

Solti performance evokes anticipation of his return

By John Von Rhein
Music critic

LUCKY SIR GEORG Solti. When he completes the winter portion of his Chicago Symphony Orchestra residency this Saturday night, he will be able to forsake Chicago-style blizzards and bluster for a bit of well-deserved rest and a family reunion in London, whose fog and rain will surely seem like heaven-sent bliss compared to what this city has been suffering through.

The maestro is not due back on the Orchestra Hall podium until the very end of the season in May, when he promises us several unusually interesting programs, including an all-star concert version of Beethoven's "Fidelio" as a nonsubscription event.

Anticipating Solti's return may not entirely take our minds off the fact that our orchestra will again be entrusted to a parade of visiting conductors for a long span of 14 weeks lasting the rest of the winter and most of the spring. It won't make any easier to live with the realization that we no longer have Carlo Maria Giulini here to provide continuity and contrast and artistic balance during those troublesome "Soltigaps." But it will certainly remind us of the good things the music director has brought us so far and those we can expect from him in future concerts.

SOME OF those good things were contained in Thursday's subscription program. In fact, it proved a more potent demonstration of collective musical skill and insight than anything Sir Georg and his band have given us this season. The repertoire stressed romantic warmth and lyricism as well as brilliance, and no orchestra responds quite so individualistically to such expressive qualities, particularly when its music director himself happens to be in good form. Solti was in very good form Thursday night.

He opened with Weber's "Euryanthe" Overture, playing it for maximum color and plenty of invigorating spirit, but easing up sufficiently in the gentler pages to make something sweetly memorable of them.

Then came the Bartok Second Piano Concerto, with the Japanese pianist Etsko Tazaki making her Orchestra debut as soloist. For such a petite young lady she commands a big, muscular sound and had no trouble whatsoever summoning the incisive rhythmic edge needed to make this essay in 20th-

Century percussive pianism gleam with diamond-hard luster.

THE PIECE is full of aggressive polyphonic writing in Bartok's acerbic, mature style, and many interpreters simply make a muddy hash of it all. Not Miss Tazaki. Her fingers operated like so many well-oiled pistons, etching all the intertwining lines with absolute clarity, yet never missing an accent and never losing her nerve however headlong the tempo. She reminded us that the concerto is not all motoric vigor but has its own delicate fantasy as well. And she managed the not inconsiderable feat of keeping the keyboard instrument always in proper sonic relief against the orchestra.

Miss Tazaki is clearly a Bartok interpreter to be reckoned with, and we will certainly be hearing from her again.

Solti and the orchestra backed her splendidly, of course, and in fact the only thing which detracted from the performance was the cacophony of coughing from the audience during the whisper-soft slow movement. It so bothered Solti (who has made no secret of his displeasure with such rudeness in the past) that before conducting the Beethoven "Pastorale" Symphony after intermission he pleaded, genially but firmly, with the offenders to stifle their noise. Miracle of miracles, they could and did.

IT WAS instructive to compare this Beethoven Sixth with Solti's 1974 Chicago recording of the piece. The conductor has evidently rethought the symphony in mellower, more lyrical, and reflective terms, for not only have some of his tempi, notably in the "Scene by the Brook" movement, become slower, but he has softened some of the accented rhythms which made the earlier performance seem somewhat unyielding and unsmiling. Tempo relationships are now better judged, and the entire work now has a more satisfying sense of flow and symphonic structure.

Solti still downplays the pictorial aspects—the peasant dance moves but is never rollicking—and he still broadens the final pages. But it's a better proportioned, richer-spirited "Pastorale" now, and the Chicagoans performed it beautifully, with wonderfully bucolic solos as only (or so it seems on a night like this) our first-chair woodwinds can play them.