

Chicago Daily News, Fri., Jan. 18, 1974

Sir Georg returns with vibrant 'Enigma'

By Karen Monson

Sir Georg Solti didn't know R.B.T., W.N., B.G.N., the mysterious Mary and all the other friends and loves Sir Edward Elgar sketched in his 1899 Variations on an Original Theme. Or did he?

It's a whole new enigma for the "Enigma" Variations. How can Solti reveal the characters in the symphonic miniatures so precisely?

Thursday evening in Orchestra Hall, at the first subscription concert of his midseason visit, Sir Georg made Sir Edward's Op. 36 sound like the most vivid, vital music in the world (which it isn't).

Each of the 14 variations was exquisitely detailed; the composer's large-scale plan was

expertly followed. The central "Nimrod" variation, a drawing of Jaeger who "discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven" when Elgar was in need of a moral boost, was painted with long, flawless strokes.

Richard Baxter Townshend, the "amiable eccentric" who rode a tricycle, appeared real-life in his scherzoish cameo. (variation 3).

AND MAYBE SOLTI WASN'T around when G. R. Sinclair's bulldog Dan fell into the river, paddled upstream and barked with joy when his paws found land. But the conductor must have four-legged friends, for those five notes in variation 9 sounded exact-

ly like a proud gleeful woof.

When time came for the Elgar, after Thursday's intermission, the Chicago Symphony seemed suddenly to recognize its music director on the podium.

The playing improved technically, the dynamic range fanned out, and color returned to the instrumentalists' faces and sounds. Solti responded accordingly, unleashing every spare ounce of conductorial expressivity, wit and poetry.

THE FIRST HALF of the evening stumbled, unfortunately. Bartok's neglected Divertimento for Strings (1939) was treated to memorable antiphonal effects and to fine solo playing from violinists Victor Aitay and Jo-

seph Golan, violist Milton Preves, cellist Frank Miller and doublebassist Joseph Guastafeste (though Aitay would never make it as a gypsy fiddler).

But the realization in general missed the squeaky clean surety the Divertimento needs.

While Solti and the orchestra paid Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto due respect, Kyung Wha Chung, the 25-year-old Korean soloist (in her downtown debut), distorted rhythms, phrases and her violin tone.

Had Miss Chung's technique held up, the performance might have been eccentrically exciting. But the soloist's shot at theatricality missed its target, and no elegance could be found to save the day.