

Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The "Muti Era" Begins

Natalia Nebel (March 02, 2010)



The era of Riccardo Muti at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra officially began on Thursday, February 25 at Orchestra Hall's intimate Grainger Ballroom where the Maestro held a press conference before an enthusiastic audience of journalists, donors, and representatives from Chicago's most important cultural institutions, including Director Tina Cervone of the Italian Cultural Institute of Chicago

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Maestro Muti set a relaxed, jovial tone immediately when he declined to stand and speak behind a podium, saying that he wasn't a priest. Preferring to stand informally behind a table, when he was asked to sit so that the TV cameras could capture him, Maestro Muti joked that people at home were seeing the most important thing - one of his best ties, bought in Naples. To much laughter, he then untucked his tie from his vest so that everyone could admire it.

The personal connection that Maestro Muti established made for an extremely constructive atmosphere that, in its delightful spontaneity, was uniquely Italian.



Maestro Muti referred frequently to Italy and spoke of the mixed feelings he had about leaving his beautiful country for Chicago. "I won't deny that when I was first approached for this job I was skeptical. After leaving [La Scala](#) [5] I had begun enjoying my freedom. I could make music without tending to administrative work."

It was after going on an extremely successful tour with the CSO in Europe, and forming deep personal and artistic connections with the musicians, that he changed his mind. In some ways Muti is continuing a relationship that began thirty years ago when he first directed the CSO. "I'd already had the honor of conducting this orchestra in the 70s. At that time I was a young man with the energy of one who has their whole life ahead of them. I told the musicians that I hoped I hadn't returned to them as a ruin," Muti said, again displaying the self-effacing humor that had so charmed the audience. Responding to appreciative laughter he added, "They may call me arrogant, but actually, I'm like good Italian red wine, I only get better with age."

The relaxed, warm atmosphere of the press conference didn't stop serious subjects from being discussed. Maestro Muti spoke of music's power to transform the world for the better by touching hearts and souls, providing for a bond that transcends cultural differences. In fact, Maestro Muti has organized musical outreaches in prisons, and spoke of an outreach at which he played the piano for prisoners, choosing composers who had suffered much and died young, like Schumann and Schubert. By relating stories such as this one with great feeling, all of us in the audience were reminded of music's spiritual power, the very thing that had brought all of us there and that united us.

As for the CSO's program this year, it will put a spotlight on the relationships between composers. And thanks to the CSO's extraordinary range, we can look forward to hearing rarely played pieces like Luigi Cherubini's "Requiem in C Minor" and the world premier of "Danza Petrificada" by Bernard Rands, who joined Maestro Muti at the press conference.

To the great fortune of all who live in the Chicago area, from mid-September to mid-October this year there will be a month long CSO celebration, culminating in a free concert in Chicago's beloved [Millennium Park](#) [6]. The Consulate General of Italy of Chicago, and the Italian Cultural Institute, will collaborate to ensure the participation of the local Italian and Italian-American communities.

The press conference ended in an optimistic, happy mood. I think I can speak for everyone there when I say that we all were moved and inspired by Muti's closing remarks: "The great orchestras of Cleveland, Philadelphia and Chicago can't close. If they did, it would not only be a huge loss for music, culture, art, but a catastrophe for our society. In a world full of anger and violence, music heals people's souls."

(In collaboration with Lidia Catalano)

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