thursday night that he does more than honor the 180-year-old "Missa." He has found its love.

The performance of the Op. 123 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chorus and soloists under Solti's direction had drama; even theatricality. But the "Eroica" of two weeks ago, the Selena Mass impressed less with fortissimo outbursts than with lyrical grace.

It's not hard to push 300 musicians into a resounding "Gloria!" It took some doing, though, to give the "at ut in terra pax" the warmth and radiance it had on Thursday. Such moments of restrained glory portended extra brightness for high-leaping musical flights.

SOLTI CAME reasonably close to answering the unanswerable questions posed in this enigmatic masterpiece. By refining the "dona nobis pacem" as much as possible, he made the military theme seem like an ominous intrusion, quelled by the soloists' operatic plea for mercy.

No intermission broke the straight-arrow path to the final plea for peace. Technical lapses threatened to fall by the wayside.

The brass instead of snappy attacks, and the solo quartet was unbalanced.

But the chorus offered sensitive, full-color singing, and Vicente Altay provided an expert viola solo for the Benedictus. The 300 voices seemed susurrus and visually to wrap around the orchestra; the sound was deep-velvet.

BEFORE voicing qualms about the soloists, I must say we were lucky to find them. Both Peter Schreier and Karl Ridderbusch feel to illness.

George Shirley replaced Schreier with tenorish vigor, and Theo Adam moved over from Lyric Opera to take a firm, Musiquesque stand with the bass line for the Thursday and Friday performances.

Thomas Paxt will step in for Adam on Saturday.

Julia Hamari sang the mezzo solo with strength and expressivity. The weak link in the quartet was debutante Wendy Fine. She had trouble making herself heard, and either her intonation was way off or she was singing wrong notes.
Solti rises to Missa impossible

By Robert C. Marsh

The Missa Solemnis of Beethoven is an ideal example of what the late Otto Klemperer could fully achieve musically, and what Solti was able to do with it. He concentrated on the musical aspects, and the results were satisfying.

Solti is a conductor of enormous range, but the essential Solti, I believe, is a man of the theater, a dramatist, and one especially gifted at finding words and music, of combining the strong and weak accents of a phrase with the patterns of tension and release in an unfolding melody. Thus, in a scene such as this, his principal emphasis is on the words. Getting the words across, selecting his musical settings, the whole process was particularly skillful.

Here, with the marital call of treumps, the threatening pulses of drums, Beethoven seems to be echoing the slow movement of the Ninth Symphony, it is a cry from the depths of the heart for God to save us in our misery and give us the blessing of peace, not merely peace on earth, but peace within ourselves.

At the close of the evening you could hardly be less than deeply impressed by the manner in which Solti had developed an hour-and-a-half of music into a moving, profound, poetic, and dramatic perception of the score. The orchestra, indeed, played even more beautifully, sacrificing on occasion beauty of sound for greater force. It was fine to hear the violins solo in the Benedictus from Votum, which was to have played this music at Ravenna last summer and could have made this evening as a victory over his recent illness.

The solo quartet was unusually well matched in terms of vocal balance; a quality all the more surprising since both sopranos, the notable George Shirley and bass Theo Adam were replacing the singers originally engaged. Adam stepping in at the last moment after singing with the Lyric Opera only the night before, (he will appear again on Friday. Thomas Paul will do the Saturday performance when Adam returns to his role in “Unsung Hero.”) Neody Fins and Julia Hannant won their share of honors as well.

As for the chorus, can there be a finer, more sensitive, vocally graceful group of this type to be heard today? I rather doubt it.

Thank Margaret Ritzler for that.