

Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Muti soar in glorious program of Mozart, Haydn

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The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with Riccardo Muti, conductor, Robert Chen (violin) and Paul Neubauer (viola) in concert at Symphony Center on March 15, 2018. | © Todd Rosenberg Photography 2018

Balm for the soul, a dire necessity for most Chicagoans by mid-March, comes in many shapes and sizes. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra is offering a particularly potent version in its concerts this weekend — vibrant, insightful performances of music by Haydn and Mozart led by Music Director Riccardo Muti.

Muti is back on the Symphony Center podium for the first two weeks of a four-week spring residency whose wide-ranging repertoire will stretch from a Schubert mass to a world premiere. Thursday night conductor and orchestra played with the energy and finesse of elite musicians revved up and ready to go.

Two of the titles, Mozart's Sinfonia concertante for violin, viola and orchestra, K. 364, and his Symphony No. 36 (Linz), K. 425, are probably familiar to classical music lovers. Haydn's Symphony No. 89, maybe less so. But, as always, something fresh can be found in great art, whether watching a classic movie for the umpteenth time or hearing a compelling performance of a symphony from the late 1700s whose melodies you know by heart.

That was certainly the case with the concert's centerpiece Thursday night, Mozart's Sinfonia concertante with Robert Chen, CSO concertmaster, as violin soloist, and Paul Neubauer, making his CSO debut as viola soloist. This piece is an intricate miracle, with expressive conversations constantly emerging between the two soloists themselves, between each soloist and the orchestra, between the soloists as a duo interacting with the orchestra. Muti fully explored the work's gracious elegance, the unhurried unfolding of vivid, long-lined melodies that makes Mozart's music so alluring. But a sense of purpose and drama was ever-present, especially in the interplay between the soloists in the slow movement.

I've heard the Sinfonia concertante countless times, but Chen and Neubauer offered something I had never noticed before. The tone of Chen's violin was bright and smooth, its melodic lines agile and lithe. While Neubauer's playing was no less agile, the tone of his viola — the violin's lower-voiced cousin — was dusky and full of shadows. In the second movement's poignant themes, we seemed to witness an intimate conversation between a young voice and an older one, between innocence and experience. At one point, the two exchanged short phrases, Chen swirling away in brief, light-hearted flights, Neubauer responding with exactly the same phrase but with a hint of sorrow or caution in his darker voice. There was nothing cynical or lugubrious about Neubauer's replies, he listened intently and with respect to Chen's side of the musical conversation. His responses revealed a man not beaten down by life, but one willing to face its contradictions. Coming and going throughout the movement, the hushed, pulsing orchestra was a sympathetic observer.

In the faster opening and final movements, soloists and orchestra exulted in Mozart's seamless, singing lines and buoyant rhythms. At times the soloists spun out of the orchestral texture like gleaming beams of light. In the first movement's cadenza, they were perfectly matched. Their decorative lines were initially entwined in a speedy, complex dance, but soon they soared off in unison, pausing and soaring again like giddy compatriots off on a grand adventure.

The Haydn symphony launched the concert with a combination of zest and elan. This was not folksy Papa Haydn, with heavy emphasis on his emphatic, dancing rhythms and short-breathed, singing phrases. Without losing any of the symphony's good cheer, Muti and the CSO found potent drama in its high spirits. Sudden, razor-sharp pauses brimmed with expectation, juicy woodwinds insisted on being heard. When the mood turned suddenly dark in the fourth movement, furious violins conjured up a roiling storm. Throughout the symphony, however, Muti allowed the music to unfold naturally, never pushing and providing sufficient room for it to breathe.

Mozart and Haydn, though of different generations, were close friends. It was exciting to hear Mozart's longer, more wandering melodic lines and rhythms in the Linz symphony after the relatively short phrases and predictable patterns of Haydn's Symphony No. 89.

With Chen back in his concertmaster's seat, the CSO strings sounded lustrous and soulful and, in the second movement, the low orchestral voices tiptoed in the background like delicate shadows. Suave yet emotionally committed, this was Mozart to cherish.

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