

Chicago Tribune

Civic Orchestra, Chicago Youth Symphony have the 'Rite' stuff (and then some)

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The young instrumental talent that is coming out of local music schools and conservatories is as amazingly good as you are going to find anywhere. Much of that talent is on display in the many youth orchestras that dot the metropolitan area – think of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, the Midwest Young Artists ensembles, the Classical Symphony Orchestra and its Protégé Philharmonic, the Elgin and DuPage County youth orchestras, among others.

Yes, Chicago still lacks a lavishly funded, world-renowned conservatory of music on the order of a Juilliard or a Curtis. But we have absolutely nothing to apologize for in the caliber of our teaching and training, or the many first-rate young area instrumentalists busily preparing for professional careers in **classical music**.

I was reminded of that fact all over again recently when I caught up with two of Chicago's oldest youth training orchestras, the Civic Orchestra, which just completed its 92nd season; and the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, which is about to begin its 65th year. Each organization, as it turned out, was presenting Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" within a week of each other at Orchestra Hall, so what better time to take the artistic temperature of each group?

I didn't doubt that either the Civic or the Youth Symphony could hack "Le Sacre du Printemps.". Stravinsky's modernist battle cry has become almost as much a standard-repertory item for youth orchestras as it has for adult ensembles. But I was pleasantly surprised by how good – and by that I mean professional-level – the performances turned out to be.

If the Civic version was perhaps more analytical, the Youth Symphony's more elemental, each interpretation stood as a convincing exposition of this astonishing score, whose 1913 premiere in Paris caused the most famous riot in music history. Each ensemble presented the "Rite" as a seamless, gripping whole – precise of rhythm and intonation, clean of ensemble, confidently executed down to the morbid spasm that brings the ballet to an exhausted conclusion.

Cliff Colnot, the Civic's principal conductor, estimates he put in around 15 hours rehearsing his college-age orchestra in the Stravinsky. It showed. You felt his players were recounting this violent ritual of "holy spring" as much as playing it. They brought out nuances of tone color in Part 2 you don't always hear from the big boys.

Allen Tinkham, his counterpart at the Youth Symphony, used a somewhat beefed-up roster of musicians that added weight but not muddiness to the sound. His vigorous, communicative baton brought forth an adrenalin rush of superior playing from his high-school-age champs. I had nothing but admiration for the solo playing in both performances.

Both conductors have worked wonders with their orchestras; we are lucky to have them, as educators, mentors and inspirational guides in the training of tomorrow's orchestral professionals.

On the same program as the Stravinsky ballet, the Civic offered seven of Joseph Canteloube's "Songs of the Auvergne," which Julia Bentley sang with a warmly pleasing mezzo and evident feeling for their delicate charm and playful wit.

The Youth Symphony presented the Prelude and Liebestod from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," along with Michael Daugherty's "Route 66," another of his rambunctious, big-band-style shout-outs to American pop culture. The players savored the chromatic lushness of the Wagner before making a brash and brassy romp of the Daugherty.

CCM's digital archive

This coming Monday, the Chicago Chamber Musicians will launch an online database that may well be the most extensive archive of recorded chamber music performances to be found anywhere. Called EncoreCCM, the new site will provide free public access to streaming audio of the group's concert recordings dating back to 1988 – a trove of more than 700 works by more than 200 composers.

Visitors may listen to as many selections as many times as they choose; they may also access information about the scores, artists and composers, should they wish to delve further into the music. EncoreCCM is an expansion of the free monthly downloads the ensemble already provides at its Web site, chicagochambermusic.org.

I have been exploring the archive – its address is encoreccm.org – with great pleasure over the last couple of weeks and found it as easy to navigate, as chock-full of interesting music, expert performances and useful background material, as promised.

EncoreCCM has all the makings of becoming a basic reference source for scholars and other chamber music groups, not to mention for music lovers wishing to familiarize themselves with the infinite variety of chamber music as performed by some of the best chamber musicians around.



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