

THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD: THE NEW MAESTRO IN HIS OWN WORDS

Collaboration is a crucial element of the Minnesota Orchestra—from the musicians onstage to the dedicated staff working behind the scenes—and this guiding philosophy is also paramount to the ensemble's 11th music director, Thomas Søndergård, whose leadership tenure begins this September in a series of six historic concerts.

From the moment Søndergård first conducted the Orchestra in December 2021, it was clear that he had bonded with the ensemble on a profound level. After giving the initial downbeat during his first rehearsal he recalls nearly falling off the Orchestra Hall podium. "There was so much energy and focus from the Orchestra, and it was just there from the beginning. I immediately felt a connection. It was a moment I'll never forget."

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—Music Director
Thomas Søndergård

Early in his career, Søndergård played in the Royal Danish Orchestra. For a decade, he worked as both a member of the orchestra and a conductor. But a turning point came in 2005 when he was invited to prepare his orchestral colleagues in rehearsals leading up to the debut of Danish composer Poul Ruders' new opera *Kafka's Trial*. Søndergård would end up leading the opera's entire world premiere production.

"Imagine the day I had to run the first rehearsal, standing in front of all my colleagues," he recalls. "I could have focused on the fact that I am suddenly guiding my friends. I could have questioned myself too: 'Do I have the experience or gravity?' All these thoughts are important in some ways, but if you think too much about these things, you can easily become too nervous. So my major focus was to guide the score that I knew well, and to make sure I had a clear rehearsal plan."

Søndergård explains that those early years as an orchestral player inform his leadership style to this day. "What I discovered...when I was playing in an orchestra is that when things really click between a conductor and an orchestra it is because the conductor has a healthy way of thinking about his or her role that is focused on making music cooperatively."

Listening has proven an essential skill for Søndergård's approach



Music Director Thomas Søndergård

to cooperative music-making, and one he has honed over a lifetime in music. "What is important is to capture what is needed in the moment. The older I get, the more I realize the importance of the ears. It's not about how I talk, how I look, what I show, and what I do not show. The most important role of a conductor is to listen carefully and to quickly decide what is needed."

Søndergård adds that a musical relationship begins not with notes on a page or sounds in the air—but with far more foundational human elements. "I don't think that I can get to a good result with anyone in front of me if I don't start with love and respect," he says. "I know that I am the one in control of the rehearsal and musicians want someone to guide them. That I have no problem with, but it is always with the time signature that is called love."

And so the foundation is set for a new partnership between a conductor and Orchestra that is founded on love and respect. Not surprisingly, Søndergård is optimistic about what lies ahead. "It is an enormous luxury for me to take over an ensemble that is in such great shape and in such great spirit," he says. "It actually feels to me as if it is just about finding the right way to place my arm around the shoulders of this Orchestra, and we will continue the journey that is already so well on its way."

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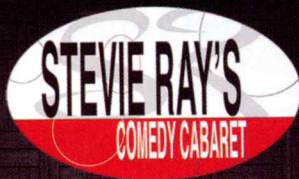
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NEWS

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

MEET A MUSICIAN: NATHAN HUGHES



Minnesota Orchestra musician since:

December 2022

Position: **Principal Oboe**

Hometown: **St. Paul, Minnesota**

Education: **Cleveland Institute of Music,
The Juilliard School**

As a native of St. Paul, do you have early memories of attending Minnesota Orchestra concerts?

I remember going to some inspirational Sommerfest concerts with friends from MacPhail and the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies, as well as observing an open conducting masterclass. These were experiences that allowed me to dream of being a classical musician, and I feel fortunate to have grown up in a community that supports the performing arts, where they are accessible to everyone. The current "Hall Pass" option to get free tickets for young people to come to concerts is a fantastic initiative of the Minnesota Orchestra!

From your many years as principal oboe of the Metropolitan Opera, what can you tell us about the differences between performing operas and symphonic music?

Musicians tell stories through sounds. Opera conveys a very specific story based on a libretto. There are different nuances in this story one can choose to emphasize, but the general idea is given to us. Symphonic music also tells a story, but often the plot is one that has more possible variants, which we musicians need to clarify to effectively communicate with our audience. My hope is in either genre, the audience feels the emotional content of these stories and connects with them in a way

that enriches their own lives.

You will continue to teach at The Juilliard School alongside your position here. What do you find rewarding about teaching?

Classical music is an art form that needs to be nurtured. Teaching has always been an essential part of what I believe makes a well-rounded musician, and it also greatly enhances my performing abilities. I am not only passing along what I have learned to the next generation, but in return, I'm also inspired and challenged and gain a lot of clarity with my own musical insights. In addition to sharing specifics about the oboe, music and creativity, I try to instill other life skills in my students such as self-awareness, communication, listening and professionalism. I'm very proud to have former students in many major orchestras, including the Minnesota Orchestra's new associate principal oboe, Kate Wegener, who starts full-time this winter.

You're also very active as chamber musician and soloist. Why is this important to you?

Seeing the world through another lens is necessary to continue to grow as an artist and ultimately as a human being. Anyone trying to continuously improve their craft knows you need to stretch yourself, keep perspective, be inspired and be pushed out of your comfort zone. I'm constantly fascinated by how different situations will influence what sound I go for, how much vibrato I use, how loud or soft I play, or how I view music. Performing a wide range of music in these various settings and environments on a regular basis helps me stay on point.

What does it mean to you to be selected as the soloist for Thomas Søndergård's first concerts as music director?

It is a tremendous honor to share the stage with Maestro Søndergård as he ushers in a new era for the Minnesota Orchestra. This will also be my first full season as principal oboe as well as my solo debut with the Orchestra. I cannot think of a more meaningful way to be welcomed by everyone and return to my home in Minnesota!

Read an extended version of this interview at minnesotaorchestra.org/stories.