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HOMEPAGE

# One of the world's top conductors returns to a favorite concert hall — in Kansas City

BY PATRICK NEAS *SPECIAL TO THE STAR*

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Riccardo Muti will lead the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for his final Kansas City concert before stepping down as its music director. *Todd Rosenberg Photography*



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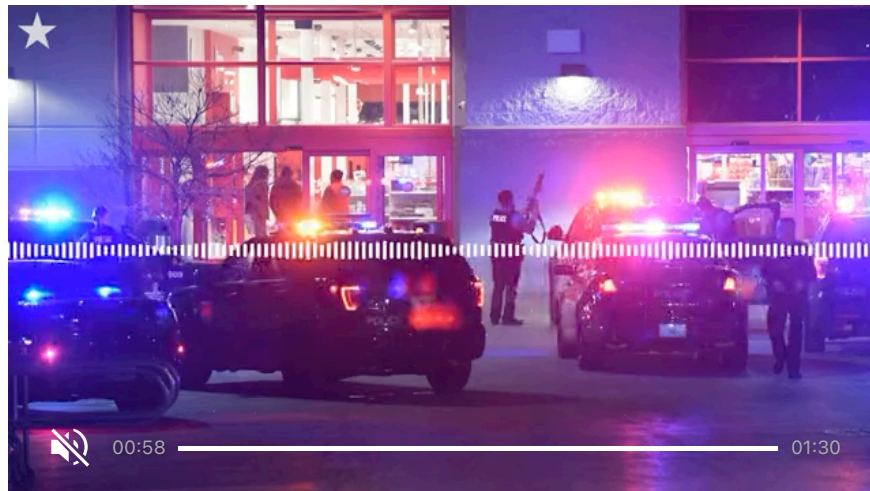
The Harriman-Jewell Series first presented Riccardo Muti in 1986, when he conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra.

It was on that first trip to Kansas City that Muti visited the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, where an 18th century painting by Corrado Giaquinto caught his eye. Giaquinto was born in Molfetta, the same city where Muti spent the first 17 years of his life. Muti said that when he saw that painting, “I suddenly felt like I was at home.”

Muti will return to Kansas City to conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on Feb. 26 at Helzberg Hall. Violinist Julia Fischer will be the soloist in Schumann’s Violin Concerto, but the main work on the program is the “Manfred” Symphony, a turbulent masterpiece by Tchaikovsky.

This concert will be an emotional one, as this will be the last time Muti conducts the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Kansas City before he steps down as its music director at the end of this season.

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Muti, 81, is a true giant among conductors, with an aristocratic bearing and an old world gravitas that is becoming rare. The two works he's chosen for his Kansas City audience are hardly ever heard in concert, but Muti has long championed them. He made a superb recording of "Manfred" in 1982 with the Philharmonia Orchestra, and in 1983 he recorded the Schumann with violinist Gidon Kremer.

"People don't know about the violin concerto," Muti said. "It is very, very different from all the other concertos, like Brahms or Tchaikovsky or Beethoven."

Muti says that the first two movements are some of the most beautiful and romantic music that Schumann ever wrote, but that the final movement is weaker by comparison. He recalled conducting the work with the Vienna Philharmonic in Salzburg, Austria.

"They had not played the concerto for a long time," Muti said. "When we arrived at the second movement, I said this movement clearly was created by Schumann when he was thinking about his wife, Clara. It's a sort of dedication to Clara. And when we read the third movement, one player of the orchestra said, 'this movement must have been dedicated to his mother-in-law.'"

A guiding principle for Muti throughout his career has been fidelity to the composer's intentions. That is how he hopes to make the case for the Schumann Violin Concerto.

"I intend to be as faithful as I can be, and try to discover the deep reasons why the composer has written that movement," Muti said. "Maybe we think that it's less interesting than the other two movements, but it's our problem, not the problem of the composer."

*Violinist Julia Fischer will be the soloist in Schumann's Violin Concerto at Helzberg Hall. Courtesy Harriman-Jewell Series*

It took some convincing from his fellow Russian composer Balakirev before Tchaikovsky finally decided to compose a symphony based on Lord Byron's poem "Manfred," but after he reread the poem while staying in the Alps, where Byron's poem is set, he decided to tackle it.

"Manfred," the poem, has all the elements of over-the-top Romanticism: a moody hero brooding over his guilt about some unnamed sin involving his dead sister Astarte. With echoes of "Faust," Manfred conjures spirits who bring him no relief from his mental and spiritual anguish.

Many Tchaikovsky fans, including myself, think "Manfred" is the composer's finest symphony, although it's rarely heard in concert. The finale has an organ part, which

should sound splendid on Helzberg Hall's Casavant organ.

“Of course we always think about Tchaikovsky's 4th, 5th and especially the 6th, the ‘Pahtétique,’ but the ‘Manfred’ is an even more important work and the most difficult, technically speaking,” Muti said. “And I will do it the way it's written, as I always do, because, generally, the Russians avoid the original finale and bring back the romantic theme of the first movement. But they do this to make an impact on the public. When you end fortissimo and loud, the public gets excited, but the original finale that we will do is much more thoughtful and deep.”

Muti has previously expressed his admiration of Helzberg Hall, and says he is looking forward to conducting in it again.

“I was very, very, very happy about the sound of the hall,” he said. “In fact, I said that we should move the Chicago Symphony to Kansas City.”

Muti, who lives in Ravenna, Italy, and is director of the annual Ravenna Music Festival, says that he will continue his long relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic, as well as other orchestras he has worked with regularly, including the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic and Orchestre National de France in Paris.

Muti, who has been at the summit of the classical music world for decades and has a perspective few can match, has a sobering vision of the future.

“Technology is killing spirituality and culture, and this maybe is inevitable,” Muti said. “The world is giving less attention to culture., and this is not in America only, but in the rest of the world, especially in Europe. Europe is forgetting its past and the governments don't care about the importance of culture. And this fact is creating more and more violence. But if this is the future, I am glad that in a few years I will disappear from this planet.”

Let's hope that Maestro has more than a few years left, and that somehow he makes it back to Kansas City to conduct more glorious music. He will always have a second home here in the heart of America.

**7 p.m. Feb. 26, Helzberg Hall, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. \$17.50-\$85. 816-415-5025 or [hjseries.org](https://www.kansascity.com/hjseries.org).**

You can reach Patrick Neas at [patrickneas@kcartbeat.com](mailto:patrickneas@kcartbeat.com) and follow his Facebook page, *KC Arts Beat*, at [www.facebook.com/kcartbeat](http://www.facebook.com/kcartbeat).

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