Chicago Symphony Orchestra Music Director Riccardo Muti is an artistic force in Chicago—and all over the planet. So why are he and Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians heading into detention centers to share music with the inmates? It’s all part of the orchestra’s goal to connect with communities throughout the city.

by Dennis Polkow
After a twelve-year absence, Riccardo Muti returned in January 2017 to Milan’s Teatro alla Scala, the Italian opera house that he had led for nearly two decades. The visit was so newsworthy that it made headlines in Europe, even sharing the front page with the Trump inauguration. But Muti wasn’t leading an opera company; he was touring with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the ensemble that he has been leading as music director since 2010. The La Scala visit was part of the orchestra’s tour to the music capitals of Europe; it and domestic tours to the West Coast last fall and the East Coast this winter were met with widespread acclaim.

Back in Chicago, however, is where the hard work happens to make all this possible. Muti and the orchestra make some of that work—the artistic process—transparent, by opening select CSO rehearsals to donors, media, seniors, students, veterans, and the like. At one of these last May, Muti asked the musicians to play the first movement of the Brahms Fourth Symphony at the start of the rehearsal. “They know it, I know it, but we have never done it together,” Muti said to the onlookers. “The result may be wonderful, or it may be a disaster!” Afterwards, Muti turned to the applause and said, “You see? They are very good! They hardly need me! Now, just a few things…” And he proceeded to do gentle open-heart surgery on every phrase of
the score, calling on the players, as Con-
certmaster Robert Chen described it after
that night’s concert, “to pull more out of
ourselves than we knew we had.”
Whether he is throwing out the first
pitch at a Chicago Cubs game, perform-
ing “Chelsea Dagger” in a Chicago Black-
hawks jersey, or reviewing his favorite area
Italian eatery on the local news, Muti has
become Chicago’s most recognized cul-
tural ambassador. And in case too much is
made of the Muti side of the extraordinary
Muti/CSO equation, Muti constantly re-
brates the city what a “jewel” it has in its
hometown orchestra.
Equally important to Muti, however,
has been to open up the doors of the CSO
enrich the people of Chicago and through
tours, the world. But also to bring music
to parts of Chicago society that are far
away from the enjoyment and enrichment
of music. We are here to serve the com-
community—not only those who come to the
concerts, but we need to go out to people
away from the world of music.”
Muti’s initial call to community engage-
ment was supported by the CSO’s then-
CEO and President Deborah Rutter, who
brought Muti to Chicago, and since 2014
by Rutter’s successor, Jeff Alexander.
“Most people look to the music direc-
tor as the public face of the institution,”
says Alexander, “so my management style
is to be less of a public persona and more
behind-the-scenes than may have been true
for some of my predecessors. I see myself as
an enabler of Maestro [Muti]’s and of the
musicians we rely on to make great music.
As chief administrator, I am here to enable
and support the artistic efforts as well as
the educational activities and community
engagement activities of the organization.
It’s very important for a symphony orches-
tra to get out into the community.”
To that end, Muti’s first concert as CSO
music director in September of 2010 was
a free outdoor “Concert for Chicago”
in Millennium Park, attended by over
25,000 people. A similar free concert has
taken place at the beginning of every one
of Muti’s eight seasons since, alternating downtown outdoor appearances with indoor neighborhood concerts. The tradition continues in the fall to open the 2018-19 season.

“One of my ideas when I first came here was to bring music to areas of the city and people that were not close to Orchestra Hall,” Muti recalls. “That we go where the people are and people are free to come in and have contact with us. More and more I think that the system that we still have today of the ceremony of the public comes into the concert hall and the orchestra and the conductor are dressed like penguins, is becoming a ridiculous relic. We have to find a way to be much simpler so we can reach people.”

Another initiative Muti began during his first week, which has continued every year since, is that he and a contingent of CSO musicians and guest artists visit a juvenile correctional facility. Because of rehearsal and concert schedules, these visits have to be on a day off, usually a Sunday; Muti spends the morning preparing in his studio, and then he, CSO musicians, and vocalists present a program at the detention center later in the day. All of them, including Muti, volunteer their time.

Entering these correctional facilities is a serious matter: all the artists, as well as the handful of guests, go through background checks, are given a list of dos and don’ts, put through a metal detector, and hand-frisked. They can bring nothing inside: no keys, no cellphones, only a mandatory photo ID to gain access behind the barbed-wire gates, which are controlled by guards buzzing outsiders in one at a time, with every name checked against a list.

Jonathan McCormick, director of the CSO’s Negaunee Music Institute, which oversees the orchestra’s educational, engagement, and community programs as well as the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, a training ensemble for emerging musicians, came to work at the CSO a few months before Muti arrived. “Like so many others,” says McCormick, “I came to Chicago to be close to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I have loved this orchestra for as long as I can remember. I became enamored by the Solti era and the quality of the
music that the orchestra was making.”

McCormick remembers the initial institutional reaction to Muti’s call to community engagement that included visiting prisons, as Muti had done in Italy. “That was somewhat of a surprise,” McCormick recalls, “but it was very encouraging that the minute we started to talk about prison programming, not one of the musicians ever said to us, ‘Why would we be doing that?’ They made very clear that this was a community of people that they would like to get to know and to help in any way that they could. I think there has been a societal shift of the perception of, especially, the juvenile justice system: is it appropriate to take a young person with a complex history of trauma, put them behind bars, and basically initiate them into a system that, statistically, they will participate in for the rest of their lives?”

The inmates, whose world is behind walls and who sing of incarceration, sit transfixed as Muti plays piano for a mezzo-soprano.

The Chicago-based Storycatchers Theatre, which helps young people in the court system transform their traumatic experiences into cultural expression, became a partner in the CSO’s visits to correctional facilities, as did the London-based Music in Prisons. “We had no experience whatsoever going into juvenile prisons and detention centers and offering musical programming,” says McCormick. “We knew that Maestro [Muti] would annually be able to go into a facility and offer an interactive recital, but we also knew that we wanted to do something that would really put the young people at the center of the project. We ended up setting up a jungle gym of instruments for them to use: guitars, basses, keyboards, as well as microphones. And over the course of six hours a day for five days, they create original music based on their life experiences and then perform them at the end of the week for residents of the facility and invited guests.”

Participants are invited to experiment, and there is a team in the room that includes two teaching artists from Music in Prisons; volunteer musicians from the Civic Orchestra, the training orchestra of the CSO; and a composer. “As the young people experiment more on the instruments, they develop proficiency, they start to play chords, they begin writing lyrics,” says McCormick.

By the time of Muti’s second visit to the Illinois Youth Center in Warrenville, in 2011, some of the residents had been in...
spired enough by Muti’s previous visit that they began writing a musical theater piece. A chorus sang “Incarcerated Girls,” which longingly spoke of their situation with a pop-Broadway-style refrain. They also performed a Latin choral setting. Muti listened very intently before taking the stage himself.

“Very nice, congratulations!” he said.

“Thank you for sharing your feelings with me. That is what music really is: feelings, no? That is what we do, too, at the Chicago Symphony: we share our feelings. Everything we are doing for you today is about love. Music without love is just noise: you cannot make music without love.

“How many of you have heard of Mozart?” he continued. “You know, he may be the greatest composer who ever lived and is a demonstration of the existence of God in that he spent such a short time here—he died very young—but never wrote music that was cheap. He had a very hard life, he traveled all around Europe, but he couldn’t get a job because the jobs were always given to others of inferior quality. It is often the case, even today.”

Sitting at the piano, he played the introduction to “È amore un ladroncello” from Mozart’s Così fan tutte. “This music is very joyful, no?” Muti asked. “It teases you, it goes along joyfully, and then comes doubt, expressed in the music,” he said, as an expected major chord shifted to an unstable augmented triad. “Can you hear that?” Muti asked, and most of the inmates nod their heads and respond in recognition. “Bravi, because I needed three years to understand this.”
Introducing a song by Tosti set in Muti’s native Naples—“not Florida, Italy,” he quipped—Muti made a similar point by showing how the music “puts the sea in front of you, no?” as if smelling the sea air while playing. The music shows the “sun and sky as well, but suddenly there is a cloud.” The inmates, whose world is behind walls and who sing of incarceration, sit transfixed as mezzo-soprano Sarah Ponder, a Chicago Symphony Chorus member and CSO teaching artist, sings Tosti’s “Ideale” with Muti accompanying her.

At a reception area where the residents have made a rectangular cake still in its pan, Muti cheerfully takes a piece on a paper plate, samples a taste with a plastic fork, and jokingly tells them, “This is a better cake than we had last night at the Symphony Ball!”

“Muti has the type of personality that commands the respect of the kids, but he could even make the guards flinch,” says CSO Principal Tuba Gene Pokorny, a regular participant in these visits to juvenile detention centers and prisons. “You’re at attention when he’s up there. One young lady expressed an interest in an aria Joyce DiDonato sang when she came with us, so I sent her a DVD of the opera that had the aria Joyce was singing. One thing I definitely want to do is keep a promise like that, because these people have had their
promises dashed probably so many times.”

Is all of this a cosmetic change only for the Muti era, or is such community engagement part of the DNA of the institution? “I think to an extent, it has been part of our DNA for most of the orchestra’s history,” says McCormick. “For example, next season we’re celebrating the centennial of the Civic Orchestra and of doing concerts for children: both are a century old and have been continuously operated. I think each music director has nurtured his legacy and taken his own approach. And the fact that we are now investing nearly $6 million a year and that we have over $30 million dollars in restricted funds in our endowment to make sure that the work will carry forward—with new ideas, new leadership—is significant. I do think we’re in an especially historic time right now, however. When people speak in the future of the Muti era, they will not only remember it as an extraordinary time of music making, but as an extraordinary time of reaching out.”

At the inaugural concert of the CSO’s African American Network at the Apostolic Church of God on the city’s South Side in October 2016, Muti told the capacity crowd, “We come not just to play a concert, but to share our feelings, love, and friendship.” The orchestra launched the network to connect with Chicago’s African American community through shared musical experiences and relationship-building. The orchestra also has an active Latino Alliance serving the Latino community. At that October 2016 concert, Muti continued, “Let’s be a family. In music, there is nothing to understand, only to feel, and feelings are the same for all people.”

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