

Professionals MA 30 of the year

The Influencers



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The

Influencers

For this year's Musical America Professionals of the Year, we asked our readers to nominate "key influencers." These are the folks who are making a difference in our business, either by virtue of their position, their creativity, and/or their dedication—people about whom you could say, "When they speak, we listen."



MEI-ANN CHEN

Music Director

Chicago Sinfonietta and Memphis Symphony Orchestra

Mei-Ann Chen never misses an opportunity to try something new. During one [Chicago Sinfonietta](#) performance, for example, a Chicago-based punk marching band, Mucca Pazza, emerged from below stage wearing mismatched uniforms for Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. As a toy cannon shot confetti, younger listeners tried to grab handfuls. According to Chen, imaginative touches like these draw otherwise reluctant people to try classical music.

Since 2011 Chen has led the Sinfonietta, an ensemble that prides itself on inclusiveness and innovation in classical music. Under Chen's guidance, last year the orchestra's "Project Inclusion Conducting Fellowship" saw its first graduates secure assistant-conducting posts at the Minnesota Orchestra and San Diego Symphony. The more traditional (given its location) [Memphis Symphony](#), where Chen is in her fifth season as music director, became a positive force for diversity and inclusion at a recent concert honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chen invited the city's Central

High School Choir of predominantly African-American students to sing spirituals between movements of Dvořák's spiritual-infused *New World* Symphony.

Chen says she hasn't felt constrained by both of her orchestras' limited resources. "We're the mightiest boutique orchestras in the country," she says proudly. Given that ticket sales at the Sinfonietta have been up as much as 50 percent the past few seasons, and up 30 percent during her tenure at the Memphis Symphony, Chen isn't boasting when she says, "We generate a circle of energy, and our audiences respond."

In addition to Memphis and the Sinfonietta, Chen was recently named artistic director and conductor for the 2016 National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra Summer Festival. Chen grew up in Taiwan playing the violin but knew from age 10, she says, that she wanted to conduct. "It was an impossible dream."

Not any more. —Rick Schultz