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## Chicago Sinfonietta's season opens with a big noise

By Kathy Cichon  
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Saxophonist and Cedille Records Emerging Artists Competition winner Julian Velasco will perform as guest musician on Roberto Sierra's "Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra" during the Chicago Sinfonietta's season opening concert, "Next," performed on Sept. 17 at Wentz Concert Hall in Naperville. (Chicago Sinfonietta)

A bit of the old and a bit of the new combined with big percussion sounds and a wide range of emotion is a good way to describe the Chicago Sinfonietta's season-opening concert.

"I think that's how people (are feeling at the moment)," Maestro Mei-Ann Chen said. "It is a wide range of emotions we all feel in our life. The new reality if you will, the new normal."

Audience members can experience the pieces when the Chicago Sinfonietta performs the concert "Next" at 8 p.m. Sept. 17 at Wentz Concert Hall in Naperville and at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 19 at Symphony Center in Chicago.

Big percussion sections are needed in the two pieces that comprise the first half of the program. George Gershwin's "Cuban Overture" is followed by Roberto Sierra's "Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra," a piece featuring Cedille Records Emerging Artists Competition winner Julian Velasco as guest musician.

After hearing Velasco perform, Sinfonietta President and CEO Blake-Anthony Johnson asked Music Director Chen to program a piece with saxophonist Velasco.

"Saxophone concertos are of course, less standard, even I had to Google Julian's list to pick the one that seems to fit in our season," she said

With the jazz theme on the Sinfonietta's wish list for future programming, "I picked the very interesting jazz concerto that hadn't been done that many times by the wonderful composer we have played a couple of times," she said.

Chen said Sierra is "able to combine the sounds of Latin America with other idioms and in this case, jazz" in the work, which has four movements. While the last movement, "Fast (with swing)," leaves no doubt about the jazz connection, she said all of the movements are fun. The second movement, titled "Tender," is also a highlight.

"It's just absolutely gorgeous music that needs to be shared," Chen said.

The second half of the concert will begin with a piece the Sinfonietta has wanted program for a long time and finally found the right moment, Chen said.

Composer Nkeiru Okoye's "Voices Shouting Out," is a "five minute wonderful symphonic opener has been performed around the country," Chen said.

"It's her response to 9/11. And she wanted to create something very meaningful, something more along the lines of voices crying out in response to the destruction," Chen said. "I thought it appropriate coming out of the pandemic, I think we're all shouting out in freedom."

Because Okoye's work also "calls for very interesting percussion, Chen said it's the perfect opportunity to introduce the Sinfonietta audience to her through one of her most performed works.

“She’s been really out there as one of the earlier African American woman composers that’s still writing music that’s relative to our time,” Chen said. “I’m just so glad that we can introduce her to Chicago.”

Following Okoye’s piece, the Sinfonietta will pay tribute to founding member and violinist, the late Terrance Gray, who died in June.

“He was one of our original members and we lost him suddenly in the summer,” Chen said. “So we decided to pay tribute to Terrance with one of his favorite pieces in the repertoire which happened to be ‘Nimrod’ by (Edward) Elgar from his ‘Enigma Variations.’”

The work is a movement about friendship and paying tribute to the best friendships in our lives, Chen said.

In addition to being a member of the Sinfonietta’s 1st violin section, he was an associate conductor of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras and he conducted past Sinfonietta concerts as well.

Concluding the program is Ottorino Respighi’s “Pines of Rome.” The Sinfonietta has wanted to perform it for quite some time, but it was delayed in the early days of pandemic.

“It calls for a pretty big orchestra, especially when it comes to percussion. We have six people playing different instruments, creating gigantic sound at the end,” Chen said.

“In the (early stages of the) pandemic’s time, size was limited because of the safety restrictions. The number of musicians was limited. It was really like ‘finally, we get to program orchestra music at its best.’ Orchestra can sound good with the smaller size, but it’s just not the same when you are in Wentz Concert Hall or our famous downtown Symphony Center.”

### **‘Next’ — Chicago Sinfonietta concert**

**When:** 8 p.m. Sept. 17

**Where:** Wentz Concert Hall, 171 E. Chicago Ave., Naperville

**Tickets:** \$54-\$67 adults; \$17 students; see website for pay what you can ticket info

**Information:** 312-284-1554; [chicagosinfonietta.org](http://chicagosinfonietta.org)

*Kathy Cichon is a freelance reporter for the Naperville Sun.*

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