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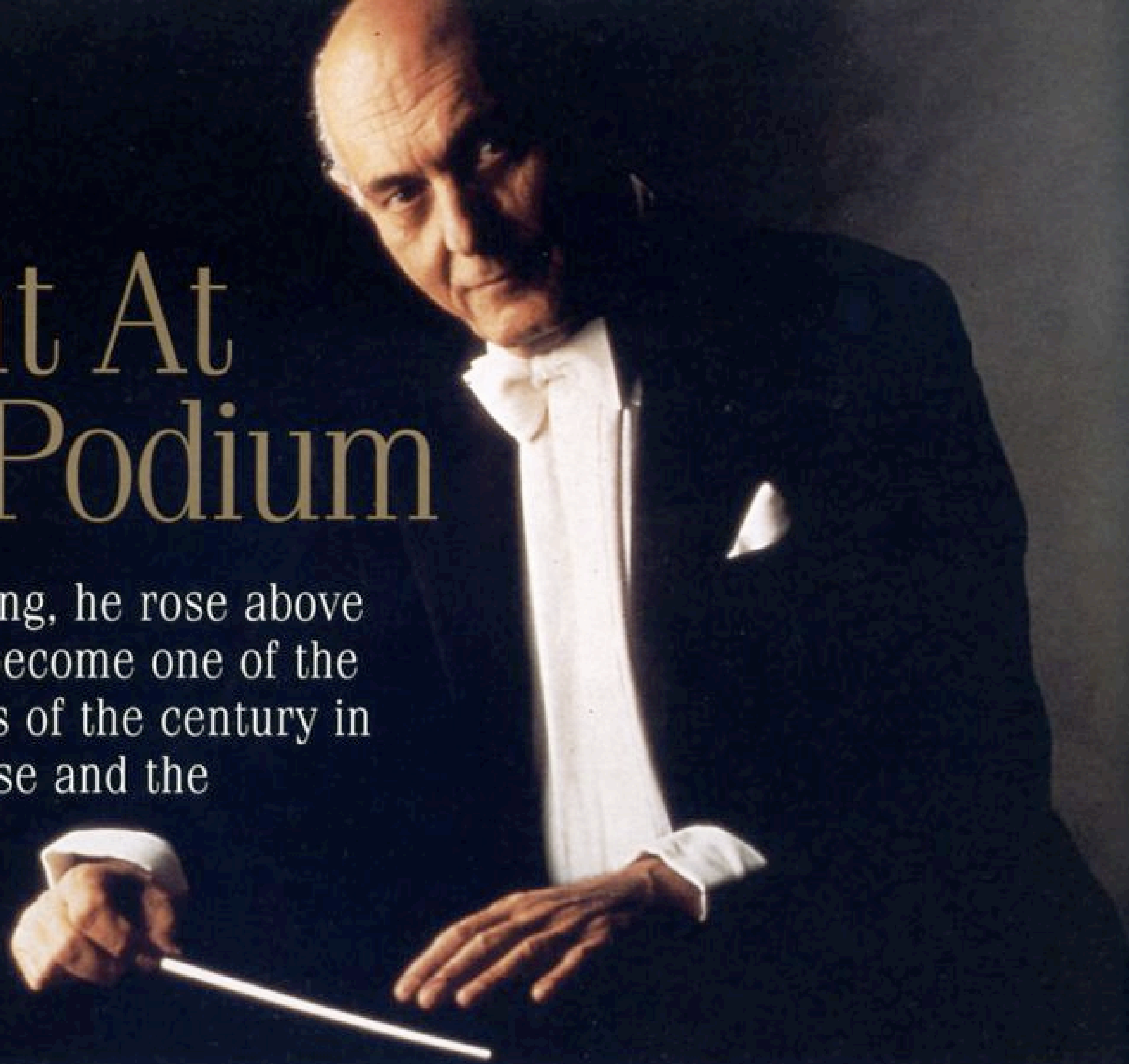

A Giant At The Podium

Blunt but ingratiating, he rose above early adversity to become one of the greatest conductors of the century in both the opera house and the symphony hall.

Taking the tram at age 10 from his home in Buda to the Ernö Fodor School of Music in Pest, and then the street car to the Franz Liszt Academy every day from the time he was 12 until he was 18, George Solti was taught discipline and hard work in a hallowed and fertile musical environment. He learned piano from Béla Bartók and composition from Zoltán Kodály, among his many distinguished instructors. But it was at a performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, led by great German conductor Erich Kleiber in Budapest's Music Academy, that Solti says, "I felt as if I had been hit by lightning." He instantly gave up the notion of a pianist's career in favor of a bid for the podium.

From "the screaming skull" to elegant, gentle maestro, George Solti came a long trip in the conducting career that followed — especially during the 22 years that he and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra made each other world famous. At his death, three years ago, Solti was one of the most celebrated conductors ever.

His personal and professional style, and the music he did best, reflected Solti's Hungarian roots and were particularly Central European in flavor. He made his orchestra a world-touring, public relations, and recording juggernaut, and when he passed, he was among the last conductors who had trained with classical music legends and taken the podium prior to the Second World War. Ambition personified, he even made his fame on the very music that had (wrongly) symbolized the Nazism that seared his early life.

Something to Scream About

Solti earned his unflattering screaming-skull nickname midpoint in his career from his less-than-diplomatic rants at players during his tenure as music director of the Royal Opera at Covent Garden, London. With little hair and a thin-skinned, pronounced, angular set of features — handsome in a fierce way — Solti's intense, demanding appearance and demeanor gave him an intimidating reputation.

But he had reasons for some anger. As a Hungarian Jew, born Gyuri Stern (he later reverted to his ancestors' Hungarian surname) in 1912 in Budapest, he suffered the cruelties of anti-Semitism early. Fortunately, his fond and protective mother recognized his musical potential and pushed his early instruction.

He was already rehearsing the players at the National Opera in Budapest by age 19. While assisting Arturo Toscanini at the Salzburg Festival in 1937, a "Bene," from the great conductor to Solti after a rehearsal was, said the maestro in later years, "the most important word in my career."

On March 11, 1938, Solti, at age 25, conducted his first opera in public. But it was also to be his last in Budapest. That same day Nazi troops marched into Austria. The following year, the national assembly in Hungary passed laws discriminating against Jews. Solti went to Lucerne to try to convince Toscanini to help him find work in America. It was then that a telegram came from his mother warning him not to return home.

Will to Achieve Over All

Solti never saw his father again and his mother only once again briefly. He lost friends and relatives to the Holocaust. Solti barely eked out a living, meanwhile, giving music lessons in Switzerland.

"George did not speak about his earlier years very often," notes Henry Fogel, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

After the war, in 1946, the American military government asked Solti to conduct Beethoven's "Fidelio" in Munich. Always a believer in lobbying for one's own advancement, Solti promoted the opportunities presented by this successful performance. U.S. occupying authorities thought him a perfect choice for a direc-

Photographs courtesy Chicago Symphony Orchestra

torship in Munich. Of course, there were few other candidates at that point; but, what more appropriate statement than to put a Jew with a hatred for the Nazis at the podium, as musical director, at — of all places — the Bavarian State Opera.

And what of Solti's decision to accept such an appointment? "He was the first to admit that it was pure ambition," explains David Stearns, classical music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer. "He would have shaken hands with the devil for such a chance."

And in some ways he did, but brilliantly, gaining the advantage and molding musicians that included former Nazi-era players with decades more experience than him. He firmly established the quality and reputation of the recast Bavarian opera over the next six years. It was there, and at the Frankfurt Opera (1952 to 1961), that Solti made himself competent at the craft of directing.

Playing to His Strengths, Making History

Solti created a large, muscular orchestral palette that was especially fit to the works of German composers such as Wagner and Strauss, and similarly to those of Mahler and Bruckner. He was widely recognized for his recordings of Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen," with the Vienna Philharmonic between 1958 and 1965. The first complete recording of this tetralogy, it featured the leading Wagnerian singers of its day, and perhaps the finest overall cast ever assembled for the piece. It captured a waning, theatrical Wagnerian tradition in which singers articulated and colored words to give them fuller meaning. This best-selling Ring recording of all time, and the first in stereo, is among the foremost classical music recordings ever. Its "Götterdämmerung" is considered one of the highlights available on classical music discs.

Solti's dedication to this epic, and his ability to excel principally in the German and Austrian post-Romantic repertoire and in contemporary Hungarian music, showed that the man was purely of the music. And he knew it beyond any false co-opting of it by politics or any other force.

A Change in the Windy City

While under Solti's hand in the '60s, Covent Garden became one of the finest opera houses in the world. But for more than 30 years, Solti had concentrated almost entirely on conducting operas, and now he wanted a turn at symphonic work.

The gifted conductor was able to aim his nuclear focus upon symphonies with the same clarity he had upon operas. He knew what results he wanted and let his instinct guide him on how to get it. Whether beseeching or pounding the podium, he was always able to communicate his will to his players — an absolute must for a great conductor.

And as he came to Chicago (1969), he had learned to restrict his volatility too. Now it was evident mostly in an ability to make quick decisions and an impatience to move forward. Simultaneously, he relinquished more control to the music and was careful to treat his players with respect.

In fact, he had become a warm, caring coach and leader. "I never saw him yell or lose his temper in his time here," notes Fogel.

The results would be legend. Hungarian Fritz Reiner had gained high regard for the Chicago Symphony in the 1950s, but Solti would bring it all the way to greatness. His arrival became one important element of many that helped to wash the bad taste of the 1968 riots out of Chicago and, among other things, put the Toddlin' Town on the world cultural map.

John von Rhein, classical music critic for the Chicago *Tribune*, captures the surge when he writes of a 1971 concert in Manhattan where Solti and his fabulous Chicagoans "blew the roof off venerable Carnegie Hall ... concertgoers had never heard anything quite like Solti's mighty band parading its powerhouse virtuosity in Mahler's Fifth Symphony, the first of what would be a long string of Solti blockbusters. The heavily sold-out house erupted in a veritable feeding frenzy at the end of the 70-minute symphony. The thunderous ovations went on and on into the night."

While to some there was unabashed self-promotion here, in just two years of his arrival in Chicago Solti nevertheless went on to take the orchestra on its first triumphant European tour. Citizens of Chicago were so stunned by the international recognition garnered by the trip that they gave the maestro and his CSO a ticker-tape parade on State Street.

Heavy on the Hungarian

Solti reflected his roots in more than just his great interpretations of Bartók. "He was very characteristically Hungarian," says Stearns, who studied Solti's style and interviewed him a number of times. "He had this electric sense of rhythm, with fast tempos — emphatic and vigorous. Music seemed bigger under his hand."

Donald Koss, tympanist for 34 years with the CSO said: "He was obsessed with tempo, and I loved it!"

The "Solti sound" was large, with a great sweep and good range. The conductor loved to orchestrate large productions and did so with a military leader's kind of gusto.

Nevertheless, some thought his approach too strident, even bombastic at times, lacking warmth and artistry. Critic Emil Franzi has written, "He was not one of the subtle or cerebral wielders of the baton. Rhythmic drive and sheer power often took precedence over shadings and lyric moments."

Franzi also notes that while Solti's musicianship was unchallenged, he was always somewhat looked down upon by music critics, as his countryman Hungarian-born Eugene Ormandy had been. But Franzi and other critics believe that Solti's legacy with Chicago will only grow with reevaluation, as has Ormandy's with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

A Man Who Knew Who He Was

Solti, his great band, and their sold-out concerts were received phenomenally the world over. And yet in the midst of it all Solti reflected his ordinary background off the podium. His second marriage, to a younger woman, brought children late in life. Von Rhein writes, "Solti was, in the words of one singer who often worked with him, 'magnificently selfish.' Except for his family and the two daughters who were the joy of his golden years, nothing much mattered to him but his performances."

Nothing perhaps except for his heritage. Among the art collection in his comfortable house in London were works by a number of Hungarian artists. "He was fiercely proud of his Hungarian background," says Joyce Idema, who worked closely with Solti in Chicago and is now Director of Press and Public Relations at the Santa Fe Opera.

The pride of origin also included his Jewish heritage. It meant a great deal to Solti to take his orchestra to the Soviet Union in 1990 before the collapse of communism there. After these cel-

ebrated dates, he traveled with his players to his native Hungary for the first time since the fall of that country's communist government. He found an opportunity to appear on television and speak of his flight for survival from the Third Reich and its fascist Hungarian allies. He recounted how, as a Jew, he "was thrown out of the opera. I lost my job. I lost my family. I lost my country." Postwar communist governments in Hungary had made it clear that Solti was not welcome home.

Solti finished the broadcast by admonishing his homeland on the strength of tolerance and diversity.

Vital to the End

George Solti regularly renewed his music, starting fresh with an unmarked score each time. As a result, interpretations in the latter part of his career could sometimes contrast to the same works performed decades earlier.

Among his convictions was that the learning process must never stop, or even slow down. He added two or three new scores to his repertoire every season. In his 80s, he was studying new music, and had begun performing the demanding Shostakovich symphonies.

As one of the last conductors who did diligence in the great training houses of Europe prior to the war, Solti's legitimacy contrasted to that of comparatively instant stars of today's classical music scene. Indeed, he has been described as a testament to the elegance and impeccable tastefulness of Central European music making.

"But he contributed to a new tradition more than holding up an old one," says Stearns. "He picked up the tempo of conducting in many senses."

The irony of a career founded on Wagner, the artist most closely associated, or in fact misassociated, with the Third Reich, shows the transcendency of Solti's career. He received the Knight Commander's Cross (with badge and star) of the Order of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany as well as the Order of Merit from the Republic of Hungary.

He had a recorded legacy of almost 50 years and 250 discs. And he maintained a grinding schedule of guest conducting with the top orchestras and operas of the world until his death in 1997, at age 84, while vacationing in the south of France.

Von Rhein, writing the maestro's obit for the *Tribune*, puts it most aptly: "At the summit of his international fame, in the 1970s and '80s, Solti was one of the handful of top conductors whose role was that of a freewheeling power broker in the high-risk world of symphony and opera. It was his finest role, and he played it to the hilt, with the easy assurance of a multinational corporation president who has clawed his way up from the bottom of the ladder and remembers every painful detail of the rise."

Solti stipulated that his ashes be interred in his hometown of Budapest. They were placed in a cemetery next to the plot of his onetime teacher, Béla Bartók.

Just hours before his passing, he had made final corrections to his autobiography, *Memoirs*, published the same year by Knopf. He dedicated the last page to a description of his emotional return late in life to his ancestral village, where he stood in the gently blowing tall grass of an ancient Jewish cemetery of his forbears, and Hungarian children serenaded him with traditional folksongs.

Certain Style in Chicagoland

With everything subservient to his music, Solti was not flamboyant in personal style, nor an overly grand public persona — despite his vivacity on stage. "My most pleasurable moments," he said, "are really the rehearsals."

He had a quiet, modest routine of studying in the afternoon and then resting prior to his driver picking him up to go to the concert hall. Solti also had ambivalence toward Chicago itself, never establishing a permanent residence there, but living instead at the Mayfair Regent. The manners of a large American city required adaptation for him. He recalled, "At first, I had been disturbed when people came up to me in the street and said, 'Hi, Solti, how are you?' But later I came to enjoy it."

In this and all ways, he was thoroughly European in his manner. He arrived often in a hat and long sweeping coat, and was uniformly addressed as "Maestro" or "Sir George". (Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain knighted him in 1972.)

"He was an old-fashioned continental gentleman, well dressed," says Fogel, "but always with an energy in his body language, speech, and movement — a fire in his eyes."

Stearns notes, "When he talked, it was in exclamations. In the control room listening to a playback of a recording, his entire body convulsed with each sound."

Solti also had a savant's kind of distraction, known to have fallen in elevators and more than once stabbing himself with his own baton while writhing at the podium. In part, it was because he worked hard for his public.

"An electricity would crackle through the hall when he entered," says Idema. "He did every concert like it was his last."

Solti gave his all in performances, even if he had to physically collapse afterward in his dressing room. His only rival during the '70s and much of the '80s was Austrian maestro Herbert von Karajan and his Berlin Philharmonic. They had an arm's-length relationship, as reinforced by von Karajan's biography published this year.

Solti would eventually win 32 Grammy Awards, more than any other musician ever. Stearns recalls asking him what he thought of this: "He was the first to admit that he was a vain man, and he expressed only half jokingly his concern that Michael Jackson might overtake him in number of Grammies."

Solti told Chicagoans outright, but convincingly, that they should erect a statue to him. In fact, on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1987, he received the Medal of Merit, Chicago's highest award, and was honored with the dedication of a bronze bust of his likeness in Lincoln Park.