



Cynthia Yeh joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as principal percussionist in June 2007.

Cynthia Yeh

I started my musical studies at the age of four on the piano. During high school I wanted to be in the band, so I took up percussion as a way to get in, although I continued studying piano. After high school, I went to the University of British Columbia starting out as a business major. In my second year, I switched and became a piano performance major, and in my third year I changed my major to percussion. I studied with two teachers who held, at various times, the principal percussion position at the Vancouver Symphony. After getting my undergraduate degree, I went to Temple University in Philadelphia and studied with Alan Abel, former associate principal percussionist of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

While getting my master's degree at Temple, I was part of a percussion ensemble, Battery Four, which included two musicians who currently freelance in the Washington, D.C. area, and another who is a member of the Houston Symphony. We played contemporary works, including a number of commissioned pieces. I was performing with Battery Four and freelancing with various orchestras when I won the principal percussion position at the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. I had been playing in San Diego for three seasons when I auditioned at the CSO in the fall of 2006.

After wrapping things up in San Diego, I moved to Chicago in early June 2007. Two weeks later, I played my first CSO concert—the Verdi Requiem led by David Zinman. I had played as a substitute with the CSO before, but sitting on stage during rehearsals and performances, as a member, was an entirely different experience! It was amazing, just knowing you are a part of this Orchestra. And everyone here has been so supportive and welcoming. It is a very positive environment.

This past fall we started the season with a two week, seven city tour in Europe. This was my first real tour as a member of any orchestra, and it was all great—from travel to accommodations to venues. Playing in different halls in different cities was eye-opening, and traveling together as a group gave me the chance to get to know more people in the Orchestra.

In terms of day-to-day responsibilities, my job as principal percussion is a bit different from other CSO principals. Since there are no given first, second, third, or fourth percussion parts, the principal has to map out all the percussion requirements and roles. There's a lot of advance work done months before a concert. I draw on my past experience in San Diego, and as a substitute player, to decide what will work best. It's not really something you learn in school. For example, you have to determine how many players are needed for each piece, assign parts, figure out the equipment needs, and decide the stage set up. As soon as the season is announced, I work on part assignments so section members know what and when they'll be playing. I also get to choose what part I'll play. I review the scores to make these decisions, and double-, and triple-check everything.

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We have four regular members in the section, but we have had as many as eight percussion players on stage for some pieces. Since there are often many different percussion instruments—of all shapes and sizes—that might be needed during a performance, I work very closely with our stage crew, giving them hand drawn diagrams for the stage set up. I'm also at the Hall an hour to an hour-and-a-half before rehearsals to check the stage and make any adjustments.

So far, since arriving in Chicago, I've been pretty busy, and haven't had too much free time—yet—to explore the city. In the coming months, I'm looking forward to playing the Shostakovich Fourth Symphony, which I've never performed, and any Mahler is great. But the best part about being here is just being part of the CSO.