

Chicago Tribune • Sep 20, 2022 at 1:00 pm

Review: A phenomenal sax soloist and a sad farewell at Chicago Sinfonietta's season opener

By **Hannah Edgar**



Saxophonist Julian Velasco and Chicago Sinfonietta at Symphony Center in Chicago Sept. 19, 2022. (Kyle Flubacker photo / HANDOUT)

In the 1840s, Adolphe Sax revolutionized music with a new instrument — just not in the way he expected.

Somewhere between brass and woodwind, his saxophone was designed for symphonic playing. But when it came to orchestras, the saxophone never quite stuck, mostly appearing as a novelty.

Turns out Sax just had to wait a century or two. These days, the saxophone is a favorite chamber and solo instrument of classical composers the world over — and Chicago is a leading crucible of that repertoire, thanks to an influential studio at Northwestern University. Recent graduate [Steven Banks](#) was one of just five young artists to receive a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant this year, and [~Nois](#), a nationally touring saxophone quartet that's become Gen Z's answer to the PRISM Quartet, is fiendishly good and fiendishly goofy in equal measure.

But — and this is a capital “B” but — for all that sax-y goodness, it remains rare to hear a *concerto* for the instrument, backed by a whole orchestra.

Luckily, Chicago Sinfonietta has made an Olympic sport of high-jumping over classical convention for 35 years, and didn’t bat an eye in engaging ~Nois saxophonist Julian Velasco as a soloist for its season opener on Saturday and Monday. Earlier this year, the 27-year-old Los Angeles native won Cedille Records’ inaugural Emerging Artist Competition, beating out violinists and pianists for a record deal with the prestigious classical label. Released last month, “[As We Are](#)” is a bird’s-eye view of Velasco’s range, both as an infectiously joyous interpreter of new music and a monster improviser.

Roberto Sierra’s *Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra* proved a perfect vehicle for Velasco to toot both horns. (Literally: The concerto requires the soloist to swap between soprano and tenor saxophones.) When he wrote it 20 years ago, Sierra blocked out sections for jazz über-virtuoso James Carter, the piece’s dedicatee, to improvise freely. Carter’s improvisational DNA is braided throughout the concerto, as it was in Velasco’s performance at Symphony Center on Monday — ozone-scraping altissimos, mouthpiece pops and blistering multiphonics.



Saxophonist Julian Velasco and Chicago Sinfonietta conductor Mei-Ann Chen, and the orchestra, at Symphony Center in Chicago Sept. 19, 2022. (Kyle Flubacker photo / HANDOUT)

The musicality, however, was all Velasco’s. The young soloist played his saxophone like a one-pipe organ, conjuring distinct timbres on a dime — burly passages evaporated into wispy harmonics and arpeggios flowed with the liquid ease of a bowed instrument. Stylistic pirouettes seemed just as effortless. During his hammy final cadenza, Velasco parlayed a bebop-y solo into a spirit-band-style ditty, all served with a generous heaping of stank.

“Play ‘Careless Whisper’!” one of Velasco’s ~Nois comrades bellowed from the back of the hall when he returned to the stage for an encore; laughter rippled through the crowd. (I did say fiendishly goofy, didn’t I?) Instead, Velasco busted out a stage-stomping “Libertango,” beginning the Piazzolla chestnut on soprano and ending, boisterously, on tenor.

Music director Mei-Ann Chen and the Sinfonietta landed one of their most sensitive supporting performances in recent memory in Sierra’s concerto. Both it and Nkeiru Okoye’s “Voices Shouting Out” (2001) — a driving and zestily orchestrated five-minute work — were worthy comebacks after the orchestra led with an unsettled, unbalanced take on George Gershwin’s “Cuban Overture.”

But there were further heights still to come, like Chen and Sinfonietta’s crisp, striding account of Ottorino Respighi’s “Pines of Rome.” Chen, who tends to fire on all cylinders early on and stay there in extroverted rep, reined in the majestic final movement so the orchestra didn’t fully crest until the piece’s end. The payoff was sublime, as were inner-movement solos by principal clarinetist Leslie Grimm and English hornist June Matayoshi.

That “Pines of Rome” was the kind of music-making every musician aspires to achieve in their life, at least once. If you’re extra fortunate, you get to do it with your favorite people.

By that metric, Terrance Malone Gray was a very, very lucky man. A founding Sinfonietta violinist and associate conductor of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, Gray died suddenly on June 26 at the home of his friend, violinist [Rachel Barton Pine](#). The Sinfonietta’s season opener not only marked its 35th season but the beginning of its first without Gray, and the first time it had performed as an ensemble since his death.

Assistant principal cellist Edward Kelsey Moore shared memories of the man he called his “best friend” in remarks from the stage.

“Terrance was more comfortable saying ‘I love you’ than anybody I know,” Moore said. “If you’re talking to someone who makes you laugh, who makes you a better version of yourself, say those words.”

Members of the orchestra were visibly overcome playing a wrenching “Nimrod” from Edward Elgar’s “Enigma Variations,” one of Gray’s favorite pieces, in his memory. After the final, benedictory chord, Chen set a bouquet on Gray’s old seat in the first violin section, sitting empty. It remained there through “Pines of Rome,” soaring climax and all.

What else is there to say but this: The Chicago Sinfonietta loved Terrance Gray. And how we love our Sinfonietta.

Hannah Edgar is a freelance writer.