

Review: Mozart, Haydn symphonies speak with warmth and grace at CSO



From left, soloists Robert Chen and Paul Neubauer perform with conductor Riccardo Muti and members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago Symphony Center Thursday. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

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The music of Mozart and Haydn is rarely as simple as it looks, and indeed, much of it is riddled with enough traps to trip up unwary performers.

Some try to sidestep the land mines by making everything sound as smooth and pristine and bland as possible. Others, particularly those of the period brigade, strip textures to the bone and press forward so urgently as to lose contact with the emotions embedded in the music.

[Riccardo Muti](#) has long steered a more sensitive middle course. The music director demonstrated that again with the Mozart and Haydn performances he led with the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) on Thursday night, to launch his two-week March residency at Symphony Center.

Next week's highly anticipated Muti/CSO performances of the Schubert Mass in E flat may be getting more attention, but that did not prevent an enthusiastic throng from

turning out. A second performance was scheduled for Friday evening at Wheaton College, a third back at Orchestra Hall on Saturday. Mozart's Symphony No. 36 in C major ("Linz") and Haydn's Symphony No. 89 in F major were consistent in sound and style with what Orchestra Hall has heard previously: gracious, charming, refined, warmly expressive. The sound may be the CSO's, but the classical sensibility is that of the Vienna Philharmonic, which Muti has led for more than 45 continuous years.

Muti opened with the Haydn, the same late masterpiece he introduced into the orchestra's repertory on Sept. 30, 2010, near the start of his initial residency as music director. Using a chamber orchestra version of the CSO, he had the musicians tripping through the sly syncopations and accented offbeats with a bracing quickness of response. Transparent textures allowed the woodwind soloists, notably guest principal oboe Nathan Hughes of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, to peek through the strings in their witty dialogues. One's only regret was that, given all the great Haydn symphonies the CSO has never touched, that Muti didn't favor the audience with one of those.

Muti regards the "Linz" Symphony on grander terms, and the elegant strength of his reading reflected this traditional, rather Old World approach. Ton Koopman took a leaner, brisker view in his 2010 CSO performances. Muti's "Linz" may have been more lyrically conceived, but it wasn't overly romanticized — in other words, using relatively large forces did not bring heavy textures or plodding tempos. The CSO played it beautifully.

In between the symphonies came Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante in E flat, K.364. We don't get to hear this delectable cross between a full-fledged symphony and a concerto for violin and viola often enough, perhaps because there are not soloists so well-matched musically and interpretively as Thursday's duo — concertmaster Robert Chen and Paul Neubauer, a star violist perhaps most familiar to local audiences through his appearances with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center at the Harris Theater.

Chen's tonal silk and Neubauer's velvet made them complementary on a basic level, but their deep musicality, their poised, seamless way of echoing and completing each other's melodic lines were little short of astonishing for artists who cannot have had much chance to play together, if at all. Their pinpoint intonation, finely synchronized vibrato and Neubauer's chocolately, never nasal, sound were remarkable enough in themselves. What really made this Mozart special was the feeling of enlarged orchestral chamber music everyone, including the attentive Muti and Chen's colleagues, brought to the piece.

*The program, which was due to be presented Friday night at Wheaton College, will have a final performance at 8 p.m. Saturday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$34-\$221; 312-294-3000, www.cso.org
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