Solti uses some exciting firsts to tune up CSO for East Coast tour

By John von Rhein
Music critic

Before Georg Solti takes his Chicago Symphony Orchestra on its biennial march of triumph along the East Coast next week, the maestro is doing his best to further the spirit of glasnost this weekend in Orchestra Hall.

What makes this program so exceptional is not only that it combines the world premiere of a new American brass concerto with one of the landmarks of 20th Century Russian music, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 8, written 45 years earlier; it also marks two important firsts for the orchestra.

Thursday's concert marked the first time that the CSO has performed any music by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, mention of whose name invariably signals the phrase, the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for music (1983). Her Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra is the latest in a series of works for brass instruments to be commissioned by the Edward F. Schmidt family of Chicago in honor of various CSO brass principals. Jay Friedman was the dedicatee and soloist.

But there was one other first, as Solti himself reminded subscribers: The Shostakovich symphony is the first work he has recorded live with any orchestra, TV concerts excluded. The London/Decca engineers also will tape the Friday and Saturday concerts and the finished recording actually will be a composite of three performances. They must have been amazed, as Solti evidently was, at how quiet a Chicago concert audience in midwinter can be (with, of course, a little bit of prodding from the podium).

Shostakovich regarded the Eighth Symphony and its wartime companion, No. 7 ("Leningrad"), as his requiem. Contemplating the appalling devastation and suffering brought on by the Great Patriotic War—as World War II is known in Russia—drew from the composer some of his most deeply personal, enigmatic music. Stalin and his apparatchiks found only unrelied gloom in the score. But Shostakovich knew that war was about other things besides victory marches, cheering crowds and socialist-realist pomp. His Eighth shows us the human spirit brutally trampled and mocked—only to rise again in a finale of numbed grief and quiet resignation.

No Shostakovich symphony Solti has done here previously (he has ventured Nos. 1 and 9) quite prepared one for the powerful eloquence of his performance. Those despairing string recitatives, those crushing brass climaxes, the acrid bite of the woodwinds—surely Shostakovich had such a virtuoso ensemble in mind when he penned this great musical testament. Solti tightened the tension of the vast opening movement to an almost unbearable level, giving us a marvelously nasty Allegretto, gradually releasing all that pent-up fury in the long concluding section until the music was quite literally drained of emotion. This was magnificent playing in all departments. It should be a magnificent recording.

It's to Zwilich's great credit that in her exhilarating, elegantly crafted concerto, she makes us appreciate the solo potential of an instrument that, for all its effectiveness en masse or in orchestral solos, almost no composer has dared to put front and center on the concert rostrum.

Zwilich writes in a conservative, accessible style that values clarity of texture and design. Her melodic topography allows the soloist a fair amount of athletic leaps that Friedman, a fearless technician and sensitive musician, was able to dispatch with tremendous assurance. Indeed, Zwilich has achieved a feat that one is always happy to applaud with commissioned works—she has nearly captured the musical personality of the performer for whom the work was written.

If I found less to capture and hold my attention in the second and third movements than in the inventive, rhythmically propulsive Allegretto that opens the concerto, this is not to deny Zwilich's Concertante scheme its lucid appeal or to deny Solti his share of the praise for a tightly engineered premiere performance. I simply had no idea a tenor trombone could do the things she writes for it, and that Friedman played so beautifully. It's good news that Zwilich is hard at work on a second brass concerto for the CSO, this for brass trombone and Charles Vernon; Chicago will hear that one two seasons hence.
Solti, CSO superb for live recording of Shostakovich

CLASSICAL MUSIC
By Robert C. Marsh

Ever since he came to Chicago 20 seasons ago, Georg Solti has wanted to program the Shostakovich Eighth Symphony. For one reason or another, it was never possible until this week, when the work was not merely to be played but recorded in concert by British Decca. It then goes on tour to the East Coast next week and, next summer, Europe.

The first performance, Thursday night at Orchestra Hall, was close enough to flawless that it might be released without difficulties, but two more tries may produce a truly unmarred version.

It is interesting to recall that Solti in his first Chicago seasons complained of audience noise and inattention. Thursday, the concentration and quiet could hardly have been improved. Everyone was aware that the performance was being immortalized. The orchestra was on the edge of its chairs.

The audience, after a charming introductory speech by the maestro, was on its best behavior, and in the hour plus required by the music, there was hardly a noise.

Solti acknowledged this with his thanks at the close of the concert. He had never made a live concert recording before, but obviously the technique is fully feasible here—a nice thing to know.

The Shostakovich Eighth was written in 1948, in the midst of World War II, and although in spirit it looks ahead to peace and victory, many lives would be lost before the final triumph. Perhaps for this reason the final movement is less convincing than the scherzos and visions of horror.

This is a landmark score in the history of the symphony in this century, and it is difficult to imagine a performance more dramatic or eloquent. Solti has taken this enormous score to his heart, and he inspires the musicians to play it with all the nobility and feeling they can bring to its pages. The wind writing, much of its chamber music is extraordinary, and the wind playing Thursday was almost unbelievable.

The evening began with the world premiere of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Concerto for Trombone. It is a work that ought to find rapid assimilation into the repertory, first because of the shortage of distinguished concertos for the instrument, but more appropriately because it is exceptionally rewarding and enjoyable music.

Jay Friedman, for whom it was written, played with the mastery of the instrument we have come to expect from him, and Solti was a sympathetic collaborator.

Chicago Symphony, Georg Solti conducting, at Orchestra Hall Thursday with Jay Friedman, trombone. Concerto for Trombone, Zwilich: Symphony No. 8, Shostakovich. To be repeated at 1:30 p.m. today and 9 p.m. Saturday.