

George Solti: celebrating a virtuoso

The great Hungarian-born conductor strove for quality and also had the ability to inspire those around

By Jessica Duchon, September 27, 2012



George Solti

Sir Georg Solti, one of the 20th century's greatest conductors, was born 100 years ago, on 21 October 1912. Now major celebrations are getting underway around the world to mark his centenary.

Looking at Solti's multitude of musical achievements, it is hard to know where to start. From Mozart to Mahler and Bartók, his repertoire was enormous. His interpretations were filled with an almost elemental power and conviction, in the opera house, the concert hall and the recording studio alike. He carried on the rigorous musical legacy of his teachers in Budapest, who included Bartók himself, as well as Zoltán Kodály and Leo Weiner.

He won 31 Grammy awards – more than any other recording artist, even Henry Mancini and The Beatles. He enjoyed a 50-year association with just one record label, Decca, and became music director, over the years, of some of the world's best opera houses and symphony orchestras, including the Bavarian State Opera, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. BBC Music Magazine's critics recently voted his set of Wagner's Ring Cycle the greatest recording ever made.

"Solti 100" events are taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. In Chicago, where his association with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra spanned three decades, the World Orchestra for Peace (which he founded in 1995) will give a biographical concert on his birthday, narrated by his widow, Lady Valerie Solti, and filmed for TV distribution worldwide; we can expect it eventually on BBC4.

The BBC itself is preparing a documentary, *The Real Georg Solti*; Decca is planning commemorative re-releases; and at the Royal Opera House, where he was music director from 1961-71, a foyer exhibition pays tribute to him. The theatre is also dedicating a Ring Cycle performance this autumn to his memory.

It seems ironic that arguably the finest Wagner conductor of his time was a Hungarian Jew who had been forced into exile by the rise of the Nazis. According to his wife, Lady Solti, the adversity he faced in his youth galvanised the energy with which he pursued his vocation. "Never give up," was his motto. And he stuck to it.

Having begun his career as a répétiteur — a rehearsals pianist and singers' coach — at the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest, Solti, who died in 1997, left the country when racial laws mirroring those of Nazi Germany forced Jews out of their jobs, including him. In August 1939 Alfred Fellner, chairman of the HSO's Friends organisation, told him he must go to Lucerne to ask the conductor Arturo Toscanini for a letter of recommendation, and provided him with the train fare. Solti reluctantly took his advice. While he was away, war was declared. He did not return. But the significance to him of his Hungarian-Jewish background never faded.

The family's original surname was Stern; Solti was chosen as a suitable Hungarianisation in the aftermath of World War I. "Later, when the anti-Jewish laws came in and people had to prove they were true Hungarians, his father went back to their ancestral village and found documents dating back to 1500," Lady Solti recounts. "The family had been farming and working on the land, going back to that time. That meant a great deal to him. When we first went to Italy, he said to me: 'Look at this red soil: that's the colour of the soil in Hungary'. And it was always very important to him when the first apricots came out, because of the apricots in Hungary. He told me that his father used to say a prayer when he tasted the first fruit of the season. I know that although he didn't say it openly, he did as well."

Solti remained, says Lady Solti, a very self-contained person despite his apparent extroversion on stage. "He felt, I think, that religious emotions were something very private," she suggests.

He was proud to be Jewish, she adds, and loved Jewish jokes and food; yet there was also a cautiousness about him which she felt stemmed from his background. "He was born before World War I and I think this cautiousness, this modesty, was something that perhaps you had to adopt if you were Jewish in Hungary. You didn't want to scream it from the rooftops."

Yet he was, she adds, "a great believer. He used to say: 'When I hear the miracle of a Mozart symphony, and when I looked into my baby daughter's eyes for the first time, then I knew there was a Supreme Being.'"

What personal philosophy drove Solti along his extraordinary path? Charles Kaye, his assistant and administrator for 20 years and now the director of the World Orchestra for Peace, knew him better than anyone in his working life. "I think he woke up each morning wanting to be better at what he did," Kaye says. "He was always striving for quality. And what you and I would consider is the very best was never good enough for him."

Perhaps that was what gave his music-making such an edge: he was able to inspire those he worked with to follow his example. "He wouldn't let a musician give up until he had given of his best," says Kaye. "He had the ability to inspire all the orchestra always to do better and to put that across to the audience."

Solti's legacy lives on in three organisations that bear witness to his idealism and his determination to further the cause of music and its performers. The Solti Foundation awards grants for professional development to young musicians, inspired by the incident in which the train fare to Lucerne enabled him to escape the war and begin a career abroad.

The Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto in Tuscany offers summer masterclasses for young singers with some of opera's brightest stars, Solti having championed numerous budding luminaries, including the soprano Angela Gheorghiu. And the World Orchestra for Peace continues to bring together selected musicians from the world's top orchestras to perform in locations of historic significance, as a statement of belief in co-operation between nations.

That orchestra serves, says Lady Solti, as a symbol. "Eventually, everyone in the world who has the privilege of free thought will feel that we each have to do our bit; we have to respect each other, we have to give each other space, we have to benefit from each other," she declares. "And that's what Solti believed. I'm pleased we can carry on his legacy with something he believed in so strongly. The best thing I can do is to try and follow his example. You can't change the past. But you can change the future."

The exhibition 'Georg Solti and The Royal Opera', runs at the ROH, until February 13 2013 (www.roh.org.uk)

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