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# Classical MUSIC

## Yannick Nezet-Seguin

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# Audience seduction

*Valery Gergiev's may be big boots to fill, but the thirtysomething Yannick Nézet-Séguin is looking remarkably comfortable at the helm of the Rotterdam Philharmonic. He talks to Andrew Stewart*

Long before Yannick Nézet-Séguin's consonant-rich name registered with audiences beyond his native Montreal, those with the ears and eyes for spotting podium talent had already placed a watching brief over the effervescent conductor. Askonas Holt, struck by the young French Canadian's work as artistic director of the Orchestre Métropolitain du Grand Montréal, added the young man to its books and secured his European debut in Toulouse in 2004. The Nézet-Séguin career story since has unfolded at near-breakneck pace. Regular guest appearances with the Dresden Staatskapelle, a widely acclaimed opera debut at this year's Salzburg Festival and the prospect of first outings at the Metropolitan Opera and with three of North America's 'Big Five' orchestras, all underline the extent of the 33-year-old musician's progress.

Nézet-Séguin's notably hype-free rise has led to appointments as principal conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, where he officially took over from Valery Gergiev last month, and principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic. The managements of both bands appear, if critical consent is any measure, to have picked a winner. That they did so based on impressions formed respectively during two Rotterdam dates and a single performance at the Royal Festival Hall speaks volumes for the musicianship, competence and personal charm of a conductor who learned his trade not in the classroom but in the real world of concert giving.

As a first-study pianist, Nézet-Séguin resigned from Montreal Conservatoire conducting lessons after a year. Dates with the vocal and instrumental ensemble he co-founded as a teenager, La Chapelle de Montréal, fed his musical education while providing insights into programme building, audience development, backstage diplomacy and decision making. The ensemble's youthful membership and its diminutive conductor connected directly with college kids and youngsters only rarely seen at Montreal Symphony Orchestra concerts or in the city's opera house.

"There was a place for that in Montreal, given to us because we wanted it badly enough," Nézet-Séguin says. "I did my first *St Matthew Passion* when I was 24 and just conducted three performances of it in Rotterdam this

Bristling with energy and raw emotion:  
Yannick Nézet-Séguin

Easter, made possible partly by that early experience. I was given a chance in Montreal because there was so much going on. But I also had to create my chances, too. Growing up in the choral music world, taking rehearsals and making things happen, helped me develop step by step.

The matter of developing audiences in stepwise fashion is clearly on Nézet-Séguin's mind soon after taking his official bow as principal conductor in Rotterdam with a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. That concert and others before the orchestra's summer break drew positive and welcoming reactions from the Rotterdam audience. 'There was no sense of resistance or reservation, "because he is not Gergiev" or whatever. There was a wholehearted feeling about that.' He goes on to set out his conviction that an orchestra's artistic direction should lead audience development rather than follow the needs of marketing and sales. 'Of course I will have to discover what the audience is like in Rotterdam. Yet the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that the most important thing is to build trust into the relationship we have as performers with our audience.'

Many soloists, he continues, have proved the point in recent years, setting a precedent for the younger generation of conductors. 'This has a little bit to do with the star system, clearly, but it goes beyond that. As conductors, we should retain that feeling of closeness with our audience. It's a question of ensuring they can trust the choices made by conductors and orchestras, and are prepared to follow those choices. That's my thinking for the next few years of repertoire planning in Rotterdam, so we can bring together those different audiences for Beethoven, for Janáček or Boulez, for Bruckner and Mahler. I know we cannot please everyone, but we need to build repertoire bridges and gain that trust. That's impossible to do by avoiding works that don't sell – we need to create links between those pieces and the works that do sell and convince our audiences to trust us.'

Nézet-Séguin says he expects to develop audience trust steadily in Rotterdam and with the LPO. The repertoire for his first Rotterdam season underlines the point. In general he has avoided the heavyweight Russian works favoured by his predecessor but without 'depriving the players of core repertoire'. Bruckner and Mahler are on the cards for 2009/10 and beyond, together with a fair spread of new and unusual compositions. Above all, he is determined to take players and audiences with him in terms of repertoire and interpretative approaches. 'Like commanding a big ship, it's a question of varying the angles not too drastically in order to make a big difference in a few years,' he observes. 'I don't see myself as a revolutionary – I like to acknowledge the group's tradition and make it my own with just a few variations.'

The conductor cites two ways of working that he intends to explore further in Rotterdam, one based on his invaluable experience in Montreal with the city's second orchestra, the other on the example of the LPO and its principal conductor, Vladimir Jurowski. Nézet-Séguin suggests that the critical and box-office success of his Orchestre Métropolitain was driven and sustained by the attractive combination of focused musicians performing interesting repertoire, not by an influx of big-name soloists or 'safe' programming. 'It became obvious to people as the years went by that we rarely worked with soloists. That was done deliberately to put the orchestra at the centre of things, not for budgetary reasons or because I am against soloists. No, it was about encouraging the audience to recognise and become proud of the players. The more every orchestra realises that the better.'

He suggests that Vladimir Jurowski's programming with the London Philharmonic and its place within the organisation's wider community and education strategy is very much about fostering audience pride and trust in the orchestra. 'I think that's extraordinarily intelligent and daring also.' Nézet-Séguin says he is eager to promote the trend in his work with the LPO, perhaps by exporting programmes tested in Rotterdam to London and certainly by connecting personally with the widest possible audience. 'It's surely a very good sign for the future that we want to make everyone discover what we have to offer. One has to be inventive to seduce the audience, and that's very important. Why not embark on meeting that challenge of seducing people? You can't do that without being true to yourself and willing to share what you believe in with everyone. Of course, it's easier said than done. But it should be the motto.'

The programme for Nézet-Séguin's first London Philharmonic concert as

principal guest conductor, given on 10 October, is definitely not lifted from the shelf of convention. That said, it avoids novelty for novelty's sake, placing trombone concertos by Jan Sandström and Leopold Mozart between the familiar ground of Ravel's *La Valse* and the same composer's orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Eighteen months had passed since the conductor gave his only other concert with the LPO. 'It feels strange that I haven't had any contact with them since then, but it makes that second concert with them more exciting.' Haydn's first cello concerto and Bruckner's seventh symphony, serious tests for the partnership between conductor and orchestra, supply the programme for Nézet-Séguin's next LPO programme on 11 February. Brahms' *A German Requiem* is in the diary for 4 April, with a concert of mainstream masterworks by Mendelssohn, Rachmaninov and Dvořák capping his first season in the principal guest's job on 27 May.

In advance of his London Philharmonic return this month, does the new principal guest conductor feel under pressure to prove himself to the orchestra? 'The pressure is always there,' he replies. 'We have evolved as musicians since then – I have certainly gained so much more experience in that time. I'm more excited than frightened, but I would be silly to negate completely the feeling that here is this second date coming after a long gap. But it's good to have this intriguing mystery and an unknown quantity in human relationships, you know. Some people think I've been catapulted to these important positions, that Rotterdam and the London Philharmonic represents a big jump. In a way, it is a big jump. But my background since my teens has prepared me for it and, even though it is like a dream, everything that has happened feels very organic. I'm not such a beginner! That helps me to feel confident about what I'm doing now.'

“ One has to be inventive to seduce the audience. It's easier said than done, but it should be the motto ”

Although the conductor's Rotterdam Philharmonic tenure got off to a flying start with five local concerts and a two-week Far East tour at the back end of last season, he accepts that he must drive that considerable early momentum forward in order to establish a strong post-Gergiev profile for the orchestra and its new chief. It certainly helps that he's a strikingly different character, anything but a Gergiev clone. Nézet-Séguin, bristling with energy and raw emotion, is more likely to let his players off the leash than his illustrious predecessor. He also has the intellectual and musical depth required to fashion distinctive interpretations that can stand close comparison with the work of others. 'In that respect, the big test was playing Shostakovich's fifth symphony in Rotterdam and on tour. That, of course, is a piece where Gergiev is an absolute master, and the orchestra played Shostakovich Five on their last tour to North America with him.'

The choice was a daring one, he says, glossing the observation by adding that occasional displays of over-confidence are not out of place from a chief conductor. 'Once in a while, you have to make those big decisions! The fact that I could convince in that repertoire, with the inevitable comparisons, makes me very happy. That's not only because of my performance but also because the Rotterdam musicians and audience are open-minded and have the right attitude about that music. I believe it means that I won't have to be compared to another conductor: music is all about remaining personal and using that to reveal fresh angles.'

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