Still in Command at 84, Stravinsky Pays Another Visit

BY THOMAS WILLIS

THE PAIR of concerts this week in Orchestra hall turned out to be Igor Stravinsky's final Chicago appearances—and I don't for a minute believe the advance billing to that effect means a thing—it would be a hard fact to have to live with. The opening concert last night held none of his recent music, for the spiky Violin Concerto so willingly and lovingly performed with Itzhak Perlman as soloist and Robert Craft conducting was composed in 1931. Moreover, the 64-member orchestra assembled for the occasion, the it had several of the vacationing Chicago Symphony Orchestra members in crucial positions, was something less than the music or the event called for.

For Mr. Stravinsky, 84, it did not seem to matter. He came to conduct, and conduct he did—the 1908 Festival Overture, the final tableau of "Petrouchka," and the reduced orchestra version of the "Fire-Bird" Suite he made in 1945.

The Sir Harry Lauder crooked cane is still with him and he needs assistance up the steps to the podium, but once in place there is no question who is in charge. The clear, regular pulse may be given with a finger or a wrist, but it is there, and most of the necessary entrance cues are indicated as well.

The wiry indomitability of personality remains amazing and the broad grin which broke across his face as he was summoned back after the concert would have lighted a house twice the size. At one point in the "Petrouchka," when the country fair was bubbling merrily along, he stopped conducting altogether. Someone near me said he got lost, but he was probably just resting. In any case, John Weicher, acting as concertmaster, dug right in and even the reper- tory novices went right along.

Mr. Perlman's broken string contributed a curious bit of unscheduled drama, for he finished the second aria of the concerto in the high positions on three strings and went on to play the wickedly difficult finale on Mr. Weicher's violin. Mr. Perlman not only took it all in stride, he seemed to be enjoying the new challenge as much as he was the work. This was his Orchestra hall debut and a most auspicious introduction. It is hard to imagine the concerto played better.

The orchestral performance was inadequate in spots, with several performers still unfamiliar with their parts. The "Fire-Bird" was even slower than Mr. Stravinsky's usual order tempo, and not even the composer's presence could erase the fact that "Fireworks" minus the large orchestra required was a pale imitation of the brilliant scherzo which first attracted Diaghileff. There was a standing ovation from a packed house; several would-be hearers had to wait until Sunday's repetition.