Chicago Hears Shostakovich's Seventh Again

BY CLAUDIA CASSIDY

That Hans Lange and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave a warm and competent performance of Shostakovich's Seventh symphony at Orchestra Hall yesterday is undeniable, and almost immaterial, to their credit. Mr. Lange had less than a week—and a tragic week—to prepare the music and sprawling score. The orchestra had played it only once before, when the late Frederick Stock conducted the Ravinia performance in August to benefit Russian war relief—conducted it with two rehearsals to Toscanni's site, in order to save money to help the composer's embattled people.

But what chalks up to your credit does not necessarily rest on your glory. The trouble yesterday was that calmness and competence, however admirable under the circumstances, were not enough for a score which is a mass of blazing emotionalism caught in a crudely sketched panorama of contemporary history.

The first movement had tremendous promise, Mr. Lange too bold in the interval between vehemence and tranquillity, the lyrical feeling for the reticent insistence of the drum. The orchestra was suspended in space with buoyant balance, and with an inexcusable continity of musical and emotional line. Back of this music was the threat of the primitive, of something raw and bleeding, something boiling over as a battering ram. Unmistakably Russian, it soared at reminiscence, blackening out memory of Ravel as effective-ly as the typically Shostakovich clarinet defied the Didelot bluster of the scherzo.

That scherzo, too, was well played. It sustained, the way it did not seem, the spell of the first movement. But after that the performance took one of two images, perhaps both. It struck internecine, which is a fatal inclusiveness in any score for emotional intensity, and/or it struck a point beyond which Mr. Lange probably had not had time to probe deeply below the complex surface.

Because in the Toccata broadcast I heard a performance as compell-ingly contemporary as today's headlines, I am unwilling to set this down as period to the "Leningrad" symphony or to our orchestra's ability to capture the full charged splendor of its performance at white heat. Sky it won't live, and I won't dwell on the matter, because it isn't particularly important. What counts in the score, and of what should count in performance, is its blazing expression of the sound and fury of our own times, when invasion, death, defiance, and ultimate triumph are facts we understand and, at least vicariously, fear. Perhaps the orchestra's midweek repeti-tions will come closer to capturing that essential validity, in the panoramic sweep of the music.

Yesterday's performance was pref-aced by Brahms' Tragic overture, and by the andante from the Brahms' violin solo violin, again played in mem-ory of Frederick Stock, whose report that word of his death has spread around the world, libregamets of sympathy are arriving at Orchestra Hall. The violin received from Moscow yesterday was signed by Shostakovich himself. Missakowski, Gilere, and Muradelli, all composers whose music was heard under Stock's baton.

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