

In Chicago We Trust

Chicago Symphony Orchestra Music Director Riccardo Muti is an artistic force in Chicago—and all over the planet. So why are he and Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians heading into detention centers to share music with the inmates? It's all part of the orchestra's goal to connect with communities throughout the city.

by Dennis Polkow





Music Director Riccardo Muti leads the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in a free outdoor “Concert for Chicago” in Millennium Park on September 21, 2012 during his opening residency of the 2012-13 season.

After a twelve-year absence, Riccardo Muti returned in January 2017 to Milan’s Teatro alla Scala, the Italian opera house that he had led for nearly two decades. The visit was so newsworthy that it made headlines in Europe, even sharing the front page with the Trump inauguration. But Muti wasn’t leading an opera company: he was touring with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the ensemble that he has been leading as music director since 2010. The La Scala visit was part of the orchestra’s tour to the music capitals of Europe; it and domestic tours to the West Coast last fall and the East Coast this winter were met all met with widespread acclaim.

Back in Chicago, however, is where the hard work happens to make all this possible. Muti and the orchestra make some of that work—the artistic process—transparent, by opening select CSO rehearsals to donors, media, seniors, students, veterans, and the like. At one of these last May, Muti asked the musicians to play the first movement of the Brahms Fourth Symphony at the start of the rehearsal. “They know it, I know it, but we have never done it together,” Muti said to the onlookers. “The result may be wonderful, or it may be a disaster!” Afterwards, Muti turned to the applause and said, “You see? They are very good! They hardly need me! Now, just a few things...” And he proceeded to do gentle open-heart surgery on every phrase of



Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

At Apostolic Church of God in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood on October 13, 2017, Music Director Riccardo Muti leads the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the free, annual community concert, the second appearance for Muti and the CSO at the South Side church.

the score, calling on the players, as Concertmaster Robert Chen described it after that night's concert, "to pull more out of ourselves than we knew we had."

Whether he is throwing out the first pitch at a Chicago Cubs game, performing "Chelsea Dagger" in a Chicago Blackhawks jersey, or reviewing his favorite area

Whether he is throwing out the first pitch at a Chicago Cubs game, performing in a Chicago Blackhawks jersey, or reviewing his favorite area Italian eatery on the local news, Riccardo Muti has become Chicago's most recognized cultural ambassador.

Italian eatery on the local news, Muti has become Chicago's most recognized cultural ambassador. And in case too much is made of the Muti/CSO equation, Muti constantly reminds the city what a "jewel" it has in its hometown orchestra.

Equally important to Muti, however, has been to open up the doors of the CSO

to all. When Muti arrived in Chicago for a press conference a few weeks after the May 2008 announcement of his CSO music directorship, he made some remarks that ended up setting an institutional tone for the next decade: "I will try not only to bring my musical ideas—not revolutionary, just my ideas—and through these, to

enrich the people of Chicago and through tours, the world. But also to bring music to parts of Chicago society that are far away from the enjoyment and enrichment of music. We are here to serve the community—not only those who come to the concerts, but we need to go out to people away from the world of music."

Muti's initial call to community engage-

ment was supported by the CSO's then-CEO and President Deborah Rutter, who brought Muti to Chicago, and since 2014 by Rutter's successor, Jeff Alexander.

"Most people look to the music director as the public face of the institution," says Alexander, "so my management style is to be less of a public persona and more behind-the-scenes than may have been true for some of my predecessors. I see myself as an enabler of Maestro [Muti]'s and of the musicians we rely on to make great music. As chief administrator, I am here to enable and support the artistic efforts as well as the educational activities and community engagement activities of the organization. It's very important for a symphony orchestra to get out into the community."

To that end, Muti's first concert as CSO music director in September of 2010 was a free outdoor "Concert for Chicago" in Millennium Park, attended by over 25,000 people. A similar free concert has taken place at the beginning of every one



Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

Young concertgoers experience the trombone following a Civic Fellowship Brass Quintet concert at the National Museum of Mexican Art.

of Muti's eight seasons since, alternating downtown outdoor appearances with indoor neighborhood concerts. The tradition continues in the fall to open the 2018-19 season.

"One of my ideas when I first came here was to bring music to areas of the city and people that were not close to Orchestra Hall," Muti recalls. "That we go where the people are and people are free to come in

and have contact with us. More and more I think that the system that we still have today of the ceremony of the public comes into the concert hall and the orchestra and the conductor are dressed like penguins, is becoming a ridiculous relic. We have to find a way to be much simpler so we can reach people."

Another initiative Muti began during his first week, which has continued every

year since, is that he and a contingent of CSO musicians and guest artists visit a juvenile correctional facility. Because of rehearsal and concert schedules, these visits have to be on a day off, usually a Sunday; Muti spends the morning preparing in his studio, and then he, CSO musicians, and vocalists present a program at the detention center later in the day. All of them, including Muti, volunteer their time.

Entering these correctional facilities is a serious matter: all the artists, as well as the handful of guests, go through background checks, are given a list of dos and don'ts, put through a metal detector, and hand-frisked. They can bring nothing inside: no keys, no cellphones, only a mandatory photo ID to gain access behind the barbed-wire gates, which are controlled by guards buzzing outsiders in one at a time, with every name checked against a list.

Jonathan McCormick, director of the CSO's Negaunee Music Institute, which oversees the orchestra's educational, engagement, and community programs as well as the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, a training ensemble for emerging musicians, came to work at the CSO a few months before Muti arrived. "Like so many others," says McCormick, "I came to Chicago to be close to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I have loved this orchestra for as long as I can remember. I became enamored by the Solti era and the quality of the



Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

Chicago Symphony Orchestra Music Director Riccardo Muti won't let the clock distract him during his open rehearsal with musicians in the UC Berkeley Symphony Orchestra during a multi-day residency hosted by Cal Performances as part of the CSO's West Coast tour in October 2017.



Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association President Jeff Alexander



Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

At the Illinois Youth Center in Chicago on September 25, 2016, Riccardo Muti thanks Chicago Symphony Orchestra Principal Percussionist Cynthia Yeh following her performance for the young men at the facility.

music that the orchestra was making.”

McCormick remembers the initial institutional reaction to Muti’s call to community engagement that included visiting prisons, as Muti had done in Italy. “That was somewhat of a surprise,” McCormick

tory of trauma, put them behind bars, and basically initiate them into a system that, statistically, they will participate in for the rest of their lives?”

The Chicago-based Storycatchers Theatre, which helps young people in the

we wanted to do something that would really put the young people at the center of the project. We ended up setting up a jungle gym of instruments for them to use: guitars, basses, keyboards, as well as microphones. And over the course of six hours a day for five days, they create original music based on their life experiences and then perform them at the end of the week for residents of the facility and invited guests.”

Participants are invited to experiment, and there is a team in the room that includes two teaching artists from Music in Prisons; volunteer musicians from the Civic Orchestra, the training orchestra of the CSO; and a composer. “As the young people experiment more on the instruments, they develop proficiency, they start to play chords, they begin writing lyrics,” says McCormick.

By the time of Muti’s second visit to the Illinois Youth Center in Warrenville, in 2011, some of the residents had been in-

The inmates, whose world is behind walls and who sing of incarceration, sit transfixed as Muti plays piano for a mezzo-soprano.

recalls, “but it was very encouraging that the minute we started to talk about prison programming, not one of the musicians ever said to us, ‘Why would we be doing that?’ They made very clear that this was a community of people that they would like to get to know and to help in any way that they could. I think there has been a societal shift of the perception of, especially, the juvenile justice system: is it appropriate to take a young person with a complex his-

court system transform their traumatic experiences into cultural expression, became a partner in the CSO’s visits to correctional facilities, as did the London-based Music in Prisons. “We had no experience whatsoever going into juvenile prisons and detention centers and offering musical programming,” says McCormick. “We knew that Maestro [Muti] would annually be able to go into a facility and offer an interactive recital, but we also knew that



At the Illinois Youth Center in Chicago on September 28, 2014, Riccardo Muti discusses music-making from the piano with a young man at the juvenile justice facility.

Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. ©Todd Rosenberg Photography

spired enough by Muti's previous visit that they began writing a musical theater piece. A chorus sang "Incarcerated Girls," which longingly spoke of their situation with a pop-Broadway-style refrain. They also performed a Latin choral setting. Muti listened very intently before taking the stage himself. "Very nice, congratulations!" he said.

"Thank you for sharing your feelings with me. That is what music really is: feelings, no? That is what we do, too, at the Chicago Symphony: we share our feelings. Everything we are doing for you today is about love. Music without love is just noise: you cannot make music without love.

"How many of you have heard of Mo-

zart?" he continued. "You know, he may be the greatest composer who ever lived and is a demonstration of the existence of God in that he spent such a short time here—he died very young—but never wrote music that was cheap. He had a very hard life, he traveled all around Europe, but he couldn't get a job because the jobs were always given to others of inferior quality. It is often the case, even today."

Sitting at the piano, he played the introduction to "È amore un ladroncello" from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. "This music is very joyful, no?" Muti asked. "It teases you, it goes along joyfully, and then comes doubt, expressed in the music," he said, as an expected major chord shifted to an unstable augmented triad. "Can you hear that?" Muti asked, and most of the inmates nod their heads and respond in recognition. "Bravi, because I needed three years to understand this."

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Jonathan McCormick, director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Negaunee Music Institute, performs alongside residents of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and musicians of the CSO during a weeklong "Music in Prisons" songwriting project in 2014.



Todd Rosenberg Photography

Introducing a song by Tosti set in Muti's native Naples—"not Florida, Italy," he quipped—Muti made a similar point by showing how the music "puts the sea in front of you, no?" as if smelling the sea air while playing. The music shows the "sun and sky as well, but suddenly there is a cloud." The inmates, whose world is behind walls and who sing of incarceration, sit transfixed as mezzo-soprano Sarah Ponder, a Chicago Symphony Chorus member and CSO teaching artist, sings Tosti's "Ideale" with Muti accompanying her.

At a reception area where the residents have made a rectangular cake still in its pan, Muti cheerfully takes a piece on a paper plate, samples a taste with a plastic fork, and jokingly tells them, "This is a better cake than we had last night at the

Symphony Ball!"

"Muti has the type of personality that commands the respect of the kids, but he could even make the guards flinch," says CSO Principal Tuba Gene Pokorny, a regular participant in these visits to juvenile detention centers and prisons. "You're at

attention when he's up there. One young lady expressed an interest in an aria Joyce DiDonato sang when she came with us, so I sent her a DVD of the opera that had the aria Joyce was singing. One thing I definitely want to do is keep a promise like that, because these people have had their



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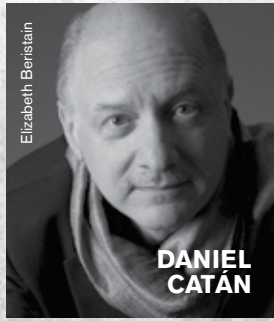
Celloist Yo-Yo Ma, the CSO's creative consultant, performs with members of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago during a Concert for Peace at St. Sabina Church in 2017.

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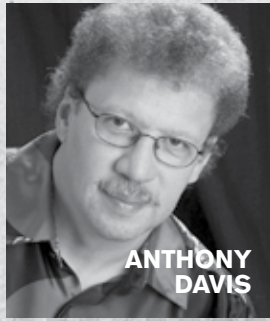


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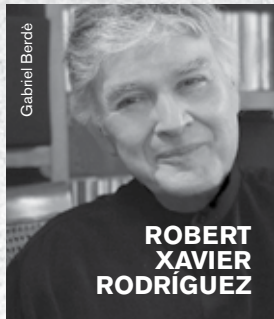
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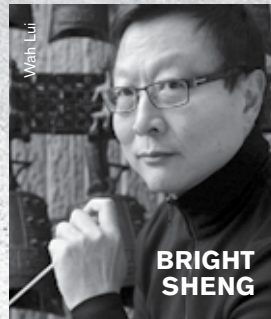
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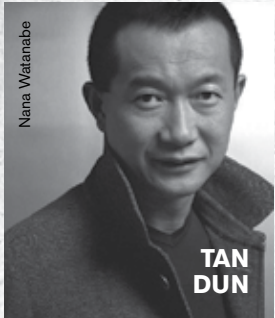
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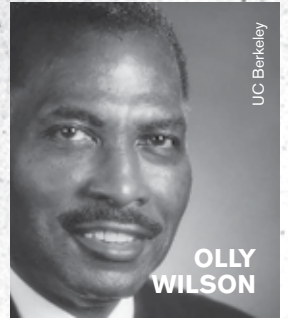
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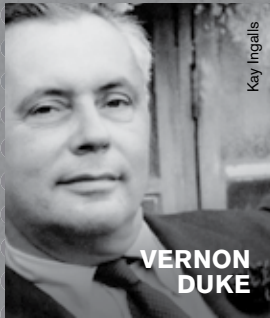
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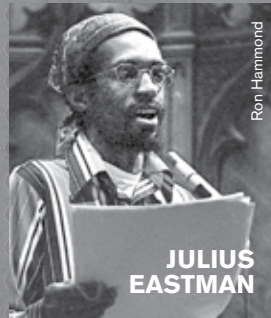
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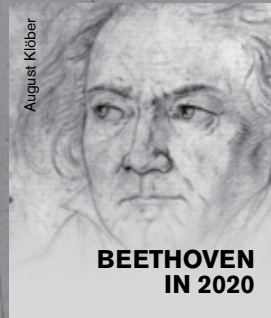


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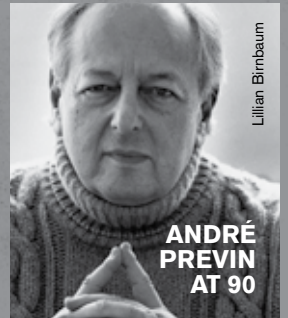
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Chicago Symphony Orchestra Bassist Daniel Armstrong demonstrates his instrument for a Chicago public school student.



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Chicago Symphony Orchestra Principal Tuba Gene Pokorny is a regular participant in the orchestra's visits to juvenile justice facilities.

promises dashed probably so many times.”

Is all of this a cosmetic change only for the Muti era, or is such community engagement part of the DNA of the institution? “I think to an extent, it has been part of our DNA for most of the orchestra’s history,” says McCormick. “For example,

next season we’re celebrating the centennial of the Civic Orchestra and of doing concerts for children: both are a century old and have been continuously operated. I think each music director has nurtured his legacy and taken his own approach. And the fact that we are now investing

nearly \$6 million a year and that we have over \$30 million dollars in restricted funds in our endowment to make sure that the work will carry forward—with new ideas, new leadership—is significant. I do think we’re in an especially historic time right now, however. When people speak in the future of the Muti era, they will not only remember it as an extraordinary time of music making, but as an extraordinary time of reaching out.”

At the inaugural concert of the CSO’s African American Network at the Apostolic Church of God on the city’s South Side in October 2016, Muti told the capacity crowd, “We come not just to play a concert, but to share our feelings, love, and friendship.” The orchestra launched the network to connect with Chicago’s African American community through shared musical experiences and relationship-building. The orchestra also has an active Latino Alliance serving the Latino community. At that October 2016 concert, Muti continued, “Let’s be a family. In music, there is nothing to understand, only to feel, and feelings are the same for all people.” **S**

Writer, broadcaster, and *Newcity Chicago* columnist DENNIS POLKOW has been reporting on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for more than 30 years.



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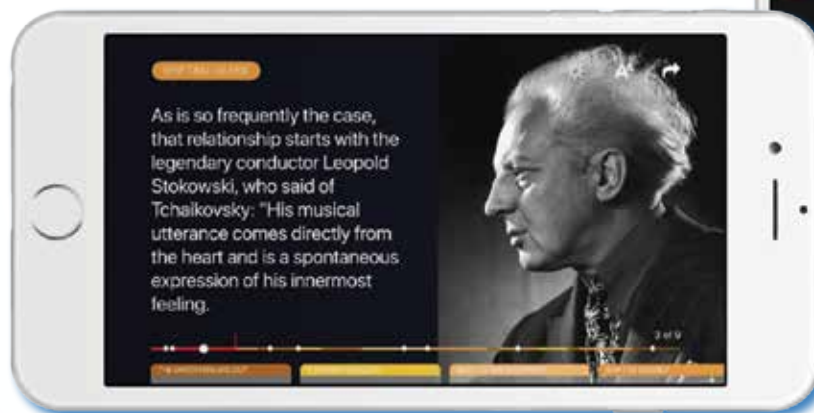


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