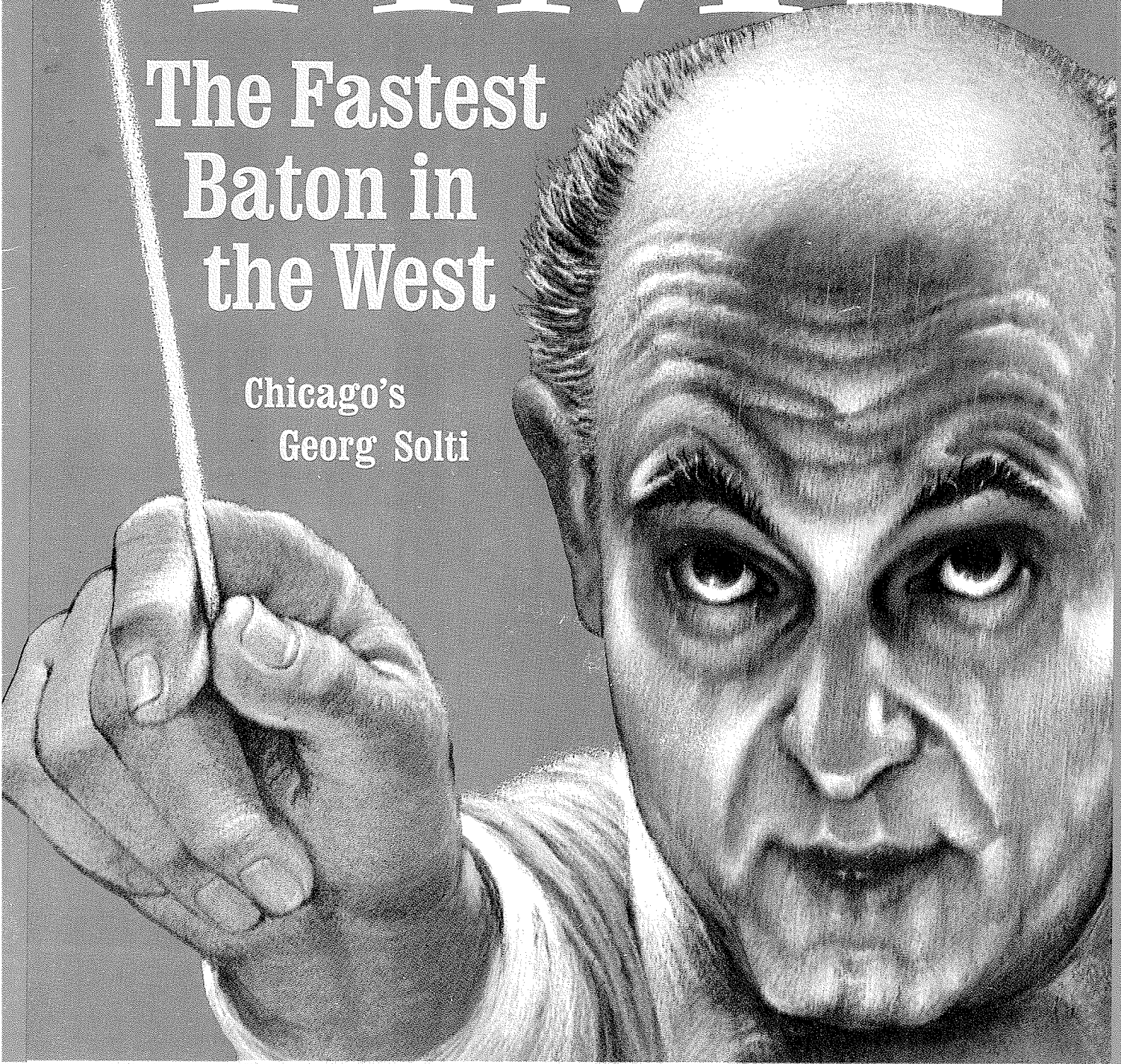


TIME

The Fastest
Baton in
the West

Chicago's
Georg Solti



CRISIS IN THE WHITE HOUSE

COVER STORY

Solti and Chicago: A Musical Romance

THE idealized symphonic conductor has Leonard Bernstein's flair, Herbert von Karajan's grace and Zubin Mehta's youth. But when the directors of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra cast around for a conductor to save their troubled orchestra in 1968, they threw out all the stereotypes and selected a man who looked, according to one Chicago musician, like a "tennis player or shortstop or golfer" on the podium. He was also bald and aging. Looks aside, Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony were made for each other. Together they are producing some of the world's most exciting music.

In the relatively brief span of four seasons, Solti (pronounced *Sholtee*) has brought the Chicago back to the pre-eminence of its days under Fritz Reiner (1953-1963). The Solti sound, not the sound of trouble, is the talk of the music world. Indeed there has not been such excitement about a marriage of conductor and orchestra in the U.S. since the golden days of the 1930s when Toscanini led the New York Philharmonic, Stokowski the Philadelphia and Koussevitzky the Boston. In recent years, only George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra have approached the august virtuosity, combustible power and quartet-like intimacy that Solti has established with the Chicago Symphony. The advent of Solti in Chicago, as he himself puts it with characteristic bluntness, "was like awakening the sleeping princess." At age 60, Solti may be forgiven for depicting himself as Prince Charming for the simple reason that almost everyone agrees with him.

Hosannas. Until his arrival the Chicago, heavy with German tradition, was known as a great orchestra that only rarely gave a great performance. Now it is an ensemble that Solti can (as he did two seasons ago) take into such musical bastions as Vienna, Berlin and Hamburg, and win standing ovations from the public and hosannas from the stuffiest critics. The money for that European tour was raised largely by Symphony Board Chairman Louis Sudler, as part of a campaign to publicize the board's selection of Solti. That choice was made, says Sudler, a Chicago realtor, on the basis of "just what a good businessman would do. First you get the best possible product, then you let the world know that you have the best possible product." The first dividend was a homecoming parade in 1971, arranged for the entire orchestra. It was enthusiastically promoted by Mayor Richard Daley, with Solti riding high and proud in a lead car—and not all that common

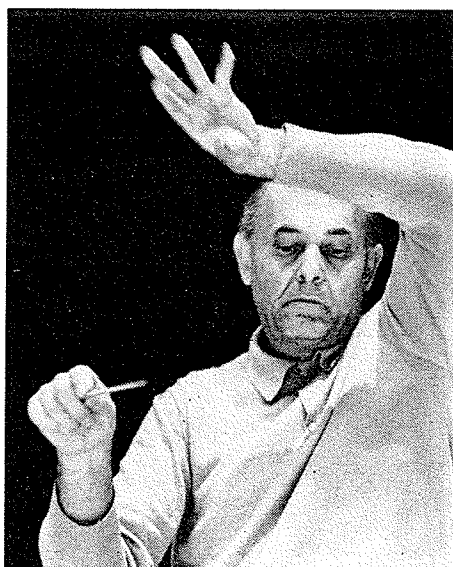
in Chicago, folks actually carrying violins in their violin cases.

Then the money—lack of which had put the orchestra on a disaster alert prior to Solti's arrival—began to come in. Annual donations by individuals rose dramatically from \$425,919 in 1968 to \$1,607,846 last year, corporate contributions from \$60,000 in 1966 to \$500,000. As a result, the orchestra's endowment fund is now comfortably at a level of \$7 million, and last year's deficit was a mere \$74,000, lowest since the pre-crisis year of 1963. Last week, the city's music lovers were crammed excitedly into Orchestra Hall for Solti's concert performance of Act III of Wagner's *Die Götterdämmerung*.

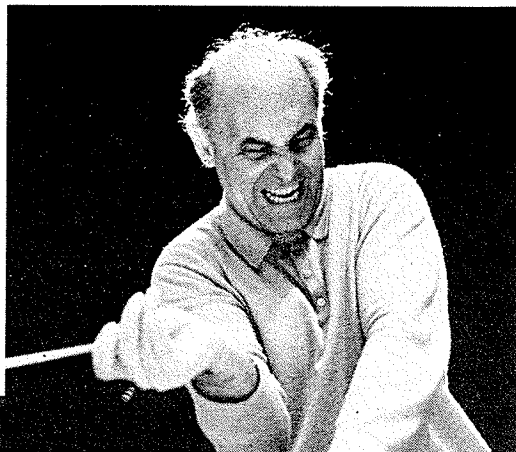
They witnessed a true musical event. Tenor Jess Thomas died magnificently as Siegfried, and the audience could almost feel the flames as Sopra-

romantic type of musician, and this is a romantic orchestra. That is our secret: at a time when everybody is doing exactly the opposite, we are unafraid to be romantic."

Romantic for Solti means a predom-



Solti rehearsing the Chicago Symphony: "Either you give him total loyalty, or you can't stand him."



no Helga Dernes submitted herself to Brünnhilde's immolation. It was a remarkable performance, a fitting finish to Solti's successful spring stint in Chicago. If Chicagoans needed any reminder, the spirited and darkly dramatic rendition of *Götterdämmerung* demonstrated anew that there is not an opera house orchestra anywhere that can match the Chicago under Solti.

Solti's love for the orchestra, and its for him, is obvious. "It's a marvelous thing to be musically happily married," he says. "I am and I know. I'm a



inance of German and Austrian music (ranging all the way from Haydn to Wagner, Mahler and Strauss), plus an orchestral tone that is big and red-blooded but not as luxuriant, say, as the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. As much as he relishes the Sequoia-like majesty of the Chicago's brass section, and its evergreen forest of strings, Solti is equally partial to the meadowed tranquillity of the wood-

winds. The delicate lyricism he conjures up between oboe and English horn in the pastoral movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* would be welcome at a chamber music recital. Yet for all his romantic predilections, Solti expertly manipulates the arcane configurations of such moderns as Arnold Schoenberg and Elliott Carter.

Solti is an orchestral architect much in the Toscanini mold. He is not one to pause sentimentally over a favorite melody or chord. The long line is everything. Such basic tools as rhythm and dynamic shading are used to sculpt breathtaking new shapes. His phrasing is at times so tight that it often seems the music is moving more quickly than it actually is. "The things that intrigue me are how to make forms clear," he says, "how to hold a movement together, or if I am conducting opera, how to build an act or a scene." These are traits that produce masterfully cohesive performances of old masters like Wagner, or such *Angst*-prone post-romantics as Mahler and Bruckner. It was Mahler's craggy *Fifth Symphony* that gave Solti and the Chicago Symphony the first chance to demonstrate their extraordinary combined talents to New York audiences. So stunningly powerful was their 1970 performance in Carnegie Hall that the Manhattanites yelled, stomped and cheered for 20 minutes: it might have gone on all night had not Solti led the concertmaster offstage with one grateful but resolute wave.

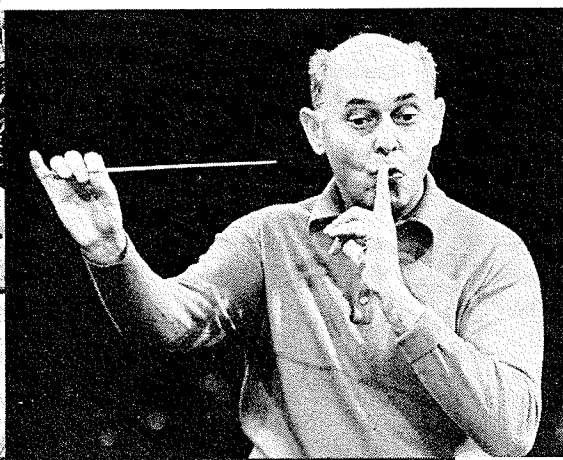
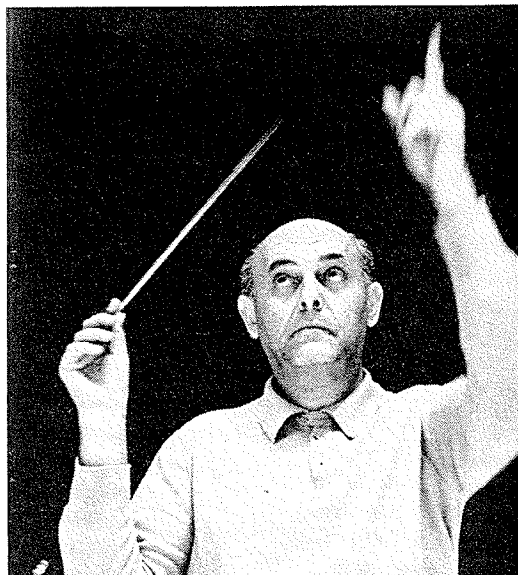
Such ovations have become familiar to Solti throughout the U.S. and Europe. In addition to conducting the Chicago Symphony for twelve weeks this

season, he devoted ten weeks to the Orchestre de Paris (he also serves as its music director). A month ago, at the 700-seat Opéra Louis XV at the Versailles Palace, he led an exquisitely wrought performance of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* by the Paris Opéra (he serves as that company's music adviser). In London, which he calls home these days, Solti regularly guest-conducts the London Philharmonic for a month each year.

Starburst. In virtually every musical capital of the world, the sight of Solti conducting is a familiar one. It is quite a spectacle: head down, baton held high, tails flying, he seems to spring from the wings. The leap to the podium is agile and sure; the bow to the audience curt, formal and, in the European tradition, from the waist, with the heels brought together in something just this side of a click. At this point, a Stokowski would spin showily and attack immediately. Not Solti. He turns thoughtfully, spreads his feet and shoots slitty glances around to make sure all is ready. Then, with a slashing, totally unexpected paroxysm involving every part of his body, he gives the downbeat. Throughout the performance, Solti's body language is dramatically explicit. The violins are brought in with huge lefthanded scoops to the floor. The trumpets are cued by the riveting spear of an arm and index finger. A starburst of fingers summons the crash of the cymbals. Moments of lyrical romance come with the left hand cradled near the heart, the right hand beating coronas of love high above. Passages of staccato brilliance are paced by chopping up and down with both arms. A furious backhand indicates a *sforzando* attack; a hand moving slowly across his mouth implores the players to give him a soft sound.

His gestures may at times seem overlarge, but they are no mere sideshow to titillate the audience. Solti is all business on the podium, his energies totally focused on the orchestra. He eschews any useless movement. A purring passage that does not have any tricky entrances usually finds Solti barely conducting at all. Says Chicago Oboist Ray Still, "When everything is going fine, he doesn't interfere with the orchestra by going into a lot of acrobatics to make the audience think it's his struggling which is producing such fine music."

Often, though, his hours on the podium are indeed a struggle—in unexpected ways. The years of conducting with arms carried high in tension, or head held tilted back to watch his performers on operatic nights, have produced extensive muscle damage to Solti's shoulders and neck. If he sometimes does a spectacular 180° leap from the violins way off on the left to the double



ROBERT M. LIGHTFOOT III

basses on the right, it is because he has to. "I can not move my head more than a few inches to the left or right without turning my body," he says. There are other problems too. Solti was flailing away so furiously during a recording session of *Parsifal* last year that he stabbed himself in the left hand with his baton and had to be rushed to a hospital to have the point removed.

On the podium, Solti defies a current vogue: he regularly conducts from a score. That any number of young and not-so-young conductors think they must conduct from memory, he blames on Toscanini: "Why did Toscanini conduct from memory? Because he was nearsighted. Of course, he had that fabulous memory, but that wasn't really why he never used a score. Today we have an entire generation of young conductors who think they must conduct from memory—all because Toscanini

"The architecture of a piece of music always comes across. Even in very slow passages you're never standing still. I think it's because something metaphysical happens. The music he makes seems to transcend what he does physically." So much so, notes one Chicago woodwind player, that "during rehearsals Solti gets so worked up, the motion is so violent, that his navel is almost always exposed."

If Solti has a weakness it is that as a colorist he prefers primary hues to the shades in between. The delicate pastels of French impressionists like Debussy and Ravel simply seem to be beyond him. Yet one can never rule out any possibility with Solti—even his becoming a master of the tender brush stroke. The Beethoven represented by his new recording with the Chicago of the *Ninth Symphony* (London) is significantly deeper and technically near-

a horse bareback across the steppes."

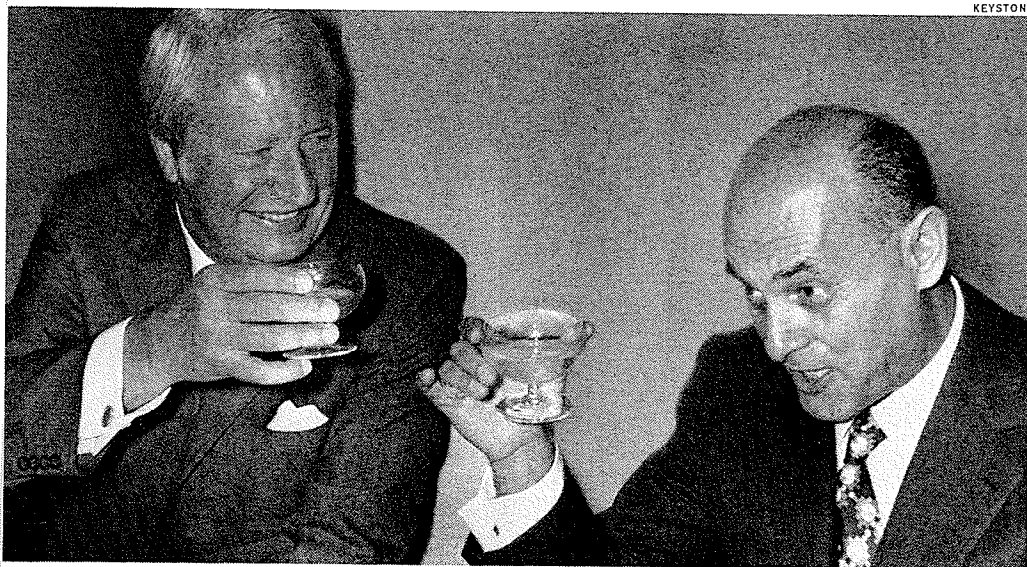
That sort of fancy is based on the knowledge that Solti is a native of Hungary, the land of Magyars. He comes from a family of bakers who had lived in the small Hungarian village of Bala-tönfokájar since the 16th century. His father Mores left the village in search of opportunities in the grain business and then real estate ("both with very little success," his son recalls); he set himself up in Budapest, where Gyuri (the diminutive of the Hungarian version of George) Solti was born Oct. 21, 1912.

At the age of five or six, it was discovered that Gyuri had absolute pitch. That prompted his teachers to send word home that the boy ought to have music lessons. Mores and Momma Theres scraped together enough money for an old piano, and Gyuri went at it with his typically fierce intensity. "I was—and am—a very determined little fellow," says Solti. By the time he was twelve, the prodigy was giving recitals. At 13 he enrolled in the Franz Liszt Academy, Hungary's leading college of music, where he studied with Ernst von Dohnányi and Béla Bartók. The latter would eventually become one of the century's leading composers, and Solti one of his major interpreters.

Dirty Jobs. As a prodigy of the piano, says Solti, "it was absolutely logical that I should become a pianist." Instead, at age 18 he went to work at the Budapest State Opera to become a conductor. Why? "I can only say that deep in your heart, if you are a sensitive person, you know what your strength is. And I knew mine was conducting."

Deep in his heart was where the conducting had to stay for some time. For much of the next decade, he worked in the opera house doing "all the dirty jobs," coaching singers, positioning scenery, accompanying the nonorchestral stage rehearsals. Solti got his first big break in Budapest on March 11, 1938, when he was allowed to conduct Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. The first act went well, Solti recalls, but with the start of the second act, the singers started making mistakes while the audience grew raucously restless. To his relief Solti later learned that his conducting was not the cause: word had reached the audience that Hitler was on his way into Vienna, only 130 miles away.

A Jew, Solti fled to Switzerland in 1939 and lived out the war there, boning up on his piano, winning first prize in the Concours International at Geneva, and developing a reputation as both soloist and chamber-music player. In 1945, then 33, desperately in search of an opportunity to conduct, Solti got word that Pianist Edward Kilenyi, an American who had studied in Budapest back in the 1920s (and whom Solti had got to know then), was the music-control officer for the U.S. occupation forces in Bavaria. Solti shot off a letter to Kilenyi and ended up with the job of music director of the Munich State Opera. Though his experience was prac-



PRIME MINISTER HEATH TOASTS SOLTI ON HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY
A familiar ovation for a breathtaking performance.

was nearsighted. It is total lunacy."

Such commonsensical candidness has endeared Solti to musicians; that endearment goes a long way toward explaining his success. Without the loyalty and respect of his musicians, no conductor can long preside over an orchestra—much less produce great music. Musicians are notoriously independent, as the old saw about the French flutist demonstrates. Ordered by a conductor to play in a certain style, the musician said: "Very well, I'll play it his way at rehearsal, but just wait till the concert. After all, *mon ami*, it's my flute." With Solti, it is different. Says Orchestre de Paris Flutist Michel Debost: "I may not like his music making, but I play it the way he wants because I can't resist him." Apart from his candor, orchestras respond to Solti partly because of his personal combination of warmth and frost, partly because of his seemingly endless store of energy and intensity. "With Solti there's always this momentum going," says Jay Friedman, principal trombonist of the Chicago.

er perfection than the Beethoven he recorded more than ten years ago with the Vienna Philharmonic. This week London issues his *Parsifal*. Serene, mystical, glowingly colored and, by the way, the slowest in stereo, it is a pantheonic accomplishment he could not have matched a decade ago.

Solti today has a depth, a broader grasp and surer hand than ever. Still intense and energetic by any standards, he nonetheless is mellower, more at ease. Birgit Nilsson, the supreme Wagnerian soprano, notes: "In his early days he was so energetic, so impulsive. He built one climax on top of another. You felt like you were going to explode. Now he knows how to relax."

No two musicians ever look at a conductor in exactly the same way. Where Friedman sees the metaphysical and Nilsson a mellower Solti, Flutist Debost sees the diabolical: "There is something of the wolf or the Hun about Solti. As he conducts, his eyes turn into cracks, his ears become pointed, and you can sort of imagine him riding

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tically nonexistent for such a position, there were few other conductors around who could pass the Allies' denazification screening. As head of a major European opera house, Solti had exactly one work in his conducting repertory—the 1938 *Figaro*. No one in Munich knew that except Solti and, as he recalls now, "I took great care to conceal my rather limited repertory. It was not for several years that Munich began to discover that I was conducting everything for the first time."

By 1948 Solti was guest-conducting in Italy and Vienna. Two years later he conducted the London Philharmonic, and in 1952 he moved from Munich to become general music director of the Frankfurt Opera. He had nine good years there (44 new productions), but in terms of his international career, it was records that brought him prominence. His 1957 recording of Wagner's *Die Walküre* with Kirsten Flagstad, Set Svanholm and the Vienna Philharmonic, was so successful that it prompted English Decca (London Records in the U.S.) to engage him to embark upon the complete *Ring* cycle, a prodigious undertaking that was not completed until 1965.

Outraged. Though Solti first visited the U.S. in 1953 to conduct the San Francisco Opera, it was not until 1960 that he was offered an American orchestra. The experience was a disaster. Solti was hired by the Los Angeles Philharmonic as chief conductor, only to learn that a young conductor from India named Zubin Mehta had been chosen as his assistant—without his consent. Solti quit. Nothing against Mehta, says Solti, but a matter of principle. "If I had given in on this one point, it would never have been the same. I wasn't happy then at all, no, not a bit. But today I am grateful. Because if I'd stayed on at Los Angeles, I wouldn't have Chicago, and where would I be then?"

His humiliation was considerably soothed by his ascendancy to the directorship of England's Royal Opera at Covent Garden in 1961. Still something of a diamond in the rough, the *Generalmusikdirektor* of the Munich and Frankfurt operas had trouble adjusting to the British predilection for requesting rather than demanding. Recalls John Culshaw, producer of the Solti *Ring* cycle: "With such a bundle of energy who drives himself so hard, you either give him total loyalty or you can't stand him." Among those who could not stand him at first were the members of the chorus, outraged that he refused to meet their delegates for discussions of working conditions. The audiences were at times as difficult. They would treat Solti to an occasional heckle and boo, and one night during *Der Rosenkavalier* a cabbage plunked down on the stage with the inscription: "Solti must go."

Solti did not go. In fact, it quickly became clear that he was not quite the ogre his Germanic brusqueness suggested. The musicians soon realized his re-



SOLTI'S FIRST WIFE HEDI
Taming the Magyar.

markable talents and total dedication. They fondly began collecting "Soltisms" that result from his frenzied blend of Hungarian, German and English. Examples: "Dis is it as ve would never did it." To signify that the chorus was a bit muddy: "Here we have ze svimming." Running up to compliment a stand-in singer on his performance, he cried: "Congratulations. I thought it would be twice as bad."

Under Solti, Covent Garden had its most dynamic presence since the days of Sir Thomas Beecham in the 1930s. Aside from Karajan at Vienna, no other opera house was headed by a musician of Solti's caliber. When he took over, Solti proclaimed that "I have only one desire: to make Covent Garden the best opera house in the world." By the time he left in 1971, he had almost succeeded, and there was no one to dispute his right to the knighthood bestowed by the Queen a year later, shortly after he had become a British citizen.

Throughout his tour at Covent Garden, Solti was taking on polish—largely due to his first wife Hedi whom he had met during the war in Switzerland. Hedi was formal, proper, acutely aware of class structure; once they were situated in London, she began seeing to it that Solti mingled with the right titles. Friends recall the day that Solti was to have tea in a lordly London home. Hedi had spent all day rehearsing him on the fine points of an English tea. Except, that is, for the sugar tongs: Solti squeezed them too tightly, and his sugar cube popped into the breast pocket of Covent Garden's administrator, the late Sir David Webster.

Hedi managed him, mothered him—and watched their marriage fall apart. "We were still young when we married, and we just grew in different ways," says Solti today. Whatever the reason,

Solti was soon known as the possessor of a wandering eye. All the old jokes about the casting couch were dragged out. There was gossip that he gave his paramours a white fur coat—and that there was an exorbitant number of white-coated women around London.

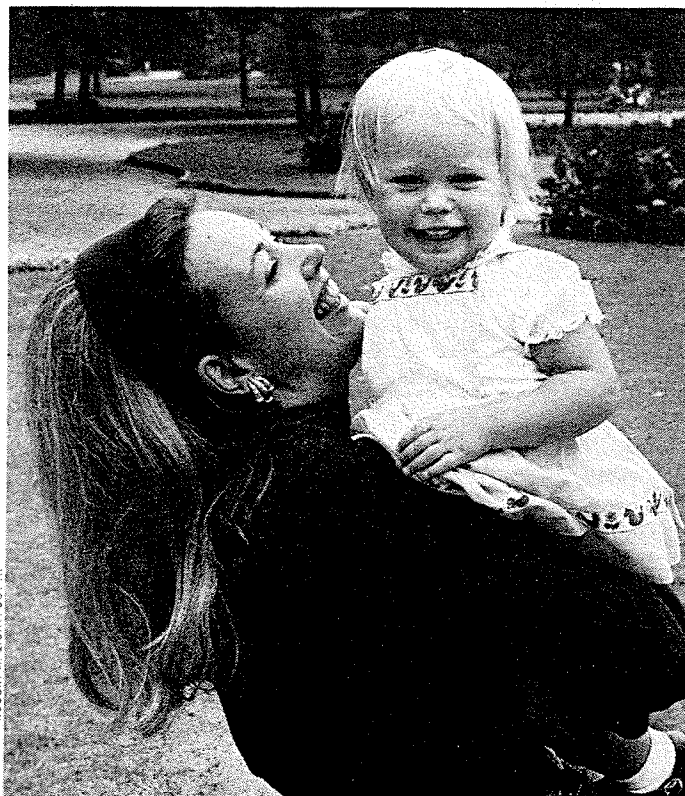
His eye finally settled in 1964 when, at 52, he met and fell in love with Valerie Pitts, 27, a reporter sent to interview him for BBC-TV. They lived together for two years ("It was a violent affair," understates Solti) until Hedi and Valerie's husband James Sargent, a theater executive, obtained divorces in 1966. Solti and Valerie married the next year. Hedi now is married to Patrick O'Shea, a landowner in Ireland.

Hedi had begun the taming of the Magyar and Valerie now completed the process. When he was in one of his intense moods, relaxed, unassuming Valerie went her own sweet way, and that, surprisingly, unwound him. She never debunked him and, more important, never inflated him. In short, says Solti's American Manager Ann Colbert, "Valerie took him off the pedestal." The aura of happy domesticity sits well on Solti these days. He has even been known to end an evening's rehearsal early to go home and tuck his first child, Daughter Gabrielle, now 3, into bed.

Though spectacular on the podium, he is just plain Georg in real life. Where Karajan tools around in a flashy sports car, Solti drives a Volvo sedan. Where Bernstein emerges from a concert in a flowing cape, Solti strolls out in a faded turtleneck. He prefers mineral water to wine, and his daily drink is usually a Scotch just after the concert and before his late-night supper; he never eats before conducting.

Night life for him means his con-

SECOND WIFE VALERIE & DAUGHTER GABRIELLE



ROBERT M. LIGHTFOOT III

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cert, or a small meal and game of bridge with friends. He abhors the violence on American TV—but is consumed by the violence of English football. When in London he can regularly be found watching soccer on the BBC.

He also watches the stock market. That is not surprising, considering his wealth. Solti's combined earnings from concerts and recordings now probably exceed a quarter-million dollars a year. Royalties from his disks, spurred by the popularity of his *Ring* and Mahler cycles, have risen drastically in the past several years; he is comforted by the knowledge that if anything happened to him ("Look, I am 60 after all"), future royalties would certainly assure his

young family a good income for at least the next 15 years. Yet signs of wealth are extremely hard to detect in his lifestyle. When they come, extravagances are usually a \$50 clock for Gabrielle, or the \$1,000 phone bill he racks up each month when on tour, partly for business but partly also to hear his daughter say "Da da."

Solti talks regularly of slowing down. He notes that Gabrielle will be five in 1975 and ready for a stable home and school life. Also, he and Valerie are expecting a second child this month. Like fatherhood, though, Solti's biggest successes have come late in life and, while mellower now, he is going as hard today as he did as a handyman at the Bu-

dapest opera 40 years ago. This week he brings the Chicago into New York for two sold-out concerts at Carnegie Hall, then on to Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California. In July he will be back in the pit at Covent Garden conducting Bizet's *Carmen*. He will stay on in London to record Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and Puccini's *La Bohème*; then after a month's vacation he will return to Chicago for concerts, and begin recording more Beethoven symphonies. On it goes. His engagements already run into 1977. Perhaps then he will be ready to slow down, but no one is betting on it. After all, notes a friend, Toscanini is one of Solti's heroes—and he conducted until he was 87.



Rating U.S. Orchestras

TIME's Music Critic William Bender, who wrote the cover story on Sir Georg Solti, here turns to other conductors and gives his considered, though to some perhaps arbitrary, ranking of U.S. orchestras:

THE TOP THREE

CHICAGO SYMPHONY
Sine qua non.

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The musicians grumblingly nicknamed him "the French Correction," and some older subscribers yawn or go home early, but it is indisputable that Pierre Boulez, 48, has brought the orchestra smack into the middle of the century and given it a pristine technical polish.

PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
After almost four decades at the helm, Eugene Ormandy at 73 commands an orchestra that remains a patrician marvel, even though Ormandy's interpretations occasionally tend to be more like glossy prints than the real music.

HONORS
BOSTON SYMPHONY
A great orchestra that lost its edge during the last years of Erich Leinsdorf's reign, and has been essentially without a ruler since his retirement in 1969. Seiji Ozawa, 37, takes over next season in an effort to restore the Boston to its traditional excellence.

CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA
Built in the image of George Szell, the Cleveland has been fervently searching for a new look since his death in 1971. After one season on the job, Lorin Maazel, 43, is going all out to provide it, even posing for a Maazel sweatshirt that the orchestra's fund-raising committee is selling for \$20.

From top: Boulez, Ormandy, Ozawa, Maazel, Steinberg, Skrowaczewski, Mehta, Schippers, Thomas, Lombard.

PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY
A perennial, dependable producer under the master hand of William Steinberg, 73.

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA
Four years after adopting a more regional stance, the former Minneapolis Symphony has a broad base of audience popularity and an equally broad range of musical style, thanks largely to its stern, businesslike mentor, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, 49.

LOS ANGELES PHILHARMONIC
At 37, Zubin Mehta remains the most polished, versatile member of conducting's young generation, the orchestra a shiny steed for his charging musical ways.

SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
Seiji Ozawa again, the only man to lead two major American orchestras at once. The peppery Japanese has excited not just his musicians but the subscribers as well—one reason the orchestra has finished in the black throughout the three years of his tenure.

ON THE RISE
CINCINNATI SYMPHONY
Always an astonishingly well-disciplined orchestra, the underrated Cincinnati has sprung to new life under Thomas Schippers, 43, one of America's finest native-born (Kalamazoo, Mich.) conductors.

BUFFALO PHILHARMONIC
Buffalo drew national attention to itself by the simple expedient of grabbing the hottest young conductor anywhere, Michael Tilson Thomas, 27, who drew his own national attention as associate conductor of the Boston Symphony. Though the Buffalo is not yet hale and hardy, Thomas appears to be winning the orchestra's fight for the youth audience.

GREATER MIAMI PHILHARMONIC
Miami's new cultural hero is slim, personable, vibrant Alain Lombard, 32. Director of the Strasbourg Music Festival in his native France, as well as a regular guest conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, Lombard has led the Philharmonic for six years and given it new dash, style and popularity.

