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REVIEWS

In Chicago, an Uneven Podium Debut, a Rarely Heard Organ Concerto

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CHICAGO—The first and last time the Chicago Symphony played Samuel Barber’s *Toccata Festiva*—commissioned to break in a new organ at Philadelphia’s Academy of Music, in 1960—was in 2003, more than 20 years ago. With most performances clocking in just under 15 minutes, Barber’s *Toccata* is a masterpiece in miniature, reprising the occasional theme from his *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* in a blazing concerto-fantasia.

On Thursday, *Toccata Festiva*’s CSO drought was broken, at last, by soloist Paul Jacobs and Hong Kong-born conductor Elim Chan, the latter making her debut with the orchestra.

Jacobs has soloed with the CSO since 2010, most recently in 2022. His familiarity with Orchestra Hall’s 3,414-pipe, 44-stop Casavant Frères organ showed in this dexterous performance: blink, and one might miss his arm shoot up to grab a stop, and only once did his hands seem to freeze up briefly while changing manuals.



Elim Chan conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

This work’s great showstopper is its cadenza, which Barber—brilliantly, if inhumanely—makes the soloist play entirely on the organ’s foot pedals. In Orchestra Hall, thanks to Jacobs’ agile feet, the episode became a larger-than-life antiphonal spectacle, the pipes bickering with one another across the hall.

Jacobs had some passing troubles catching the orchestra pre-cadenza. His peripheral sightlines, with the console at far stage left, certainly didn’t help, nor did Chan’s fixation on the score. Sonically, however, the Chan-CSO unit was a taut and energized partner: The piece’s final cadence, orchestra and organ ripping at full blast, was so mighty it may well have opened a fissure in the hall.

After such a short billing, Jacobs’s choice of encore was most welcome: Charles Ives’s *Variations on America*. In his magisterial performance, Jacobs hammed up the movements’ vivid personalities: the merry-go-round naïveté of the third, the pompous polonaise in the fourth, and the sulking dirges of the interludes, some of the teenage Ives’s earliest forays into bitonality. After a final variation that demands the same fleet feet as the *Toccata*, Jacobs’s *Variations* arguably drew even more spirited applause than the main event. (Audiences, savor it while you can: In a pitiful oversight for the composer’s 150th year, Jacobs’ encore might be the most Ives Orchestra Hall hears this season, [or next](#).)

Barber’s *Toccata* presented a more positive spin on Chan’s partnership with the CSO than Weber’s *Freischütz* Overture, which preceded it. The conductor’s interpretation was at its best when it settled into the whiz-bang excitement of the Vivace—but it took some settling, the syncopation uneasy at first. Chan’s energetic beat, and her habit of quivering her baton for emphasis, kept shapes clearly demarcated and the tempo flowing, but she shortchanged the Adagio’s misty expanse. Paralleling the overall arc of this performance, the CSO horns’ fortunes improved post-Adagio, sounding gloopy in their early chorale but firm and authoritative in their later hunting call.

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Associate concertmaster Stephanie Jeong in the spotlight for Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*

Chan's winning performance at the 2014 Donatella Flick Conducting Competition—she remains the only woman to have won it—included Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. It's become a calling card of hers, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, saw her most opinionated leadership of the evening. Her left-hand cues to the harp dictated exactly how she imagined that instrument's arpeggios under associate concertmaster Stephanie Jeong's solos—a flourish for a languid roll, a tight whorl for a snappier one. At the arrival of the woodwind- and tambourine-spiked theme in "The Young Prince and Young Princess," Chan pulled back the tempo and let the orchestra grow ever so gradually, as though a janissary band was approaching from the horizon. Her agitated baton, earlier misplaced, now sharpened the edges of air-cleaving chords and *tutti* interjections in the fourth movement. Only her awkward final cutoff left a bitter aftertaste in this otherwise assured performance.

But *Scheherazade* is only as good as its solo work, and CSO principals seemed unable, or unwilling, to hitch themselves to the same wagon on Thursday. Section cellos rocked tranquilly in "The Sea & Sinbad's Ship," but principal cellist John Sharp churned like a coming storm. Above that, newly installed principal horn Mark Almond snipped off his soaring lines before they'd faded away—a tic of his all season. Clarinetist Stephen Williamson, bassoonist Keith Buncke, and flutist Stefán Ragnar Höskuldsson defaulted to a primary-color boldness where they'd usually reach for pastels.

Even Jeong has played a more distinctive *Scheherazade* in recent seasons, [at Ravinia in 2022](#). But any night with Jeong in the concertmaster's chair is a good night, and her performance was still very fine indeed, all endless lines and soft-spoken grit.

Photos by Todd Rosenberg

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