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New musical horizons at player-run Chicago Philharmonic



By **John von Rhein** · Contact Reporter

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An orchestra where the musicians rule

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Across the classical music marketplace of metropolitan Chicago, connecting with communities is the anthem of suburban symphony orchestras. That's been especially true in recent decades, as these arts organizations expand their offerings in creative new ways they hope will attract younger, more diverse audience members.

The player-driven Chicago Philharmonic is seeking to connect by giving its public clear alternatives to what they hear elsewhere — thoughtful theme programs, unusual artistic collaborations, adjunct chamber music series, a new downtown Chicago concert series, and more.

Collaboration is in fact the name of the game for the orchestra's 2015-16 season, which begins Sunday evening at Evanston's Pick-Staiger Concert Hall.

The season will include joint ventures with the troupes Visceral Dance Chicago and Cirque de la Symphonie, along with such add-ons as thematic presentations in the auditorium foyer, in-concert educational components and a second season of off-site chamber music concerts by Chicago Philharmonic players.

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"Ours is an energized and passionate community of musicians," says Donna Milanovich, a professional flutist who has been the group's full-time executive director since 2012. But it's a community that operates very differently from most other professional symphonic ensembles in the region, she points out.

"We are a musician-run organization that draws on a pool of more than 250 of the area's best freelance players — respected veterans as well as brilliant young conservatory graduates," she explains. "The

CSO is the CSO, and it's marvelous. But there's also a need in the area for a first-class orchestra that fills (its own) niche, while providing a solid support base for its musicians."

According to Milanovich, the philharmonic provides a goodly portion of its member musicians anywhere from one-third to one-half of their annual incomes. And because the orchestra is governed directly by its players, programming and personnel decisions are made by committees made up primarily of orchestra musicians.

Free of the traditional music-director responsibility of hiring and firing players, and other administrative duties, Scott Speck, the ensemble's artistic director, can concentrate on making music and widening horizons.

"The thematic focus for this season's concerts is turning points in the lives of composers," explains Speck, who also serves as music director of the Joffrey Ballet, for which the philharmonic functions as the official orchestra. "Also, I don't consider a concert complete unless it includes a work by a living composer. An important part of our mission is to participate in the creation of new music and to work with living composers."

For the 76 symphonic, chamber and ballet performances the philharmonic gave last season, it drew on a rotating roster of 256 area musicians, roughly 32 of whom are members of the Lyric Opera Orchestra, Milanovich reports. The remainder include moonlighting Chicago Symphony members, Lyric ringers and local freelance instrumentalists.

"From the point of view of both personnel and quality, this orchestra is a perfect fit with my philosophy as a conductor," Speck says. "That we are able to draw from a bigger stable of musicians (than other area orchestras) I consider a great strength. With a structure similar to that of the Berlin Philharmonic, there's an organic quality to this orchestra; it's more than just following a baton.

"What's more, we're able to hire the best players for any project we happen to be doing. This has enabled us to really develop as an ensemble — there's been a vast improvement over previous seasons."

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation must agree: The orchestra has just been approved for a three-year grant totaling \$90,000 (\$30,000 per year) from the MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince. This will be the ensemble's second MacArthur grant for general operating support, but its first multiyear award from the arts and culture fund.

The Chicago Philharmonic has gone through several artistic identities since its original incarnation as the Orchestra of Illinois, which was founded by a group of Lyric orchestra musicians in 1978. Having tried unsuccessfully to widen its regional reach, the organization reconstituted itself as Symphony II in 1988 and tried again. It shed that unfortunate name in favor of its present name around the time it engaged Larry Rachleff as music director. He succeeded in building a solid, respectable ensemble

during his 23 years at the philharmonic.

But the biggest change came in 2012, when Paul R. Judy took over as board chairman of the orchestra's corporate parent, the Chicago Philharmonic Society. Judy, a former board chairman (now a life trustee) of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, saw the opportunity to create a new business model, patterned after the player-run St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, in which the musicians would have a much greater voice in their own artistic affairs than was, and still is, the case at most symphony orchestras.

Thus far the model has proved remarkably successful. With an operating budget of nearly \$1.9 million, today's Chicago Philharmonic is musically and organizationally strong, playing to 75-percent capacity houses at Pick-Staiger hall, building on its partnerships with Ravinia, the Chicago Park District and other local arts and educational organizations. Prospects look bright indeed.

"Our audiences have become more diversified over the last four years, and we are attracting a broader range of ages," says Milanovich. "With each concert we want to give our audience a sense of occasion, and also a sense of the unexpected."

The next step for the orchestra is broadening its downtown Chicago constituency. The orchestra will kick off a three-year residency at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance on May 28 with a program of orchestral favorites that will incorporate the acrobats, aerial flyers, dancers, jugglers, contortionists and strongmen of Cirque de la Symphonie.

What's more, the Chicago Philharmonic Chamber Players will return to Chicago's City Winery for Sunday-brunch programs of classical music, soul and jazz, with guest vocalists, Nov. 22 and Dec. 20.

"Part of my artistic plan is to identify those things the CSO cannot deliver but we can, and perform them at the highest level," Speck says. Beyond that, "We want to continue making our programming that much more enticing to more people. I love pushing the envelope to the extent that we can maintain relevancy in our programming."

The Chicago Philharmonic under Scott Speck will begin its season with Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony and Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 (Robert McDonald, soloist), along with Wojciech Kilar's "Small Overture for Orchestra." The Lira Singers will perform Polish folk music in the foyer. 7 p.m. Sunday, Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Northwestern University, 50 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston; \$25-\$75, \$10 students; 312-957-0000, www.chicagophilharmonic.org.

Sharps and flats

— Another suburban orchestra that regularly explores neglected byways of the repertory is the Northbrook Symphony, under music director Lawrence Rapchak. The rarity at its concert on Sunday afternoon will be Ludwig Spohr's unaccountably neglected Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra, performed by a group of student musicians from the Music Institute of Chicago Academy who call

themselves the Ludwig Spohr String Quartet. Curtain time is 4 p.m. Sunday at the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts, Glenbrook North High School, 2300 Shermer Road, Northbrook.

www.northbrooksymphony.org.

— Baird Dodge, principal second violin of the CSO, will join music director Kirk Muspratt and the New Philharmonic for Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at the MacAninch Arts Center, College of DuPage, 425 Fawell Blvd., Glen Ellyn. Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" rounds out the program; www.atthemac.org.

— Launching Northwestern University's Skyline Piano Artists Series will be a recital by pianist Ursula Oppens, at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Mary B. Galvin Recital Hall of the Ryan Center for the Musical Arts, 70 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston. The program will celebrate Oppens' new Cedille album, which is crowned by Fredric Rzewski's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," a work she premiered 40 years ago; www.events.music.northwestern.edu.

— Schubert's "Trout" Quintet and chamber works by Mozart and Mendelssohn will make up the Dempster St. Pro Musica's concert at 1 p.m. Sunday at SPACE, 1245 Chicago Ave., Evanston; www.dempstermusica.org.

— The greatly admired American pianist Earl Wild will be the subject of producer Jon Samuels' musical tribute, at 10 p.m. Wednesday on WFMT-FM 98.7. Wild died in 2010, at 94.

— The second season of the Illinois Humanities' OpenICE series will open with a concert by violist-vocalist Wendy Richman and flutist Claire Chase, two founding members of the International Contemporary Ensemble. Composer Pauline Oliveros will take part in the Chicago premiere of her own "Intensity 20.15." Concerts are at 4 and 6 p.m. Saturday in Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery, 1120 N. Ashland Ave.; www.ilhumanities.org.

— The Syrian instrumental trio Hewar will perform a benefit concert for Syrian refugee relief, at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Luther Memorial Church of Chicago, 2500 W. Wilson Ave. Composer Kinan Azmeh, the group's clarinetist, is a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Proceeds will go to Save the Children, a charity working with Syrian refugees; 773-539-3018.

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