

CSO plays Prokofiev with lovely little twist in 'Romeo and Juliet'

By John Von Rhein
Music critic

ONE OF THESE DAYS Sir Georg Solti really should tackle the Prokofiev second and fourth symphonies, which are the last of the big Prokofiev orchestral works missing from the Chicago Symphony's downtown repertory.

Thursday night, however, brought more pressing Prokofiev business. With recording sessions beckoning, and a live radio broadcast (transmitted via satellite to 10 European capitals) scheduled for Friday afternoon's concert, Solti turned his orchestra's attention to three of Prokofiev's most popular scores: the "Classical" Symphony, Piano Concerto No. 3 and excerpts from the ballet "Romeo and Juliet."

Rather than offer the standard "Romeo and Juliet" suites, Solti drew his own sequence of 17 pieces totaling about 45 minutes of music from the complete ballet, a selection that followed through the action of each act. It was a perfectly sensible choice affording maximum musical contrast, and it should make for a very full record with the "Classical" Symphony as makeweight.

SOLTI PREDICTABLY made much of the driving rhythmic impetus of the quick sections. The Montagues and Capulets tilted with ominous menace, and no one could mistake the cold glint of dueling steel in Solti's hair-trigger Act II finale. But such was the care he lavished on the score that the lyrical pages of the love music, and those depicting the young Juliet, soared with a tender lyricism, every instrumental detail vividly etched. One came away both refreshed and exhilarated, so new and right did the music seem. It should make a fine record.

A pity that the entire disc will not be given over to selections from "Romeo and Juliet." By comparison, Solti's "Classical" Symphony sounded like a caricature of this delightful neo-Haydn romp, thick and unsmiling, devoid of charm or wit. It was distinctly inferior to the Carlo Maria Giulini performances and recording.

Very little was amiss, however, in Etsko Tazaki's spirited account of the concerto. How good it was to find a pianist capable of delving beyond the brilliantly pyrotechnical surface, showing us the supple contours of Prokofiev's

melodic structure. Rather than reduce the Steinway Concert Grand to a smoldering ruin, she let the music and the instrument sing with a knowing sense of fantasy, particularly in the slow movement. For the outer sections she did not so much play the angular rhythms as pounce on them, tossing them back and forth with the orchestra in the spirit of sardonic sport, which, if you remember Prokofiev's recorded performance, is precisely what this music is about. Solti was a perfect partner in diablerie.

FOR SUCH A SMALL nation, the Netherlands is blessed with an unusual abundance of major orchestras. Next September will bring a red-carpet visit from the Amsterdam Concertgebouw as part of the bicentennial celebration of diplomatic relations between Holland and the United States. And Wednesday night gave us a return concert by the Hague Philharmonic Orchestra (known as the Residentie Orchestra in its homeland) as Chicago's first musical salvo of that celebration.

It is easy to see why the Dutch government is proud of its symphonic export, for the Hague is a solid musical organization that can hold its own in the inevitable comparisons with Holland's "other" orchestra. Its choirs are blended with security, the ensemble is cohesive, the overall sound is clean yet warm, and all refinements of dynamics and tone color are duly attended to by Hans Vonk, the orchestra's assertive conductor:

Of course, there were moments in both Strauss' "Don Juan" and the Tchaikovsky Fifth Symphony when one would not have confused the Hague with one of the world's supreme virtuosos ensembles. The exultant opening of "Don Juan" was rather hard of tone, as if Vonk had underestimated Orchestra Hall's appetite for decibels; and the Hague strings, while sweet and supple, lacked the alluring richness demanded by the heady climaxes of the Tchaikovsky. But these moments were fleeting, and they were more than compensated for by the vigor, strength, lyrical fervor and carefully tempered rhetoric that characterized these readings in general.

The program began with a Dutch contemporary piece, Otto Ketting's "Time Machine," that gave the winds and percussion an aggressive workout in sputtering staccato discords and other trademarks of the international soundpiece genre.