

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNUS SAM MAGAD TAKES A BOW AFTER 34 YEARS AS CSO CONCERTMASTER

Sir Georg Solti appointed him concertmaster in 1972. “Although I didn’t know it at the time, it was Solti who taught me how to lead with confidence,” he says. Later, Magad served under Daniel Barenboim, whom he greatly admired for his artistry and ability and with whom he developed a close friendship.

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DePaul School of Music alumnus Samuel Magad recently retired after 48 years with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and 34 years as concertmaster.

For one alumnus, a degree from DePaul University’s School of Music led him to the kind of fairy-tale career that most musicians only dream about. Samuel Magad (MUS ’55) retired last January after nearly a half century with the renowned Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO). Throughout his illustrious career, Magad has traveled the world over, worked with some of the world’s most distinguished musicians and performed under classical music’s most celebrated conductors.

As a violinist, Magad is known for his sensitive musicianship, beautiful solo sound and high standards. As concertmaster, a position he held for 34 of his 48 years with the orchestra, he is remembered for his diplomacy, evenhanded leadership and a knack for getting along with all sorts of people. And as a person, he is loved for his charm, humility and sense of humor.

The concertmaster’s many roles

Much more than just the person who tunes the orchestra, the first violin chair—the concertmaster—is a position of honor and responsibility. As the musicians’ leader, he is responsible for many subtle aspects of pitch and unity throughout the orchestra. “The concertmaster interprets the conductor’s wishes and leads the group to present the concert in the way the conductor wants it to be,” explains Magad. The concertmaster also plays the solo violin parts, which, Magad says, can range from a few measures to long works with intricate cadenzas.

Magad (to the left of conductor) in performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2005, Myung-Whun Chung conducting.

Photo: Todd Rosenberg

In addition to his role as musical leader, the concertmaster also serves as advocate and spokesperson for the orchestra musicians. Tom Hall, retired CSO violinist and conductor of the DePaul Chamber Orchestra, explains, “Should conductors become too unreasonably difficult in some way, and tensions between maestro and orchestra become too great, the concertmaster is the person to speak up for the orchestra and address the problem on the spot. This was a role Sam Magad filled to perfection.”

Born and raised in Chicago, Magad began studying with noted violinist Paul Stassevitch, then director of DePaul’s Symphony Orchestra, at the age of 13. “He opened my eyes to music,” says Magad of his teacher. With the help of a generous scholarship, Magad continued studying with Stassevitch at DePaul, where he served as concertmaster under Stassevitch’s baton.

After three years with the U.S. Army Band in Washington, Magad was hired by CSO Music Director Fritz Reiner in 1958. Reiner, he recalls, told him, “I like your playing but not your violin. I will hire you anyway,” with instructions to buy a new one. “I have had many violins since then and I am always searching for the next better one,” says Magad.

Magad describes his role as “bridging the gap between conductors and members, management and members.” His skill as a bridge builder was appreciated by his fellow violinists, who upon his retirement presented him with a crystal sculpture inscribed, “To a great concertmaster, who formed a bridge of partnership among equals based on shared values and ideas.”

Symphony orchestras were not always “partnerships among equals,” Magad explains. In the late ’50s, he and a group of fellow orchestra members banded together to form the Chicago Symphony Members’ Committee, one of the first players’ associations in the country. The group’s early meetings were held at Magad’s home. Its goal? “To address the subject of improving the standard of respect and working conditions for the orchestral musician,” he says.

After many years of negotiations, the orchestra evolved into the democracy that it is today. Such members’ associations are now common, and, thanks to pioneers like Magad, players across the country enjoy good working conditions, fair treatment and an equal voice.

“Sam’s perspective on things was always helpful,” says adjunct professor of double bass Rob Kassinger, who has played with the CSO for 14 years. “He had an amazing amount of experience that he was able to draw upon. I always looked forward to what he had to say.”

It seems that everyone who worked with Magad speaks fondly of him. DePaul cello professor Stephen Balderston, who served as assistant principal cello of the CSO for 10 years, shares this memory: “Mr. Magad was on my audition committee when I was first hired.

I had always been in awe of him because of his beautiful playing on the orchestra’s recordings. After the audition, he approached me to congratulate me. Not knowing what he looked like, I asked him who he was. He replied, ‘Me? Oh, I’m just a CSO member.’ When I found out who had said that to me, I was mortified. I called to apologize and found a warm and friendly Sam Magad on the other end of the phone.”

In addition to his work as concertmaster, Magad made regular appearances as CSO soloist under the direction of numerous conductors, including Barenboim, Solti, Claudio Abbado, Rafael Kubelík, Erich Leinsdorf and James Levine. He presented countless chamber music concerts, performing with his CSO colleagues as well as Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, Maxim Vengerov, Mstislav Rostropovich and Barenboim. Magad can be heard as soloist on many of the CSO’s internationally acclaimed recordings.

He is the founder of the Northbrook Symphony and served as the symphony’s music director and conductor for 20 years. During his tenure, the orchestra was named Orchestra of the Year and he was named Conductor of the Year by the Illinois Council of Orchestras. He also was concertmaster of Chicago’s Grant Park Orchestra and the Aspen Festival Orchestra, where he performed for 13 years as soloist, chamber musician and conductor.

The DePaul tradition

For Magad’s family, DePaul has been something of an ensemble performance. His wife, Miriam, graduated from the School of Music in 1974 with a concentration in piano. Their daughter Debra received her law degree from DePaul in 1981. And Debra’s son Jared Rabin currently is studying violin and jazz guitar at the family alma mater.

“I was lucky to have found a school that was interested in helping me start my career,” says Magad. “Under [Music School] Dean Casey’s leadership, I can see that it is an even more wonderful school today than when I graduated.” He was awarded the DePaul Distinguished Alumni Award for achievement in the arts in 1968.

When asked to name his favorite composer or piece of music, Magad declines. “The music of the week is always the best music in the world,” he says.

What will he do for an encore? In addition to traveling, going to the opera and relaxing in the audience at Symphony Center, he hopes to continue performing chamber music and to “be helpful with the artistic encouragement of our young people.”

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