



TAKE A BOW New Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Associate Concertmaster Stephanie Jeong

You were one of the first new appointments by Riccardo Muti. At your age, in such a prominent role, do you feel a great deal of pressure? I'm aware of how young I am, but I try not to show that I'm aware of it. I was a little worried at having such an important position at my age, but I talked to my friends and my teachers about it, and just because I'm young doesn't mean I'm not qualified. I keep that in mind and focus on doing my personal best.

How would you describe your relationship with Maestro Muti? You know, there are quite a few good conductors out there, but what separates the good conductors from the great ones is that the great ones really inspire you. You don't feel like you're doing what they're telling you to do; they make you feel what they're feeling, and then the orchestra becomes one big unit. When I play under Muti, my attention skyrockets.

How has it been working with Concertmaster Robert Chen? He's been very welcoming, supportive and friendly, and that is definitely a big help. I sit next to him every single day, and to be able to work well together and personally get along is huge.

Part of your role as associate concertmaster is filling in for the concertmaster CONTINUED...

Strings Attached

Stephanie Jeong left Chicago at the age of 10 as a violin prodigy; she made a triumphant return last year as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's new associate concertmaster.

| *By Margaret Sutherland* | *Portrait by Kristyna Archer* |

It's been clear since she was a child that violinist Stephanie Jeong was destined for great things, but few could have imagined the beautiful symmetry of her career arch. Jeong, 24, was raised in Northbrook. At 10, she became one of the youngest students ever accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, then went on to earn her master's degree at Juilliard. The sky was the limit as Jeong then won a coveted spot in the New York Philharmonic. Fate intervened, though, when CSO Music Director Riccardo Muti offered her the orchestra's associate concertmaster position last year.



SHAKE ON IT Maestro Riccardo Muti congratulates Jeong after she filled in for Concertmaster Robert Chen, who was ill.

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...CONTINUED when he’s out. Just a little more than a week after joining the CSO you had what sounds like an intense night when Robert Chen fell ill and you went on as concertmaster for Liszt’s *A Faust Symphony*. You received spectacular reviews.

I think I have good control of myself, and I think that comes from performing a lot. But it was nerve-racking because it was only my second week on the job. I had a couple of hours, so I learned the solo, showed up to work a little earlier, and the group soloists and I met with Muti during intermission to play the group solo through. You follow the cliché phrase: The show must go on.

Who are a few of your favorite composers?

It changes as I discover new pieces. Sometimes you find that once you’ve learned the piece you appreciate it more.

I always enjoy learning Bartók, which is kind of weird because his pieces are hard and stressful to learn. I really like Bach, too. It sounds simple, but it’s not.

You left the New York Philharmonic after less than a season to join the CSO. What convinced you to come home? I was already in the middle of the audition process here when I got the job in New York, so there was somewhat of an overlap. They’re both top five orchestras, but the position here really drew me in. The CSO is a major orchestra, in my hometown and near my family, so, for me, it’s a dream job.

How has the move back been so far? It’s kind of weird because technically I came home, but it’s really new to me, too. I moved away when I was 10 to go to school in Philadelphia at the Curtis Institute of Music.

What are you most looking forward to about living here? I want to get to know the restaurants. I’m looking forward to getting to the point where I have my favorite places, and make Chicago my home. It just takes a while to figure things out, but in due time I’ll feel the same way I do about Philly and New York. I get very emotionally attached to the places I live.

What would you say you’re most looking forward to this year? I’m very excited to go on tour. We’re going to Russia and Italy. I’ve never been to Russia. I’ve been to Italy but not the cities we’re going to visit on this trip.

Did you always know that music was your calling? I started so young, before I was 3, so I don’t have a memory of my first lesson or anything like that. I had other hobbies, like ice skating for a few years growing up, but violin was always the focus.

When you put the violin in my hands, I know what I’m doing. The violin is basically me. I cannot imagine... if something happened and I couldn’t play anymore, I have no idea what I would do.

You’ve accomplished so much. What qualities brought you here? Dedication, for sure. I really never took a day off growing up. I think that if you work that hard every day it will add up to something, eventually, especially if you have talent to back it up. Family support is important too. I feel like when you’re a young kid you need someone to push you. I had the right environment to keep me going and work hard. ■