

Intermezzo

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Membership Meeting:
Monday, November 8th, 2021
@ 6:00 pm

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Monday, December 13th, 2021
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CSO Brass Annual Concerts See Page 6



The Chicago Symphony Orchestra Brass Annual Concerts: How "Life in the Sound" Has Inspired Generations of Performers, Educators and Students

Nearly every December for the last 20 years, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass section has presented a concert to sold-out crowds. It's been a chance to hear an ensemble of world-class musicians carry on a tradition of brass excellence that has excited listeners for years. Because the concert coincides with the Midwest Clinic, which brings thousands of attendees to Chicago, aspiring performers and teachers have had a chance to hear this premier ensemble and carry that tradition with them. And this December, after a pandemic that silenced our halls for 15 months, the occasion to hear these musicians is especially anticipated.

Mark Ponzo, Professor Emeritus of Trumpet at Northern Illinois University, encouraged his students to attend, and he himself goes every year. "It was the only opportunity during the year they were going to hear the whole brass section just by itself," he says. "Hearing an ensemble at that level is rare. A lot of these kids won't have the chance to go to an international conference where they might hear another large brass ensemble, so every year I would put it on a calendar of events and encourage them to get their tickets and go."

For University of Oregon tuba professor Mike Grose, making sure students attend the concerts is a must. "Going to Midwest is part of a music education degree, so we on the music faculty always recommend that they see the CSO brass concert. It's exciting for students to get to hear excellence in person in real time, not just on a recording, and to listen to repertoire that they otherwise wouldn't have heard. And they enjoy getting to see the musicians come out into the lobby afterward. Once, (Principal Tuba Gene Pokorny) invited my students down to chat a little bit afterward and they enjoyed that very much. It was an extra treat."

The reputation of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass goes back to the 1950s, exemplified by Principal Trumpet Adolph "Bud" Herseth, Principal Tuba Arnold Jacobs and Principal Horn Philip Farkas. When Principal Trombone Jay Friedman joined the orchestra in 1962, the sound the brass was famous for had already been established. "If I had to capture it in one phrase, it would be 'life in the sound' – the sound absolutely jumping out of the instruments," he says. "A lot of people think it's just about playing loud, but it isn't. It's all the dynamics, especially the softer ones. There's such a liveliness at any volume."



Adolph "Bud" Herseth (Trumpet), Arnold Jacobs (tuba) and Philip Farkas (horn). Herseth Photo courtesy Jim Steele. Jacobs and Farkas photos courtesy the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association.

As Associate Principal French Horn Dan Gingrich describes, "What we're trying to do is be as expressive and make as many different colors as possible. Everybody thinks about power with the CSO, but I like to think there's more to it. I'm more concerned with unanimity of sound and sound production, all the parts fitting together. Always true to the fundamentals, consistent and pure, in tune and matching."

Mike Grose agrees. "We talk to our students about the use of 'extreme dynamics'. We all get excited by playing loudly, but with the CSO brass section you get to hear just the most amazing *ppp* that project really well."

The quality of the orchestra attracted attention through recordings made in the 1950s under conductor Fritz Reiner with RCA Victor. John Hagstrom, Second Trumpet and host of the CSO podcast [interMISSION @ the CSO](#), explains, "Those recordings with Reiner were showcasing what the orchestra did in those days. It was a sensational experience just from the new technology of stereo long-playing vinyl records. Because the Orchestra had such a good reputation, they were one of the first to display the power of new recording possibilities."

Though those records were well-received, it's believed that the CSO's first European tour in 1971 helped the orchestra rise to international prominence. "Through the Reiner recordings other musicians knew the CSO was good, but we needed Solti to put us on the map through that tour," says Friedman. "That was a six-week tour. You'd never have that kind of tour today! We played Mahler 5 everywhere."

The CSO maintained their status as they continued to record. "There was new digital technology recording in the 1980s, and the CSO was chosen to re-record almost all of the standard repertoire, mainly with Solti, Abbado, Levine and Barenboim," says Hagstrom. "There are other very good brass sections out there, but the CSO had the opportunity to be heard, and when they were they became preferred."

Despite that long-running reputation, any kind of recurring performance highlighting the brass didn't happen until 2001. Friedman, who is the Music Director of the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest, started the tradition. "I rented Orchestra Hall and hired the CSO brass to do a concert as a fundraiser for my orchestra in Oak Park. We played my arrangement of 'Eine Alpensinfonie' and raised \$54,000!"

Adds Hagstrom, "It was Jay's idea to ask the management to present another brass concert in 2002, and when it turned out to be profitable the management was willing to keep presenting it annually."

Surprisingly, as Pokorny tells it, the administration at the time wasn't entirely convinced another concert would succeed. "Management was really skeptical that this was going to go over, but the concert sold out in no time and people were all for it. Right after we put on this incredible show, one of our guys got up and made an announcement: 'If you all appreciate what we've tried to do here, right now could you cheer loud enough that they can hear you up on the 7th floor and let them know this concert actually went over pretty well?' Of course, the place exploded. We've been doing it mostly every year since then. It's something that people look forward to and we certainly look forward to it in the brass section."

The music for the program is suggested by the musicians and compiled by Second Trombone Michael Mulcahy, who also serves as the director of the CSO brass. "In choosing the repertoire I take seriously that it is not a brass concert, but a Chicago Symphony concert that's played by the brass, so I have to make sure our artistic offering is in concordance with the symphony programs," he says. "We don't do pops rep as a rule. And although the concert is scheduled in December, it's not a Christmas concert. We may include a particularly beautiful carol, just as a treat. I always include original music for brass. We do have to play some of the best music written for our instruments. We have a responsibility to do that. I'm always looking for great music; it has to be top-shelf and the transcriptions have to be first class. We're not just playing a fun concert; we are representing the integrity of the CSO and we have to protect that."

"In terms of playing original music, I think of composers who combine well. I think it's like cuisine; there has to be certain compatibility. For example, if I'm thinking of American music. I think of Ingolf Dahl, who happened to influence Morton Lauridsen and Michael Tilson Thomas. So it's very logical that if we were to perform music of one of these composers, that's a thematic connection that I would like to capitalize on artistically."

Mulcahy continues: "In May, the CSO brass presented the first live concert in Orchestra Hall since the country began grappling with the virus. I thought our return to the hall mirrored the rollout of vaccinations that enabled the rebirth of the country as well as the return of live music to the Hall. I felt this was a good time to celebrate America as we opened up, so I chose an all-American program: Copland, Barber, Michael Tilson Thomas, Bernstein, Schuller... so the thematic connection was there."

While the brass have enjoyed a long and deserved reputation, Hagstrom explains that, "What the orchestra, and the brass by extension, gives our community and our world is a sense of what waits for us when we work together. We're being collaborative citizens within a community, whether it be musical or otherwise. That's the example that great music sets forth. There's something timeless about the message within this music. You have to make an investment of effort to listen attentively, and the reward is much greater once you do."

"We've had fantastic audiences in December," says Gingrich. "That's an inspiration to us. It's standing room only and they have a tremendous appreciation for what we do. They applaud for us, but we're grateful for the audience. Especially music educators: we have such deep respect and appreciation for what they do. Music education is so, so important in the lives of kids and people everywhere. We just wish we could applaud them more."



CSO brass perform online during quarantine.
Photo courtesy of Todd Rosenberg.