

# Carving out his future

Conductor Jaap van Zweden exceeded expectations with his Asian Ring cycle – can he do the same when he takes the helm at the New York Philharmonic? Neil Fisher visits the Dutchman in Hong Kong and encounters a bold, pragmatic musician who seems ready for the challenge

Leonard Bernstein was the one who pushed Jaap van Zweden off the diving board. The Dutch violinist had a gold-plated job in orchestral music as the concertmaster of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Then Bernstein, on a tour with the orchestra in Berlin, asked van Zweden to take the rehearsal in the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No 1 so that he could 'do the hall' – check the acoustic and the balance. The Dutchman tried to protest. 'I said, "Lenny, I've never conducted",' he recounts. 'He said, "Yeah, I know – just do it". And to say no to him was dangerous.'

It was not exactly a 'star is born' moment. Bernstein's comment on van Zweden's conducting debut was: 'That was pretty disastrous.' Yet he also told him: 'I think you should take it seriously – I see something there.' Van Zweden waited a few years, 'but his words started to live more in my life'. He decided to take the plunge and swap the violin for the baton permanently. His father was aghast, arguing that his son had a great job and one that came with a great pension at that. 'I said, "Look dad, I'm not born for a pension". This was my moment to take a chance.'

The symmetry this September is satisfying. Van Zweden is taking up the position of Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, America's most venerable orchestra, the oldest of the 'big five', and he is following in the footsteps of one Leonard Bernstein. What's more, it is Bernstein's anniversary year: the composer-conductor is being feted for his contributions to music theatre, symphonic music, education and, of course, some towering interpretations of big chunks of the repertoire.

Bernstein remains a touchstone for New Yorkers – even though he was not universally admired during his tenure in the 1950s and '60s. He did, however, make the Philharmonic a central fixture of the New York cultural scene. Today the Philharmonic appears somewhat rudderless, hampered by a problematic hall – the refurbishment of which has just been drastically scaled back – and an ageing subscriber base. Classical music is not keeping up in the battle to entertain the city's public and grab their dollars. Other US orchestras – including Johnny-come-latelys such as the LA Philharmonic and the Minnesota Orchestra – are creating more waves nationally and internationally. By stepping into the New York bearpit, the 57-year-old van Zweden is taking a risk, and the orchestra is taking a risk on him. Will it pay off?

To try to find out, I've travelled thousands of miles in the opposite direction to New York. Since 2012 van Zweden has been the Music Director of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, a job he initially combined with being Music Director of the

Dallas Symphony Orchestra (ahead of starting in New York, he stood down from the Texas orchestra in May). Brought into the Hong Kong Phil to raise standards, his flagship project has been a *Ring* cycle, the first to be played by a Hong Kong or mainland Chinese orchestra, with each opera performed in concert a year apart, all recorded by Naxos (the label is based on the island). I was there for *Das Rheingold* in 2015 and returned to see Siegfried bumped off, Valhalla burnt down and the Rhinemaidens frolic once more in *Götterdämmerung* in January this year. This fourth and final instalment will be released in November, alongside a box-set of the complete cycle. The orchestra, good in *Das Rheingold*, if working desperately hard, sounded transformed in *Götterdämmerung*. 'It's made me really proud to have been on this journey,' says van Zweden.

'The orchestra has changed dramatically because of this *Ring*. One of the most important things they've learnt with this music, more than anything else, is that you cannot just focus on your

own part. You need to know what the other players are doing.'

This was also van Zweden's first *Ring*, so it was a journey that conductor and orchestra were taking together. 'I had done *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, but the *Ring* is so different from all the other operas of Wagner. It needs a different technique because it's darker than the other ones. Especially with *Götterdämmerung*, which demands an incredible "shape" from the orchestra.' He is talking about unanimity of ensemble but also elasticity. 'For instance there isn't one bar in the same tempo, so you really need to know what the singers are singing *about*, why they are going forwards, why they are holding back. The flexibility of the orchestra with this opera is needed more than in any opera of Wagner.'

What is the message of the *Ring*? Does van Zweden dare to distill it? 'There's one sentence in *Götterdämmerung* when Hagen talks about power ... and I think that says it all. It's about power. All the time. Who is on top of who.'

Van Zweden is thought of as a tough taskmaster in rehearsal, even a disciplinarian. Some musicians in the Dallas Symphony Orchestra complained of being 'brow-beaten excessively' by their Music Director but there was no doubt that he brought renewed vigour to the orchestra, as shown on record in powerful recordings of Mahler's Third and Sixth symphonies.

In Hong Kong the *Ring* was partly a challenge to the players, van Zweden says. 'The *Ring* was necessary for the orchestra. I thought it could change the orchestra tremendously and it did. And with the same people there! There is not one single new

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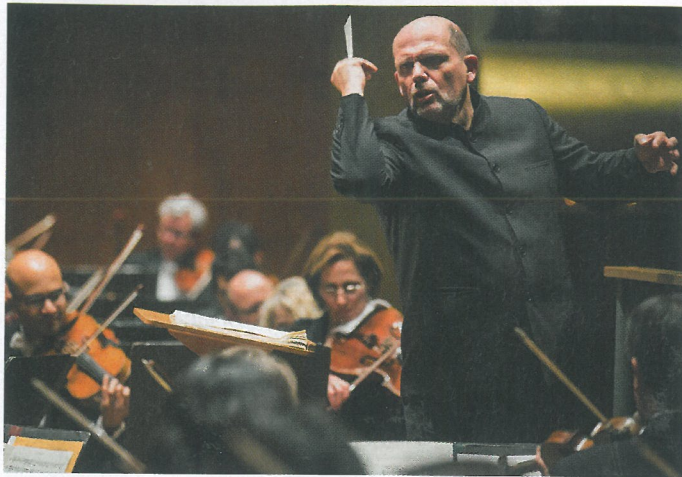


player since *Das Rheingold*, and that's an achievement. It's very easy for a Music Director and an orchestra to just replace its weaker elements, but that's not why we are here. We are here to be a family and to make each other better and that's what we did. And the people who were not as strong four years ago as they are now should celebrate that. Because everybody is on a top level and I am not afraid to say that this orchestra can be compared to any top German or American orchestra.'

That's a bold statement, but tested against a frequently electrifying, vividly played *Götterdämmerung*, it's not one that's been idly uttered. The only real quirkiness of this Asian *Ring* cycle has come in the multiple castings of key characters, who have – due to administrative rather than artistic reasons – changed from opera to opera. That said, what's been lost in continuity has been made up for in thrilling contrasts: the

third Brünnhilde fielded by the HK Phil, Gun-Brit Barkmin in *Götterdämmerung*, had never sung the part before but was fearless and exciting. Matthias Goerne's Wotan – one of the few singers who remained on board throughout the cycle – is also a collector's item, if an unusually introspective take on the part.

I ask van Zweden about the different challenge of inspiring his 'other' orchestra, the Dallas Symphony. He replies instead with an anecdote about the New York Phil, one that illustrates the dangers of looking back to a performing tradition, of resting on one's laurels. 'In one of my first weeks with the Philharmonic we did Mahler 1 and the orchestra were talking to me about the tradition of the bowings of Lenny [Bernstein]. And I said to them, 'How interesting!' Because these are not the bowings I remember from playing in the Concertgebouw



Van Zweden conducts the New York Phil at David Geffen Hall in 2016

Leadership is one way to beat off the competition. Not just his own, but from the Philharmonic's new President, Deborah Borda, a New Yorker who was transformative at the LA Philharmonic and was wooed back, van Zweden says, partly through a direct approach from him. 'It was not easy to get her but I had to do it.' That her first big decision was to put the brakes on a \$500m total renovation of David Geffen Hall was a necessary climb-down, he argues, because

*'To be criticised in New York feels normal. But if I read something which I think is right, I can take that with me'*

fundraising for the redevelopment would have come at the cost of donations to the orchestra, leaving the Philharmonic 'on its knees'. Perhaps because he has had years playing in the dry, box-like Hong Kong Cultural Centre, he is also much more enthusiastic than others about the Geffen Hall. Plenty can still be changed there, he argues, without a gut renovation. 'And I think the really great orchestras should create their own acoustic.'

Van Zweden has been unfavourably contrasted with his predecessor at the New York Phil, Alan Gilbert, when it



Conducting the New York Phil and soloists Simon O'Neill and Heidi Melton in *Die Walküre* in February this year

comes to his appetite for contemporary music. Not only is this unfair, he says, but contemporary music is 'one of my real pillars for the New York Philharmonic in the years to come'. It's also there in his own track record, he says. 'I was at the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic for six years and the key job was presenting new music.'

When he began the 2017-18 season in New York (as Music Director Designate) he programmed Philip Glass's Concerto for Two Pianos, the first time that Glass's music had been played by the orchestra. 'The New York critics were already criticising me about not doing enough new music. Then I got to New York and saw that Philip Glass, 80 years old, had never been played in New York by the Philharmonic! How is that possible? They have an icon living their own city, never been played. So I said, "Enough".'

His first season as Music Director kicks off this September with a new work by Ashley Fure: she's a 30-something experimental composer who rarely sticks to the script, so this is quite a statement of intent. Perhaps understandably, van Zweden speaks more confidently about a new concert work by his compatriot Louis Andriessen, *Agamemnon*, which he was also instrumental in commissioning. 'He's not very keen on writing for large orchestras so it was a challenge to get him to write for us ... he's such an inspiring guy for a generation of musicians and audiences.' A post-minimalist bridge connects Andriessen to another composer, the New Yorker David Lang, whose opera *prisoner of the state* is a contemporary take on Beethoven's *Fidelio*. 'He's finishing it now. I asked if I could hear some of it, and I was completely mesmerised by what I heard. I can't wait to start work on it.' There are three other world premieres, including works by another Manhattanite, Julia Wolfe, and a piece by the prodigious 24-year-old Conrad Tao, who has already clocked up premieres for van Zweden in Dallas and Hong Kong. 'I'm more and more intrigued by this young man, he's an amazing talent.'

*The New Yorker's* music critic, Alex Ross, assessing the all but impossible brief awaiting any Music Director of the New York Phil, was pithy about the predicament: 'No matter who is in charge, a cadre of skeptics, including a fair number of the players, will believe that someone else could do better.' At least van Zweden is going into the job with his eyes wide open – and a rather humble philosophy. 'To be criticised in New York feels completely normal,' he says. 'We all raved when Lenny

Bernstein came to the Concertgebouw about his Mahler symphonies, but when you look back many actually said, "Oh it was over-exaggerated, self-indulgent, bla bla bla". Then there was Boulez [Bernstein's successor in New York] who was more strict, and then they said, "Yeah, it was boring". So there's always something. But if I read something about my concerts which I think is right, and that I can take with me for the next performance, then it means I can actually learn something. Because I think I can always learn.'

And will he know when he has made a difference – how will he gauge success? 'In the end', he replies, 'being a good or great conductor is not so difficult. It's much more difficult to be a good father for your orchestra. And the players need to feel your respect every day.' **G**

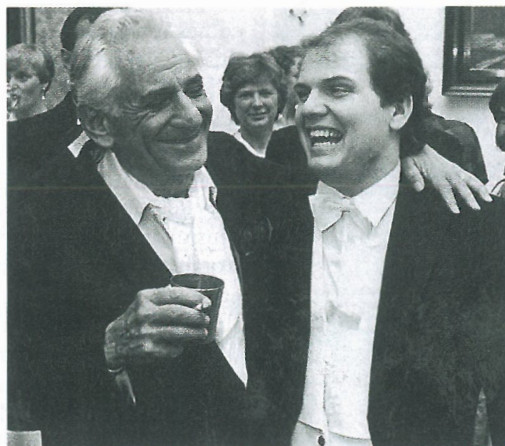
when Lenny was conducting Mahler 1. So a tradition changes every day, and every time a new conductor comes in, but you don't notice it.'

It's hard not to think of the words of another New York Philharmonic Music Director, Gustav Mahler: 'Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.' Van Zweden agrees, referencing two of the greatest ensembles in the world. 'I don't know any orchestra that works so hard as the Concertgebouw or the Berlin Philharmonic to keep their traditions alive.'

His relationship with the New York Philharmonic is based more on chemistry and results than sharing a lofty vision, he suggests. I put it to him, as has been floated, that the orchestra doesn't like big 'talkers'. He chews it over. 'I think the Philharmonic likes instinct, absolutely ... but at the same time it's a very intellectual orchestra, with a huge, powerful knowledge on their shoulders. But talking a lot is really only possible when you have 10 rehearsals like Harnoncourt would have with the Concertgebouw.'

These rehearsals came with scholarly lectures – 'fascinating' – but at the cost of technical preparation: 'The concert came and we were shaking in our chairs because we did not know how he was going to conduct us,' he recalls. The lesson is: 'When you talk a lot, it's dangerous not to be ready.'

So van Zweden is a doer and a pragmatic one at that. His most frequent appearances in *Gramophone* early on in his conducting career were in reviews of his complete survey of



Van Zweden with Bernstein, who persuaded him to conduct

the Bruckner symphonies with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic: quite a way of immersing oneself in a new career. 'Well, when you start to conduct at the age of 38, you have to learn some new music and I didn't want to make the mistake of waiting for certain pieces.' Plus, he did know these symphonies – but as a concertmaster, playing under the baton of Eugen Jochum, Bernard Haitink and Riccardo Chailly. The results, as many *Gramophone* critics have noted, have a refreshing clarity, even a kind of levity in the multiple orchestral textures, which van Zweden acknowledges. 'I love

the details in Bruckner more than the big lines – we all know the big lines, but what is it that's behind them? And if you would say what kind of man I am, I am a man of details. There for me is the real treasure.'

Back to the mission awaiting him in Manhattan. He seizes on a salient problem when it comes to beefing up the New York Phil's standing: there are plenty more orchestras poised to grab the attention.

New Yorkers have regular opportunities to grade their home band at David Geffen Hall (formerly Avery Fisher) against touring ensembles rolling in and out of Carnegie Hall. 'Every week there is a world-famous orchestra,' he points out, 'whether it's Berlin, the Concertgebouw, the LSO, Chicago Symphony, Cleveland ... they're all coming in and playing really prepared programmes. It's not the Olympics but people always like to compare, so the pressure is there.'

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Jaap van Zweden puts the Hong Kong Philharmonic through their paces in *Götterdämmerung*, the final instalment in their Ring cycle which has been recorded for Naxos