

To Russia, With Musical Love — After 22 Years' Absence : NPR

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Todd Rosenberg/Courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

An advertisement in Moscow for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first concerts in Russia in more than two decades.

This week, music is bringing Americans and Russians together in a way that policy discussions never can. And don't call that a cliché in front of the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

If U.S. relations with Russia have hit a sticky patch over Syria and other issues lately, that didn't stop the Chicago Symphony from thrilling a Russian audience this past Wednesday night, just as it did on its last visit — to the then-Soviet

Union in 1990.

Lana Vyrazhanova loved the concert at the prestigious Moscow Conservatory. She says it is first and foremost about relations — the music comes second. "It seems to me," Vyrazhanova said, "that when the Russians stand and applaud, they aren't just applauding the music, they are applauding the American people."

Dmitry Smirnov's Space Odyssey opened the concert, as it did again in Moscow on Thursday and will in St. Petersburg on Saturday. The three-concert tour was organized in less than a year, when U.S. diplomats in Moscow refused to take no for an answer.

Before the concert, the Chicago Symphony's music director, Riccardo Muti, sat alongside the U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, for a press conference. The Italian maestro admitted that music bringing people together can be a cliché.

"Culture is important, culture is important. We repeat so many times that culture is important, that culture is not important anymore," Muti said. "We are satisfied in repeating this phrase."

But Muti has taken orchestras to troubled places around the world, including Sarajevo after the war, and the power of music is not a cliché to him. "The problems in the world are created most of the time by the words," he said. "In fact, ambassadors, the less they speak, the better it is."

"Especially for me," Ambassador McFaul said, to laughter.

McFaul assumed his post in January, a month after disputed parliamentary elections sparked Russia's biggest street protests in years, and weeks ahead of a presidential vote that returned Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin.

"There's been some difficulties," McFaul said, "but if you look at the overall structure of the relationship, the overall record of achievement, on many dimensions, we see a lot of momentum in terms of U.S.-Russia relations."

The difficulties include controversy over meeting opposition figures during his first week on the job, and suggestions last month that his phone and email were being hacked. But McFaul was quick to mention the successes as well: "The new START treaty, the new 123 Agreement [on nuclear cooperation], cooperating on Iran, Afghanistan, North

Korea, the World Trade Organization."

The evening's main piece was Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5. The composer's widow, Irina, was in the audience and reportedly told Muti she enjoyed the performance. It was also special for the orchestra's principal oboist, Eugene Izotov.

"It's a particularly personal trip for me," Izotov said, "because this is the stage where my father and uncle played. I grew up on this stage. I first heard Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony as a kid out in the hall, so it's very moving."

In returning to the Conservatory's storied stage as an ambassador from President Obama's hometown, Izotov embodies the enormous changes — in Russia and in U.S.-Russian relations — since the orchestra last played here 22 years ago.