

Music

# Singers scale the 'Missa' summit to score another Solti success

By Thomas Willis

Reprinted from yesterday's late editions  
**IT IS THE** season's strongest musical weekend. First the Lyric Opera's "Siegfried," repeated tonight, and now the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus's *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 three of the symphonies and an overture are to be made next week, with others to follow. And the stamp of his individuality, a combination of furious energy, high contrast etching 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 impressions, the evening's resounding success was in major part due to the singers who, as soloists and choristers, found the inner resources to cope in nearly all instances with almost impossible demands. Faced with a work full of performance problems as it stands, Solti proceeded to superimpose still more difficulties.

These included the minor one of Germanized Latin pronunciation — making all the

"g's" hard and converting ordinarily Italianized "c's" into "s's" and "z's." From the music's standpoint, it is a good idea, for melodic lines come out more cleanly without "sh's" and "ch's" and a good strong glottal attack midway in, say, the "Agnus" of "Agnus Dei" puts the phrase in stronger perspective.

A SECOND requirement of the music director's conception focused on the balance of vocal forces. The usual treatment favors the chorus, allowing the soloists to ornament and comment on the Christian mass texts as enunciated by the larger group. Solti opted for a reversal, softening the underlay wherever possible in favor of the soloists. The procedure risks a misplaced accent and occasional anticlimax, but the resultant clarity was undeniably worth it. One heard more of the music Beethoven created than at any performance I can remember.

Intensity of expression permeates every measure of the *Missa*, from the fervent "Lord, have mercy" of the opening to the final entreaties for peace amid military trumpets and drums. Its Gloria motive charges up the scale into near supersonic—particularly for sopranos—heaven. The Credo's midsection hushes into mystery for the incarnation, affirms humanity, then, in Solti's thinking, relaxes its drive as it enters the "life everlasting" section. The *Agnus Dei's* operatic pleadings for deliverance and forgiveness are presaged by the deepening introspection of the Sanctus—humans contemplating the obscurity of "holiness."

The solo quartet was different in two instances from the one chosen. George Shirley replaced the ailing Peter Schreier a week or so ago and Karl Ridderbusch was replaced on a day's notice by Theo Adam, in town to sing

Paul the replacement of a replacement at that performance.

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

Miss Fine's apparent indisposition left the *Missa's* breath-taking moments to Victor Altay's Benedictus violin. In all his years, as concertmaster, I have never heard him play better—a double benediction if there ever was one.



Wendy Fine

DINING OUT

## 'Missa': from Solti with love

By Karen Monson

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

Georg Solti proved Thursday night that he does more than honor the 150-year-old "Missa." He has found its loveliness.

The performance of the Op. 123 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chorus and soloists under Solti's direction had drama, even theatricality. But like the "Eroica" of two weeks ago, the Solemn 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 "et in terra pax" the warmth and radiance it had on Thursday. Such moments of restrained glow portended extra brightness for high-leaping musical flames.

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 pleas for mercy.

No intermission broke the straight-arrow path to the final plea for peace. Technical lapses threatened to foil progress. The brass insisted on sloppy

attacks, and the solo quartet was unbalanced.

But the chorus offered sensitive, full-color singing, and Victor Altay provided an expert violin solo for the Benedictus. The 200 voices seemed aurally and visually to wrap around the orchestra; the sound was deep-pile velvet.

BEFORE voicing qualms

about the soloists, I must say we were lucky to find them.

Both Peter Schreier and Karl Ridderbusch feel ill.

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

Thomas Paul will step in for Adam on Saturday.

Julia Hamari sang the mezzo solos 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 Artur Schnabel used to call "music that is better than it ever can be played." The truth of this is apparent even on such occasions as Thursday night in Orchestra Hall, when the work received an exalted and highly dramatic performance from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Sir Georg Solti conducting.

The problem of the *Missa Solemnis* and other works of its stature is that it really is not a single work of art but a plurality of works which arise from different perspectives of the same printed score. Thus performances by conductors

as different in their viewpoint as Solti and the late Otto Klemperer can be fully achieved musical statements each of which is, in its own way, a faithful account of what Beethoven has left us as the musical blueprint of his vision.

Moreover, although you may have personal preferences for one approach over another, to know the *Missa Solemnis* you must grasp all the different works of music that, in the hands of different musicians of genius, it can become.

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 joining words and music, of combining

the strong and weak accents of a phrase with the patterns of tension and repose in an unfolding melody. Thus, in a score such as this, his prime emphasis is on the words. Getting the words across, enforcing their meaning with the full resources Beethoven has provided, becomes the primary artistic goal.

That, surely, was the overwhelming quality of this performance, the heaven-scaling cry of praise at the close of the Gloria, the sense of mystical reverence in the hushed announcement of the Incarnation, the triumphant proclamation of the resurrection, all these brought to Beethoven's mass an intensity frequently associ-

ated with the Verdi Requiem, but not this music.

Surely most moving of all was the *Agnus Dei*, concluding pages that are relatively quiet and must make their effect with what they say rather than sheer volume of sound.

Here, with the martial call of trumpets, the threatening pulse of drums, Beethoven seems to be echoing the call for brotherhood in the Ninth Symphony. It is a cry from the depths of the heart for God to see 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 about his own, blazing, personal perception of the score. There are other ways to play this music, but this way proved its validity with its splendor.

The orchestra, need one say, played wonderfully, sacrificing on occasion beauty of sound for greater force. It was fine to hear the violin solo in the *Benedictus* from Victor Aitay, who was to have played this music at Ravinia last summer and could look upon this evening as a victory over his recent illness.

The solo quartet was unusu-

ally well matched in terms of vocal timbre, a quality all the more surprising since both tenor 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 "Siegfried.") Wendy Fine and Julia Hamari won their share of honors as well.

As for the chorus, can there be a finer, more sensitive vocal group of this type to be heard today? I rather doubt it. Thank Margaret Hillis for that.