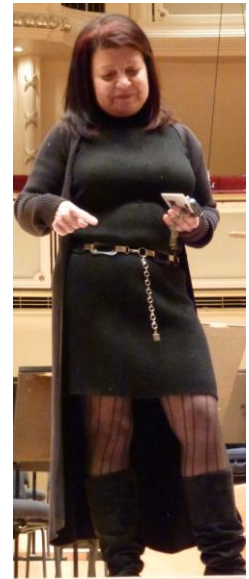


# Behind the Scenes at the Chicago Symphony Center March 7, 1012

CTPA members had a behind the scenes glimpse of the Chicago Symphony Center on March 7. Our knowledgeable guide, **Shifra Werch** of CSO Group Services, was our spokesperson for the tour and gave us great nuggets of information. (Her contact info is at the end.)

The Orchestra was founded in 1891 (after the great fire), with the desire to make Chicago the “Paris of the Midwest”. This is the label the rich who donated wanted to have for Chicago. Theodore Thomas, who started the symphony, wanted the best musicians of the world to be part of the symphony and in a community that would support it. Riccardo Muti (from Italy) is the symphony's current conductor, loves Chicago and thinks conducting the Chicago symphony is like driving a Ferrari.

The original orchestra first played at the Auditorium, but found it difficult to fill the hall on a subscription basis. Daniel Burnham and Theodore Thomas became friends and Burnham decided to build Orchestra Hall. Burnham donated his time and the building was done in a year, from 1903 to 1904. It was officially named Orchestra Hall in the 19-teens.

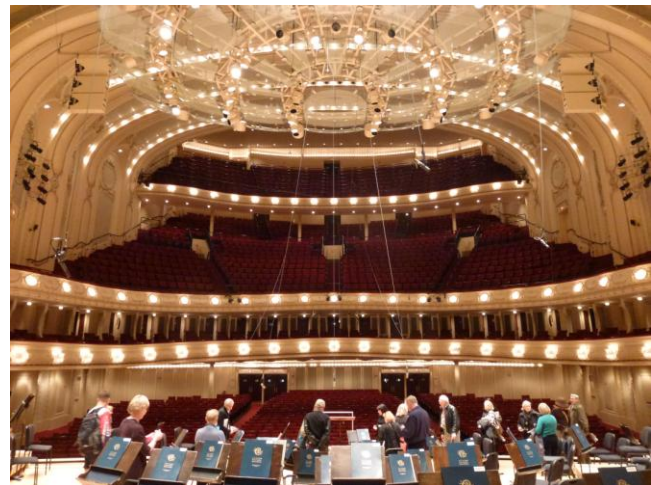


The first piece performed was Beethoven. Two months after opening in Orchestra Hall, Theodore Thomas passed away.

The Beaux-Arts building has been a landmark since the 1970's. There was renovation in the 90's that added more ticket windows, a security desk and a full bar, that was just in the outer area.



Looking at the stage



Looking into the audience from the stage

The building is owned by the Symphony and is totally rentable. We were in the hall where we learned that it is more of a responsibility than an honor to be the first chair. During the Depression the Symphony could not pay its electric bill and showed silent movies and performed the scores of silent films. The playing of film scores was revived on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary and that led the way to still recurring program of Friday night films. Musical programming encompasses much more than the symphony. The diverse programs include world music, jazz, theatre and programs for children.

At one point, as seemed fitting, a Burnham grandson was involved with one of the redesigns of the hall. In the mid-1990s, there were modifications which included acoustic changes and making the stage larger to accommodate more musicians. Other modern technology such as the addition of cameras, discrete microphones and a way to control the humidity are implemented in the current design. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a lot more people were educated and knew about the arts, which contributed to the growing popularity of the symphony and the advent of stereo played a role in how music was performed. The new terrace behind the stage is for the chorus and is also sometimes used as additional audience seating.



We were allowed a do-not-touch visit to the stage where musical scores and instruments were present for an upcoming rehearsal or performance. From the stage, Shifra mentioned President Franklin D. Roosevelt had spoken from this very stage. President Obama is a subscriber and members of the Supreme Court have attended concerts.



After we all sang “Happy Birthday” on stage (so we could add “Performed on the stage of Symphony Center” to our resumes), we next ventured behind-the-scenes. We explored downstairs, where some musicians and maestros have dressing rooms, and where there are some offices, rehearsal rooms, storage areas and quiet rooms.

Shifra also spoke of the blind and open audition process that can take over a year for a new spot to be filled. Once the probation period is finished, the musicians are tenured and can occupy the spot for life. The median age of a symphony musician is between 48 to 57 (of course some younger and older), with the union still playing a large part in the arts to watch over the musician's rights. There are a certain number of annual performances expected of a member musician, but because of the high number of total performances (approximately 300) everyone does not play them all. The CSO is one of the top paying symphony's in the U.S., with salaries from about \$140K to the upper six figures.

Directly underneath the stage is the climate controlled piano storage. There are two Steinway concert grands which are bought up to stage level on lifted platforms. The organ, whose pipes can be seen on stage, is also lifted to the stage in the same manner. There is an educational initiative headed by musician Yo Yo Ma that takes workshops into the community. There is a family series during the week done on a lottery system, allowing for reduced price tickets and there are reduced price tickets for high school students also. There are several areas for patrons to relax between performances. We visited one downstairs and made our way to another upstairs for our last stop.

Our last stop was the Grainger Ballroom that back in 1904 was accessible to the outside in the days before air conditioning. The lovely small ballroom is used for pre-concert conversations and there have been over a thousand weddings held there.





There is the modern arcaded hallway that led us to Buntrock Hall and the rotunda on the Wabash side that was done by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. This is where we ended our tour. The Symphony Center has been connected, eliminating the alley taking you back to the office building, the gift shop and the restaurant, Rhapsody.



**Shifra Werch**, Group Services at Chicago Symphony Center can be contacted for tours and group sales at **312-294-3042** or **WerchS@csso.org**.

For individual tickets, call 312-294-3000 or visit the web: [www.cso.org](http://www.cso.org).



Write up prepared by Gina V Diskell  
Photos by Donna Primas CTG