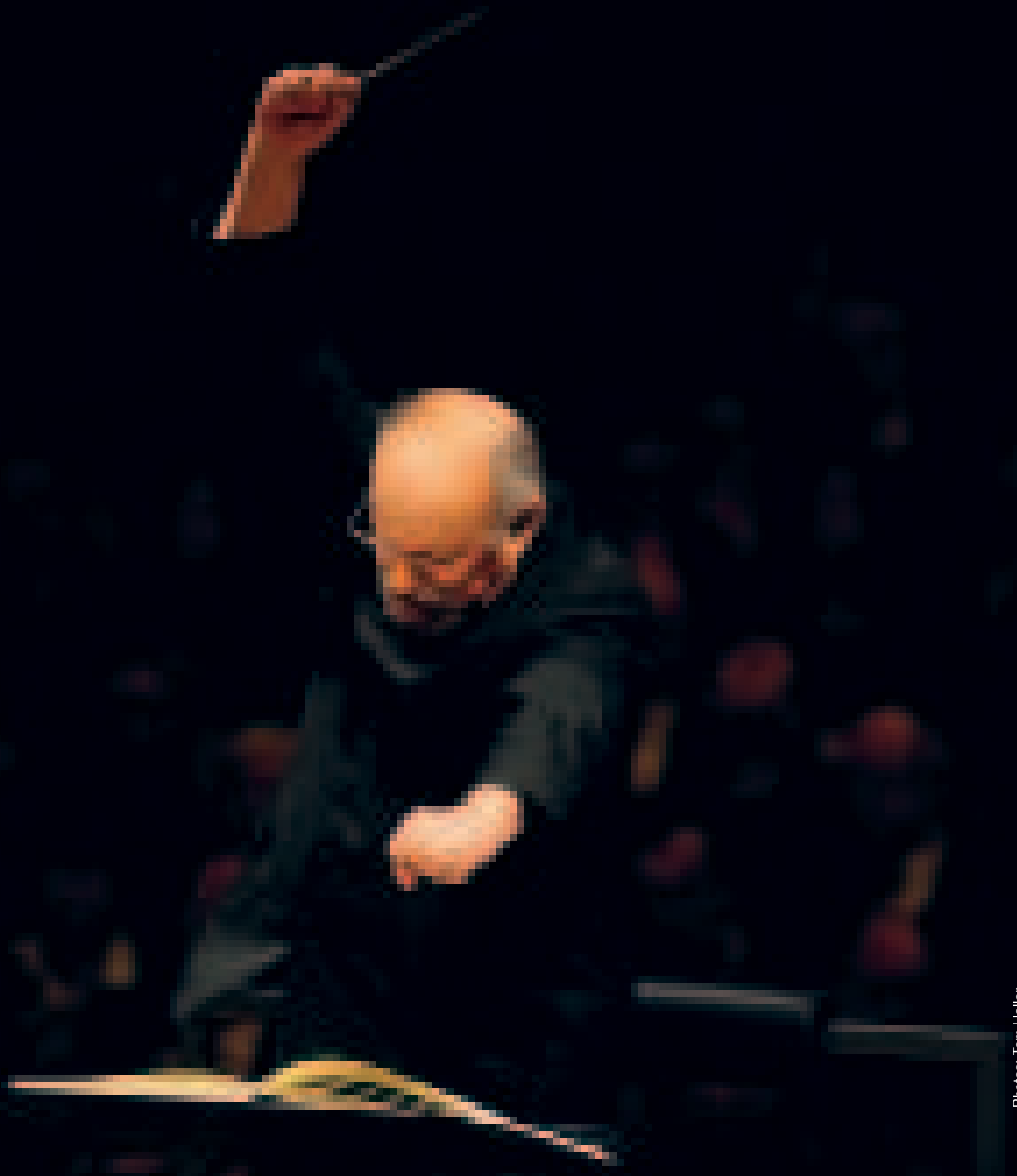


INTERVIEW WITH TWO WORLD-CLASS CONDUCTORS: DAVID ZINMAN AND LIONEL BRINGUIER

▶ “BEETHOVEN CALLING”

What's the difference between passion and profession? None, according to David Zinman and Lionel Bringuier, the present and future Chief Conductors and Music Directors of the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich.



Ruth Hafen David Zinman, 2013 has been a musical annus mirabilis, a year full of anniversaries: Wagner, Verdi, Britten. For you, another name has been even more important – Igor Stravinsky. His “Rite of Spring” premiered in 1913, conducted by Pierre Monteux, and you were Monteux’s assistant when he conducted it in 1963 for its 50th anniversary. In June this year, you conducted it for its 100th anniversary. This music has accompanied you for more than 50 years now. How has your approach to this work developed?

David Zinman When you’re young, you learn a piece, you conduct it, but you don’t live with it. In this case, I had a chance to live with it for a long time. In 1963, I prepared the piece for Monteux with the London Symphony Orchestra. I was 27 then. Over the years I’ve conducted the piece off and on, every four, five years. So by the time I got to the 100th anniversary, I was quite familiar and comfortable with it, and had developed very strong ideas about it. I was also very fortunate to have the chance to conduct the first performance of the autograph that had lain in the Paul Sacher Foundation for many years. I had the opportunity to work with the very first creation of what he actually wrote down 100 years ago – warts, mistakes and all.

◀ “Probably like giving birth”: this is how David Zinman feels after conducting Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring”.

— **Was there something that surprised you?**

David Zinman There were many things that surprised me, of course. But the most surprising thing was how almost perfect it was. He made many changes over the years, the last version dates from 1967.

— **Would you have liked to ask him something?**

David Zinman Of course, everybody would like to ask him about it, but I don’t think he wanted to talk about it so much. In many interviews he said, “Don’t ask me about that, I’m writing something else.” Most composers are a little like that. This piece was a kind of albatross around his neck.

— **You once said that you feel “a kind of terror” with regard to this work. What do you mean?**

David Zinman The piece is about terror, and it places stress on the conductor and the orchestra. If stress isn’t there, then something is lacking. And especially when you get to the end – the piece is an increase in tension, so by the time you get to the end there are these unbelievably tense moments. That’s the terror one feels.

— **How do you feel after having conducted such a work?**

David Zinman It’s probably like giving birth, I don’t know. You just don’t know exactly what you feel. Relief that it’s over. Happiness, if it went well.

— **What was the first music you felt passionate about?**

David Zinman I’ve always felt passion about Beethoven, since I was a young kid. The biggest impression I had was when I heard Beethoven’s “Eroica”. It

was like a blinding light that said, “Wow, this is something very special.” So it started out with Beethoven and then of course branched out to all kinds of other composers.

— **Lionel Bringuier, what was your first musical passion?**

Lionel Bringuier When I was a kid, my family often used to go to the opera house and to the orchestra in Cannes and Monte Carlo, so all of the music I was listening to was really wonderful for me.



DAVID ZINMAN

Born in 1936 in New York, David Zinman first studied the violin at the age of six. In 1961 Pierre Monteux invited him to be his assistant with the London Symphony Orchestra. In 1964 Zinman became one of the youngest conductors with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra in Amsterdam. From 1985 to 1998, he was Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. He became Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich in 1995. Zinman has toured extremely successfully with the orchestra and made many recordings with it. The complete Beethoven Symphonies sold almost one million copies, and earned him the German Record Critics’ Prize in 1999.



LIONEL BRINGUIER

Lionel Bringuier was born in Nice in 1986 into a family of musicians. Having dedicated his early musical life to the cello while studying at the Paris Conservatoire with Philippe Muller, he began his conducting studies with Zsolt Nagy in 2000. In 2004, he obtained his diploma in cello and conducting with "Mention Très Bien à l'unanimité", and was the winner of the 49th Besançon Young Conductors Competition in 2005. He made his BBC Proms debut at the age of 23 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall, performing Rousset's Symphony No. 3. Bringuier is the Chief Conductor designate and Music Director of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich, beginning in the 2014/15 season.

— **Is there a work you feel so passionate about that you can imagine it to be your companion for the rest of your life?**

Lionel Bringuier It's hard to say because I'm passionate about music in general. Stravinsky is also a favorite of mine. But in general, I am passionate about the piece I am working on.

— **Are there works you have a love-hate relationship with, works you hated in the beginning but decided to do them all the same?**

David Zinman Yes, for a long

time I didn't conduct Shostakovich, Bruckner or Elgar. Later on, I came to love them. It always started out as rejection and then gradually there were one or two pieces where I thought, "Oh yes, I have to conduct this," so I tried to find a way into it. Once I had found my way in, it made me interested in more.

Lionel Bringuier Not really, you could say I'm a musical omnivore. I love contemporary music, but I want to cover all areas of the repertoire, from the Renaissance to our century. When I open a new score, I'm always like a kid in a candy shop.

Maybe it's because I'm young, but I don't have anything I hate (laughs). I love music in general; I only have a love relationship!

— **David Zinman, you can look back on a very successful career as a conductor. Has there ever been a crisis, a turning point?**

Did you ever want to not be a conductor?

David Zinman There are times when I don't want to be a conductor. That's part of it too. But of course I've devoted my life to it. Not only do I conduct, but I also teach other conductors. I have taken breaks from it, but in general I'm too curious about music and too curious about how to conduct. So that keeps me going into old age.

— **How do you prepare for a new piece of music?**

Lionel Bringuier When it's a contemporary composer, I can meet him and ask some questions. Basically, I always try to keep as close to the score as possible, the score being the direct link between composer and interpreter. The whole

process of preparing is very long. David Zinman has conducted "The Rite of Spring" for over 50 years. Of course I don't have this kind of experience, but there are also pieces I've been conducting for many years, like Stravinsky's "Firebird" or Ravel's "La Valse"; and yet I always feel I learn something. Even if I think I know a piece very well, there's always something new to it – that's what's so fascinating about it.

David Zinman I learn the piece, and sometimes it takes a very long time, sometimes it doesn't take too long. But certainly it starts out with my analyzing it, how it's constructed, why the notes are there. Once I've understood this, the music pretty much enters me and then I know what to do with it. It's a matter of time. Some works I've spent two or three years with before conducting them, others only two weeks.

— **What are the most important character traits in a conductor?**

David Zinman He has to be convincing – that's the most important thing. Of course charisma also plays an important role. When a conductor is lacking it, he has a hard time. He also has to be physically gifted in the way he conducts; his gestures have to be clear. A lot of young conductors don't have that, so they talk a lot. The more experienced ones know they can just do it with their hands.

Lionel Bringuier A conductor shouldn't only act in an authoritarian way. He has to be open, and he should listen to people. I work with the most wonderful

musicians in the world. If a soloist is playing a solo, then it is essential for the conductor to listen. I also think that charisma, the presence on the podium, is very important. That doesn't mean making many gestures. But the most important thing is mutual trust.

— **What are your experiences with cell phones ringing during a concert?**

Lionel Bringuier I've had that experience, but luckily enough, I never had to stop the concert. If a phone rings during an emotionally intense part of a concert, that can break the whole process. If you take, for example, a slow movement of a Mahler symphony and then suddenly a phone goes off, that's of course very frustrating.

David Zinman This is now part of modern life. It happens a lot. Sometimes it happens and you don't hear it because it's far enough away. The people with hearing aids that beep are just as disturbing. Once I was conducting in a rehearsal and I had forgotten to turn off my cell phone, and someone rang me. Of course the orchestra laughed, they said, "Oh look, it's Beethoven calling." Some orchestras impose a small fine where the conductor has to buy them coffee if his phone goes off.

— **How do you deal with setbacks?**

David Zinman You have to find a way to make the best of it. Some things won't work. Some pieces I know I'll get close to, but I'll never be able to do them what I think is justice. You just have to live with that. But you keep trying. What's interesting:

“After a performance I always feel that next time can be better.”

David Zinman

there's never been a performance of a piece of Beethoven or Mahler where I've said, "Oh yes, that's it, it can't be any better." Never. It can always be better. So it's like the horse with the carrot, the carrot is always in front of you enticing you on. After a performance I always feel that next time can be better.

— **Lionel Bringuier, at 27 you're still young for a conductor.**

How is it to work with people, many of whom are quite a bit older than you?

Lionel Bringuier It's true that I'm considered young, but I don't feel that way because I started conducting when I was 14. I've worked with many orchestras since – actually I've spent half of my life conducting orchestras. I realized something when I was only 14: the musicians will not follow a conductor because of his age. They will trust a conductor who knows what he wants and who has strong ideas about the music. But what matters most is always the music. Neither nationality nor age is important. If the musicians feel that we are well prepared, they will trust us even more.

— **Both of you have a strong commitment to contemporary music. How do your audiences**

meet your enthusiasm? And the orchestras?

Lionel Bringuier It depends on how it's done. I think contemporary music is very important because it's the music of our time. In Schumann's day they played only contemporary music, every concert was a premiere and the audience would come. I don't think it would be good to put too much contemporary music on the program. I wouldn't program a concert exclusively with contemporary music. It's important to have a mixed repertoire. People don't want to always hear the same things. It's nice to hear something new as well. Maybe it's comparable to food: it's boring to always eat the same dish, sometimes it's nice to sample something new, maybe even exotic!

David Zinman I think the orchestras are more involved than the audiences. It's challenging for them, and sometimes it's irritating for them as well. I like new music because it's never been done before. The dots on the page are fresh, and you can set your mark. But the audiences are less inclined to take a chance on new music, so you just have to go ahead and do it. Sometimes you succeed, and sometimes you fail.

— **So you'd rather do it in spite of the audience?**

David Zinman You can't say, "I'm not going to do contemporary music because the audience doesn't like it." You can do it in homeopathic doses. You don't have to go out and conduct a two-hour piece that means nothing to the audience but only to you and the composer.

— **David Zinman, you foster young conducting talent, and you, Lionel Bringuier started out conducting when you were 14. However, there are not many young people in the audience.**

How can you pass on your passion for classical music to a wider and younger audience?

David Zinman That's very hard! We have this tonhalleLATE program, which is very popular with young people. But it's difficult to get them to come to the regular concerts. The problem is, they don't have the money and they don't have the time. If it was made easier for them, say, if the tickets didn't cost more than a movie ticket, we'd get more people, and if it were at a time that really helps them, on a weekend late at night. Most people go first with their parents when they're young, and then they don't go, and when they're about 50, they come back. Essentially, all over the world, the audience starts at 50. Although there's a new audience on the rise in China and Asia in general: they're very interested in classical music, and they're all learning to play the piano and other instruments. I think part of the problem is that people have given up on musical education. When you learn to

play an instrument as a young person, then you're interested. If you play football, you go to see a football game. So the music making within the family has gone away in our lives. Of course you can get all the music on your smartphone or on YouTube. But you'll miss the social interaction of a concert.

Lionel Bringuier When I finished my contract with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and also with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León in Spain, we had many more young people than before I started. In Spain I created an academy for young musicians to join the orchestra. But I think it's important to have people of all ages. Maybe it's a question of habit, as David mentioned. If you go to a classical concert as a kid, you keep going. So it's my role to go and meet this younger audience. I have many ideas on that subject, but it's still too early to announce. So stay tuned!

— **David Zinman, how would you summarize your career as a conductor?**

David Zinman I've pretty much gotten to do everything I wanted to do. I've recorded the basic repertoire: Beethoven's symphonies, Mahler's symphonies, Schubert's symphonies, Schumann's symphonies. I've had a very varied and enjoyable career with music. One thing I haven't done a lot of is opera, and in a way I'm very fortunate not to have to go through that anymore (chuckles). But other than that, I've done what I've wanted to do. At the end of my career I've had the wonderful Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, which

has gotten better and better. And that's really important.

— **The Tonhalle Orchestra has become your creature.**

David Zinman Yes, until the next person takes over.

— **Lionel Bringuier, you are this next person. Under David Zinman, the orchestra has risen to international renown. I can imagine that it must be quite difficult to take over the baton.**

How do you prepare for this?

Lionel Bringuier I wouldn't say that "difficult" is the right word. It's very exciting. To become music director of one of the best orchestras in the world at 27! I feel totally ready because I have quite a lot of experience despite my young age. I have worked for six years with the Los Angeles Philharmonic with two wonderful music directors, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Gustavo Dudamel; I have also worked with amazing guest conductors such as Lorin Maazel and Herbert Blomstedt. I have learned a lot and also taken responsibility. All over the world orchestras have young music directors. Sometimes we forget that Zubin Mehta became music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic when he was 26. So no, I don't feel any pressure.

— **Fifty years from now, what would you like to be able to say when you look back on your career?**

Lionel Bringuier So far, I've always been able to do what I love. Music is my passion. Of course I hope to be making music in 50 years' time, working with orchestras, meeting audiences. I have the feeling that Zurich is going to be a very important part of my life. ●

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