

Next stop: Carnegie Hall

Solti's 'Missa' a preview of bigger things to come

By Karen Monson

Sir Georg Solti conducted Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" Thursday evening in Orchestra Hall, so you know already that something big is in the wind. Things like that don't just happen without a future.

That something big is called Carnegie Hall, New York. Then later, add on London Records. The "Missa" will be the grand finale of three Solti-Chicago Symphony concerts next week in New York.

And when the orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Chorus, conductor and soloists get back home, they'll put the work on London's tapes, thus adding another important installment to their already impressive Beethoven discography.

Not that Solti's "Missa Solemnis" is a Chicago novelty. The music director offered the work here as recently as November, 1973, with a different set of soloists and, if memory serves, with a whole lot less brilo.

THURSDAY'S interpretation was as close to the Verdi Requiem, as close to grand opera, as this imposing mass can get without completely overlooking its stern, Gothic architecture. Solti took full advantage of every sudden change in volume, every unexpected harmonic shift, every fluctuation in tempo, every chance to hold back mysteriously, every chance to fly.

Some of the most sudden shifts didn't work particularly well at this first performance, but they'll probably be smoothed over by the time

of the Chicago repeats (at 8:15 p.m. Friday and 8:30 p.m. Saturday), and for Carnegie Hall.

And if the theatricality sometimes seemed to stretch the point unduly, well, this is a work that's easier to respect than to love, and a little dramatic push never put an audience to sleep.

Some of the most memorable contributions came from Margaret Hillis' Chicago Symphony Chorus, with that cushy sound in the quiet passages, that proud fortissimo, and the agility to take the scales on the "Et ascendit" at Solti's aggressive pace without a hitch.

And, of course, the orchestra furthered the impact, with lovely solo work from first-chair violinist Victor Aitay and flutist Donald Peck, and with just the right combination of discipline and abandon.

THE SOLOISTS, however, were another matter, a badly mixed lot. Soprano Lucia Popp was the star in the quartet, with her sweet, clear tone floating high and, sometimes, meltingly.

Mezzo-soprano Yvonne Minton projected more easily than her colleagues, which sometimes meant that her voice cut through and stuck out of the quartet.

The men were both distressingly weak. Mallory Walker's tenor lacked focus and resonance. Basso Gwynne Howell didn't have the strength to give the soloists' sections a firm foundation, and his beginning of the "Agnus Dei" was without conviction.

The Symphony

Solti 'Missa' imposing, thorough

ALL THE MUSIC historians make a point of telling us that the opening page of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* contains the composer's inscription: "From the heart—May it go to the heart." For all the composer's exalted status as one of music's supreme geniuses, I expect there are many musicians who wish that this particular work could be transferred to the listeners in just that way, without the necessity of actual performance.

Sir Georg Solti is making his second local pass at this most challenging of Beethoven's scores, performing the Mass at this week's subscription concert, taking it to Carnegie Hall for the annual New York City "blockbuster," and recording it the following week.

When he first performed it here in 1973, two of his intended soloists had to be replaced on short notice and a third, the soprano, was in pitch trouble in those heaven-scaling passages where she was most needed. This time he is faring better. At Thursday's opening performance, Lucia Popp combined a spring breeze freshness of voice with impeccable technique to make the demanding role sound easy.

TWO OF HER collaborators, Yvonne Minton and Gwynne Howell, were equally ideal for their share in the craggy monument, whose peaks and valleys form a unique musical landscape unequalled in the history of religious music. Mallory Walker, the tenor, had the expressive line and color, but the top of his phrases paled by comparison with those of Robert

Tear when Carlo Maria Giulini conducted the *Missa* here in 1970.

That Giulini performance, in fact, enfolded Orchestra Hall in a kind of holy ecstasy. It somehow transcended the notes, and both audience and performers were caught up in the composer's impassioned alternation of plea and praise, affirmation and tremulous search. During it, listeners forgot the problems, ignored the excessive length of the windy Handel-like fugues, and responded to the truncated ending as an inevitability and not the anticlimax that it is.

SOLTI'S PERFORMANCE Thursday was technically brilliant, thought through to the last detail, strongly accented, crystal clear in its balances, and as attentive as it was in 1973 to the all-important relationship between soloists and chorus. Margaret Hillis had her sopranos persuaded that "Et vitam venturi" could be enunciated and beautifully sung on a high B-flat and the rest of the singers responded to both Beethoven and Solti's determination to operate at the outer limits. And the Benedictus violin solo, a Victor Aitay specialty, was again a particularly effective invocation.

Homogeneity is not the entire answer to this flawed masterpiece, though. Its five parts are separate entities, not movements of a symphony. Each has its own emotional ambience and spiritual quality. Imposing though it was, this performance was more monument than testament, more plan than prayer.

Thomas Willis

Fine moments by Solti in Beethoven music drama

Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti conductor, and Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director) with Leola Popp, soprano; Yvonne Minton, mezzo soprano; Mallory Walker, tenor, and Gwynne Howell, bass, at Orchestra Hall Thursday. Missa Solemnis; Beethoven.

Music by Robert C. Marsh

According to the text books Beethoven wrote one opera, "Fidelio," and technically speaking that is correct. But as Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus demonstrated Thursday, Beethoven's gift for music drama was in no sense limited to the operatic stage. His Missa Solemnis, although nominally a large-scale setting of the Roman Catholic mass for festive liturgical purposes, far exceeds in the scope of its dramatic ideas anything in "Fidelio" just as the Verdi Requiem reaches peaks that are only rarely equaled in the Verdi operas. Solti's account of the Missa Solemnis does

not attempt to convey spirituality by the conventional musical devices of slow tempos and deeply inflected melodic lines. It is, on the whole, briskly paced, although the meditative passages of the Benedictus (in which Victor Aitay's violin sang forth splendidly) were given full breadth. This was a performance that found its greatest glory in the soaring climax of the Gloria or the menacing drum notes of the Agnus Dei as we plead for peace while being called to war. The conception of the score was theatrical rather than religious, but it was consistent, it worked, and it produced some of the finest moments Solti has brought us this season.

The chorus was excellent, although I still find its Latin harsh and the pace was fast, it was working hard to get in all the words in a bar. The solo quartet, considering the reputations (and, I surmise, fees) involved, really

was not as exciting vocally as one might have hoped. If you will excuse my chauvinism, I question the need to import a Welsh bass, Gwynne Howell, when there are young American singers who could have done just as well.