

Sinfonietta's diversity mission shifts into high gear



Daring. Defiant. Different. That's how the Chicago Sinfonietta markets itself.

It's no empty assertion.

For 27 seasons the mid-sized orchestra has made it its niche mission to promote ethnic diversity among its players, staff, board and audience. It prides itself on the sometimes outrageous eclecticism of its programs. It has been a role model for groups seeking to remove the intimidation factor from classical concerts and get down with the entire community.

The Chicago Sinfonietta, which bills itself as "the nation's most diverse orchestra," can afford to crow a bit right now. Consider:

Ticket sales for the last two years have been running at an all-time high.

The ensemble's innovative mentoring programs for minority musicians and conductors are bearing fruit across the symphony orchestra landscape.

The Chicago-based Joyce Foundation recently selected the sinfonietta as one of 10

leading Chicago arts organizations receiving more than \$2.5 million in grants. The Sinfonietta's grant will bolster its initiatives to enable artists of color to achieve careers in classical music, among other diversification efforts.



In short, the Chicago Sinfonietta is making very good indeed on the pioneering vision of Paul Freeman, its founder and music director emeritus.

"As we in orchestras look at the changing demographics of this country, we need to look at how we are reflecting our communities," says Jim Hirsch, the orchestra's executive director. "We can and we must create more relevance, create more of a connection to our communities, than what orchestras have experienced before."

True to his word, Hirsch has taken a leadership role within the League of American Orchestras, a national service organization, to expand the sinfonietta's seven-year-old, Chicago-centered Project Inclusion fellowship program for minority musicians and conductors nationwide.

Putting a face on those efforts is the orchestra's dynamic music director since 2011, the Taiwan-born Mei-Ann Chen.

"Not only are we using symphonic music as a vehicle for collaboration, we also are trying to create a unique concert journey that is different from what everyone else is doing in the (Chicago) market," says Chen, who recently renewed her contract through the end of the 2016-17 season.

Different indeed. The sinfonietta began its current season in September with the Chicago punk marching band Mucca Pazza trading raucous licks with the orchestra. It ended last weekend with a salute to the U.S. armed forces that included a gospel choir singing spirituals between movements of Dvorak's "New World" Symphony and a video-

accompanied premiere of "Veteran's Lament," a stirring elegy by the Chicago composer and Vietnam war vet James "Kimo" Williams. Audience members were provided with postcards on which they could address greetings to service members.

Certain devices designed to shake up the classical concert format may cross the line into gimmickry (the Dvorak-cum-spirituals experiment was one example), but Chen defends their use as a means of attracting neophytes who never thought they'd love classical music.

"We try to build in diverse elements we hope will illuminate the music for everyone," she says. "We are always tweaking the programs to get the right balance between gimmicks and artistic integrity."

She must be doing something right. Ticket sales have grown by 50 percent over the last two seasons, according to Hirsch, with the biggest growth among audience members ages 29-45 – significantly younger than the standard audience demographic of most U.S. symphony orchestras.

The recent \$300,000 grant from the Joyce Foundation will allow the orchestra "to focus on things that can truly drive our mission forward," Hirsch says.

Since its inception in 2008, the Project Inclusion Orchestra Fellowship program has mentored more than 30 musicians of color at the early stages of their careers. Four graduates have won tenured positions in professional orchestras, eight former fellows are professional freelance musicians and three teach music fulltime. This season marks the third year the sinfonietta has partnered with the Grant Park Music Festival in the program.

What's more, the first graduates of the sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Conducting Fellowship, Roderick Cox and Sameer Patel, have been hired as assistant conductors at the Minnesota Orchestra and San Diego Symphony, respectively. Kalena Bovell and Roger Kalia have been chosen as next season's conducting fellows. The fellows in both programs are selected through competitive auditions.

The fellowship programs cover a broader range of musical and career advice – young instrumentalists learn the most effective auditioning methods, and beginning conductors learn how to assemble concert seasons – than other such mentoring programs at other orchestras.

Never shy about getting its name out in front of the public, the Chicago Sinfonietta maintains an active presence on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This has enabled the orchestra to "spend less on marketing than probably any other orchestra in the city," Hirsch says.

Web traffic "saw hits in the tens of thousands," he reports, following the orchestra's tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. in January. The concert, another of the ensemble's annual celebrations of the civil rights leader, included young African Americans reading original poems written in response to the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner.

"After that concert I experienced something I have never seen before in my entire career in music," the executive director says. "The kids were reciting their poems and, at one moment, the entire audience gasped. It was a remarkable moment.

"You always hope that what you put on stage has the power to transform people. Thanks to Mei-Ann, we've hit that goal more often than with most artists I know. She pulls off the impossible."

Sinfonietta's 2015-16 season

A collaboration with the Chicago flamenco troupe Clinard Dance Theatre and tap dancer Cartier Williams, the Chicago premiere of an electric bass concerto played by bass virtuoso Victor Wooten, and world-premiere videos by Chicago-based visual artist and astronomer Jose Francisco Salgado highlight the Chicago Sinfonietta's 2015-16 season. Mei-Ann Chen will conduct four of the five subscription programs.

The season-opening concerts Oct. 3 and 5 will include Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" and the percussive rhythms of dancing feet – courtesy of the Clinard company and Williams – overlaid on symphonic works by Stravinsky, Borodin and Roberto Sierra.

The annual celebration of the Mexican "Day of the Dead," Nov. 1-2, with guest conductor Andres Franco, will include the premiere of Chicago composer Elbio Barilari's "Offrendas," along with music of Faure, Barber, Gabriela Lena Frank and others.

Highlighting tribute concerts to Martin Luther King Jr. will be the local premieres of Conni Ellisor's "The Bass Whisperer" (Wooten, soloist) and Michael Gandolfi's "Fourth Chickasaw Variations." The Apostolic Church of God Sanctuary Choir will join the

orchestra for a set of spirituals and gospel music. Dates are Jan. 17-18.

Percussion soloists Cynthia Yeh (of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) and Alcides Rodriguez will perform Jennifer Higdon's Percussion Concerto and Ricardo Lorenz's Maracas Concerto, respectively, at the concerts of March 12 and 14. Works by William Grant Still, George Whitefield Chadwick and Alberto Ginastera round out the program.

The premieres of new Salgado films accompanying music of Berlioz and John Estacio will anchor the season finale, May 21 and 23. Excerpts from Holst's "The Planets" mark the 10th anniversary of Salgado's multimedia partnership with the orchestra.

Concerts will take place at Wentz Concert Hall at North Central College in Naperville, and at Orchestra Hall in Symphony Center. For further information, visit chicagosinfonietta.org.

Sharps and flats

-- Conductor James Conlon's post-Ravinia future is coming into focus. The music director of the CSO's Ravinia residencies has been named principal conductor of the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della Rai in Turin, Italy, beginning with the 2016-17 season. He will be the first American to hold that position in the 84-year history of the orchestra, which serves as the official ensemble of the Italian public broadcasting network Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana). The present Ravinia season will be his last as festival music director.

-- The vocal ensemble Chicago a cappella will team up with actors from Chicago Shakespeare Theater and WXRT-FM 93.1 radio host Terri Hemmert for programs during its 23rd season in 2015-16. Sharing podium duties will be principal music director John William Trotter, music director emeritus Patrick Sinozich and guest music director Benjamin Rivera.

Concerts are Oct. 11-25 (Jewish Roots of Broadway), Nov. 29-Dec. 19 (Holidays a cappella), Feb 13-21 (Shakespeare a cappella) and April 15-24 (The History of Rock and Soul). Performances will take place at 10 area venues; chicagoacappella.org.

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