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New York Philharmonic Names Jaap van Zweden Its Next Music Director

The Dutch conductor will succeed Alan Gilbert, taking the baton beginning in the 2017-18 season

By JENNIFER SMITH and PIA CATTON

As the New York Philharmonic enters one of the most challenging periods in its history, it will have an exacting musician and a dogged fundraiser at its podium: Jaap van Zweden, the Dutch-born conductor who currently leads the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra.

Mr. van Zweden, whose appointment was announced Wednesday, will succeed Alan Gilbert, who plans to step down at the end of the 2016-2017 season. During the following season, Mr. van Zweden will serve as music director designate.



Conductor Jaap van Zweden at a news conference Wednesday at the New York Philharmonic where he was announced as the orchestra's next music director. (Photo: Agaton Strom)

He will then be officially ensconced in the 2018-2019 season, just before the Philharmonic embarks on the planned \$500 million renovation of David Geffen Hall, its home venue at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, starting in 2019.

During the renovation, the Philharmonic faces a homeless stretch: It will perform at alternative venues, risking a loss of audience and identity along the way, even as it campaigns to raise the remainder of the necessary funds. Thus far, the orchestra has publicly announced the \$100 million gift from Mr. Geffen, the entertainment mogul, and \$20 million from board Chairman Oscar S. Schafer and his wife, Didi, to help with the renovation and build its endowment.

With so much on the line, leadership is crucial, said Michael Kaiser, former president of the Kennedy Center and now chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management.

"When people are considering making major gifts, they want to know who is going to be in charge," he said. "They want to know what the artistic perspective is going to be."

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Mr. van Zweden's perspective is rooted in the classical orchestral repertory, though he has also led numerous Wagner operas and has commissioned new work such as "August 4, 1964," composer Steven Stucky's concert drama in honor of President Lyndon B. Johnson's centennial.

A Juilliard-trained violinist, Mr. van Zweden, 55 years old, was appointed concertmaster of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam at the age of 19.



Jaap van Zweden leading the New York Philharmonic in Shostakovich's 'Symphony No. 8' in 2014. (Photo: Getty Images)

He has been music director in Dallas since 2008 and in Hong Kong since 2012. He has appeared as guest conductor at a number of leading orchestras, making his debut with the Philharmonic in 2012.

Asked about his time with the New York orchestra, he described the work as collaborative.

"As a conductor, you have thoughts about a piece. And they have their history with a piece," he said. "If you meet in the middle, that's the moment that you really connect."

He said he hopes to continue to play music by contemporary composers, mentioning in particular a new violin concerto by Esa-Pekka Salonen, the composer and conductor currently in the midst of a three-year stint as the Philharmonic's composer-in-residence.

Many in the field believed Mr. Salonen would be the Philharmonic's next leader. While he would have been a familiar name, Mr. van Zweden brings a "big wow factor," said Jesse Rosen, president and chief executive of the League of American Orchestras.

"He is a big musical personality," said Mr. Rosen. "His concerts are thrilling."

Known as a perfectionist who doesn't mince words, Mr. van Zweden has raised hackles among some musicians in Dallas, who have publicly criticized his abrasive style.

"At times maybe, he created tension where there didn't need to be tension—pressing musicians who already have high expectations for themselves," said Ken Krause, president of the Dallas/Fort Worth Professional Musicians Association. "But they had great moments of music making."

Asked about his taskmaster reputation, Mr. van Zweden said, "I am a big believer in discipline because it gives you freedom at the concert. It's all about music. It's all about the outcome."

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Alessio Bax, a piano soloist who has performed with Mr. van Zweden on multiple occasions, said the maestro will “definitely get the respect and the best of the players.”

“A lot of conductors let things go in rehearsal and think that they will step up in the concert,” he said. “He wouldn’t let things go in rehearsal if they are not perfect.”

On the financial front, the maestro was “a ferocious fundraiser” who brought the same intensity to the task that he brought to the podium, said Jonathan Martin, president and chief executive of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. “It lights him up when he is able to share that with people and almost evangelize about it.”

Joseph Polisi, president of the Juilliard School, said that in conducting the school’s orchestra, Mr. van Zweden exhibited a sense of community.

“He’s not someone who is going to conduct the concert and then you can’t find him,” said Mr. Polisi. “He’s a progressive person about reaching out.”

In 2014, Juilliard and other conservatories joined with the Dallas symphony on a program to nurture exceptional violin students as the next generation of musical leaders. Known as the DSO/Jaap van Zweden Scholars, the initiative was based on a need Mr. van Zweden felt as a young musician.

“He told me many times,” said Mr. Martin, “that he wished he had had some guidepost for his career development.”

As he bids farewell to Dallas, he will leave one major guidepost for others, said Mr. Martin: “His single biggest achievement was building the quality of the sound of this orchestra through relentless adherence to standards and basics.”