

SIR GEORG SOLTİ is one of the world's great conductors. When the Chicago Symphony is heard under his direction, it is among the world's finest orchestras. From a standing start in 1969, they have continued to move together, steadily upward and with a high sense of artistic rapport.

And now, in all considered judgment, it is my belief that they should end their year-in-and-year-out relationship, to meet together on some especially festive occasion, but otherwise go separate ways.

What nonsense! I can hear indignant voices complaining. Whoever heard of breaking up a winning combination?

And that is exactly the point. Making music is not a sport in which someone comes out a winner. A conductor and an orchestra reach the most sublime of heights when the applause at the end is lavished on the composer, not on the precision of the second violin section or the unanimity of a brass choir sending chills up and down the spine of listeners impatient to explode into bravos.

During the most recent series of Carnegie Hall concerts (in May), Solti and the orchestra were heard five times. One program (both were repeated) offered a pairing of Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 and the Sixth of Bruckner. The other began with the prelude to Moussorgsky's *Khovantchina*, followed by the First Symphony of Shostakovich and the Ninth (in C Major) of Schubert. There was also a concert version of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, with a too-large chorus.

The best results were achieved in the Moussorgsky prelude, a quietly beautiful evocation of dawn breaking over Moscow's Red Square (ca. 1600). I have heard many fine performances of Rimsky-Korsakoff's version, but never a more just and loving one than Solti and his ensemble brought off.

Every detail was in place, each one a tile in a mosaic polished to a shining uniformity of pictorial purpose. But the same procedure, applied on a grander scale to the four symphonies, left substantial areas of exposition unfilled, despite the climactic roar that greeted the last chord in all but the Beethoven. The Fourth Symphony's ending chord is only *fortissimo*.

In the break it came to mind that a few weeks earlier the calendar had come around to the hundredth birthday of the late Sir Thomas Beecham (April 29, 1879). With it came a copy of the English



Sir Georg Solti—He conducts to win.

periodical, *The Gramophone*, which had a commemorative article on the great man by conductor Denis Vaughan. Along with a feast of anecdotes and reminiscences was one pungent commentary on the conducting of one of his greatest contemporaries with whose methods he differed. Said Sir Thomas, his own aims were: "To illuminate the composer and the work."

Whether this was indeed a shortcoming of Toscanini, the conductor in question, may, for the moment be set aside. What cannot be set aside is the perception and rightness of Beecham's comparison between his objectives and those of so many highly rated present-day performers, not only conductors but soloists as well.

A perfect likeness of the score's notational values is evoked. The dynamics are all there, spread out like so many beeps on a radar screen: highs and lows, intermediate voices in all their gradations are perceptibly present. But a quintessential element is lacking. The work (in Beecham's phrase) has been illuminated but not the composer's psyche, purpose, auditory essence, personality.

The degree to which this has become the Solti-Chicago style was made only too clear by their treatment of the Shostakovich No. 1. It was written in the last year of the composer's conservatory period: He was 19, bright as a new kopeck, full of dash and musical specificity, in love with sound and the command of it which, by 1924, had already

made him a fantastic pianist as well as a brilliantly gifted composer.

To judge from the way Solti tore into it, breaking tonal porcelain into wry, shattered rubble, the work might well have been the Seventh ("Leningrad") Symphony that Shostakovich wrote about 20 years later when the Nazis had his home city under siege. Rather than a playful lark illustrating Shostakovich on the brink of his career, No. 1 was, this time, a battlefield experience. To this critical mind, the outcome was never in doubt. Solti won, hands down.

As for the Schubert C Major, the Chicago-Solti performance was broadly laid out, intently pursued, impeccably prepared, marvelously well performed. It was, indeed, everything but Schubertian.

As an instance, the opening of the first movement is marked *allegro*, but also *ma non troppo* ("lively," but "not too much so").

At the pace that Solti preferred, it was both "lively" and "too much so." When he arrived at the later point where Schubert says *più mosso* ("All right now, faster"), Solti's accelerated speed was quite out of place.

Of the four movements, the *scherzo* was most in keeping with Schubertian necessity, rhythmically firm, almost genial. And the finale went rocketing along, like a slightly off-center space vehicle. But no recourse to self-destruct was necessary. Solti has his orchestra conditioned to supersonic speeds, and the hand on the control (as in the later *Fidelio*) was always firm.

Having been a Solti-watcher, and listener, from his obscure beginnings in the mid-Fifties to his exalted heights of today, I am well aware of his mighty abilities. But I am also keenly conscious of the meat on which this our Caesar feeds—the lifeblood of applause, earned, induced, or merely provoked.

For a while (SR July 10, 1976) that was incited by such absurdities as Ravel's *Boléro* as an encore to Debussy's *La Mer*. Now it is built into programs in which the orchestra is all but whipped into producing something more startling than the last time around.

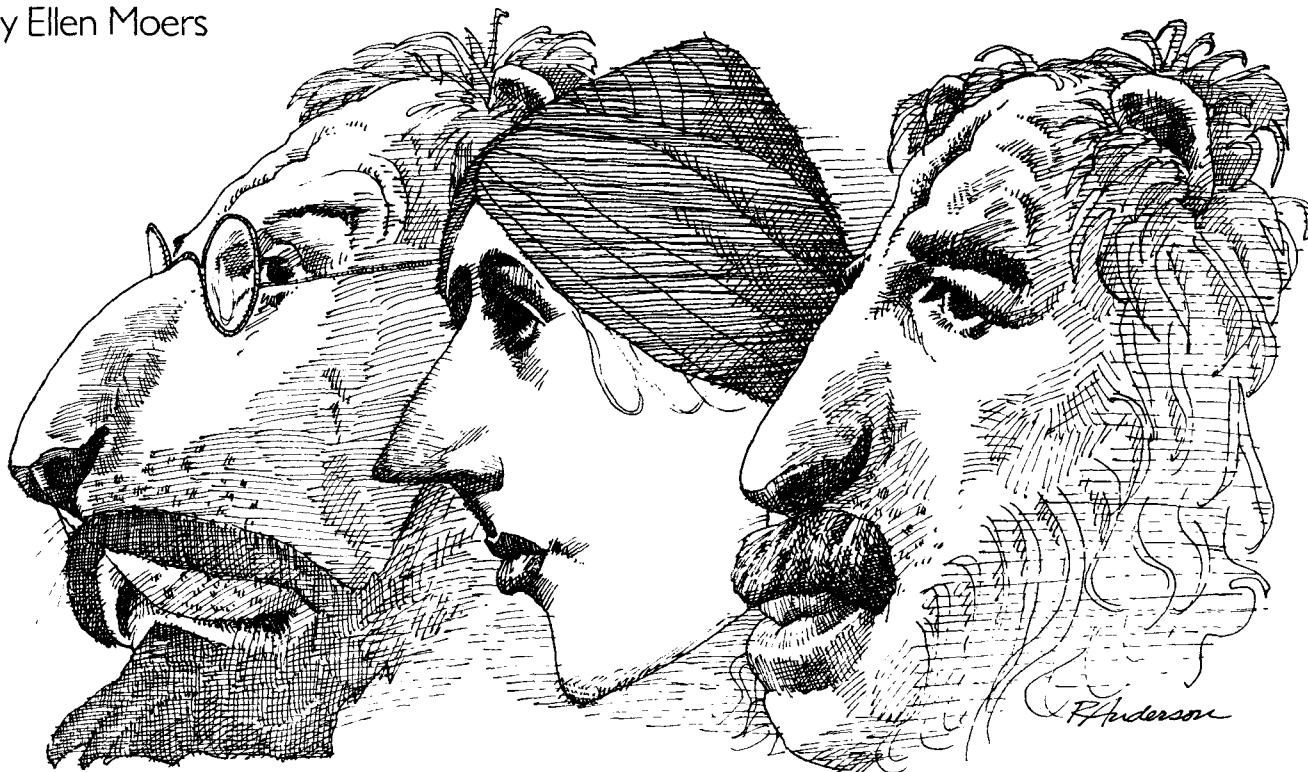
The next time you see, and hear, Solti and the orchestra, look at the tension and anxiety among the players. That's not music, that's madness. They deserve different leadership and more civilized musical objectives.

—Irving Kolodin

CHICAGO TRIBUNE, COURTESY LONDON RECORDS

Those Dangerous Bloomsberries

by Ellen Moers



Three of the lions—Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes.

Bloomsbury: A House of Lions

by Leon Edel

Lippincott, 287 pp., \$12.95

ONLY LEON EDEL would have the nerve to write, without benefit of any significant new discoveries, another book about Bloomsbury. Only Leon Edel is entitled to that nerve for, as one of the masters of the 20th-century art of biography, author of the five-volume life of Henry James, Leon Edel can now do anything (biographically speaking) that he dam' pleases. His motive for writing a book about the principal writers and artists of the English Bloomsbury group from the 1890s to 1920 is not that he wants to set the record straight, or revise it, or attack it, but simply because he pleases. And pleasure—pleasure in narrative skills, in graceful writing, in his lavishly shared enjoyment in the "radiant personalities" of the Bloomsberries—is what his *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* offers both those who consider themselves spe-

cialists to the point of surfeit in Bloomsburiana, and those who have not yet read a word on the subject.

It would be difficult for a reader to find himself in the latter category. In the last quarter century studies of the Bloomsbury group have been published by J. K. Johnstone, S. P. Rosenbaum, Quentin Bell, Carolyn Heilbrun, and most recently Richard Shone, who concentrated on the painters (Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant). There have been first-rate biographies of major Bloomsbury figures (Michael Holroyd's Strachey, Roy Harrod's Keynes, P. N. Furbank's Forster) and memoirs by Desmond and Mary McCarthy, Clive Bell, and Leonard Woolf. Most abundant and most fascinating have been the products of the recent Virginia Woolf industry. Ever since Quentin Bell's best-selling 1972 biography, the BloomsBellies have been editing or sponsoring yearly volumes of Virginia Woolf's letters, diaries, memoirs, and uncollected or unpublished writings. By general consent

today, Virginia Woolf appears to be the most important Bloomsbury writer and the main reason for sustained interest in the group.

Fanned rather than dampened by all these publications, especially by the waspish running commentary in Mrs. Woolf's private writings, controversy over Bloomsbury has continued to rage. Was it a group at all and, if so, who were and who were not its members? Was it a casual coterie based on family relationships and college friendships, or an organized movement—"the only genuine movement in English civilization," E.M. Forster once said. Was it a snobbish clique venomously fanged against the ordinary middle classes, or against heterosexuals, or just outsiders? Was it a brilliant vanguard that produced masterpieces of modernist thought and art? Or a rather provincial set whose private incomes enabled them to dabble in the wake of their genuinely innovative contemporaries, such as Proust and Joyce and Stein and Eliot and Pound (none of