

**When Lahav Shani made his first appearance with us last June he achieved an immediate rapport with the audience. Two months later his appointment was announced, with effect from the 2018–2019 season. Meet our new music director.**

His biography already reads like an epic. Lahav Shani (born in Tel Aviv, 1989) took his first piano lesson at the age of six. He then also learned to play the double bass, he studied orchestral conducting and in 2013, when he was in his early 20s, he won the prestigious Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition. He was already one of the family at the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and the rest of the world got to know him soon afterwards. In the past few years Lahav has conducted such orchestras as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Czech Philharmonic, the Staatskapelle Berlin and the Vienna Philharmonic. When he made his Rotterdam debut last June he won the hearts of our audience and our musicians. When he becomes our music director in 2018 he will be the youngest in the orchestra's history.

We talked with Lahav Shani on a Monday evening in August. The following day our musicians will find out that Lahav is to be their new conductor in chief – an appointment that they advocated in June with striking unanimity. Lahav is very keen to see them again too. 'In all honesty – and I will tell them this tomorrow as well – the first time I was here, in the first break in the very first rehearsal, I called my fiancée from my dressing room. I told her: "I probably shouldn't say this, maybe I shouldn't even think about it. But I really hope they ask me to be their music director. I would be so happy." I had never said anything like that before, but I couldn't hide my feelings.'

*Why was that?*

For quite a while lots of people have been asking me if I would rather have my own orchestra. A bit like parents encouraging their child to get married. But I wasn't in a hurry. I thought, if I'm going to have my own orchestra, I will have to feel totally at home with them. And it was absolutely clear to me, right from the start, that this was the case here. From the very beginning I felt the encouragement from the musicians: ask us whatever you like. I got everything, and more – I discovered again and again that we could go even further together. The possibilities are endless. It doesn't get any better than that as a conductor.

*You already know exactly what you want. You started at a very young age: you were only six when you learned to play the piano.*

Yes, when I took my first formal lesson. But I had started a long time before that. There are videos of me at nursery school, already playing with two hands. Not just the melody, but also the bass line. I was three or four. Music has always been one of my native languages. My father is a choral director, and also plays the cello. We always had music at home. I heard thousands of concerts when I was a child, and I discovered the opera videos we had at home. I was deeply affected by them. In particular I wanted to listen to *Die Zauberflöte* every day. I didn't understand a single word of it, but by the time I was four I could sing along with the whole opera, from beginning to end.

*You also learned to play the double bass.*

That was much later, at secondary school. They had a school orchestra, which appealed to me greatly. I knew all the symphonies and really wanted to play them myself. I decided to play the double bass so as to get into the orchestra. For whatever reason, I felt confident with that instrument. I thought I would be able to master it. And I did: after a few months I was playing Beethoven's Fifth with the orchestra. So I got to learn the repertoire from the inside. I became

leader of the bass section, which was great – but I wanted more. We very often had a conductor who gave me the feeling that I would do things very differently ...

*And one thing led to another.*

I had the same feeling with conducting that I used to have with the double bass: I had never tried it, but I thought I could master it. I never had any fantasies about myself in the role of conductor, in a big concert hall in front of a famous orchestra. All I wanted was to experience that incredible emotional energy of an orchestra as much as I could. So I took the plunge: I auditioned for an orchestral conducting course in Berlin. I had zero experience as a conductor, so I assumed I had no chance – which was probably the best attitude in order to win the place. Everything I have achieved so far has been the result of a combination of meticulous preparation and very low expectations. Except for my debut in Rotterdam: I expected a lot from that.

*Why?*

Maybe it had something to do with Yannick. Shortly after the Mahler Competition I was invited to the Edinburgh Festival and to get to know other musicians there. Yannick was there with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. I attended a rehearsal and was enthralled. I felt such a connection with Yannick and his way of working. We met afterwards. He was – well you know yourself how friendly and charming he is. I was still at the beginning of my career, so he didn't know me at all. But he devoted an hour of his time to chatting with me. I found it really inspiring that a maestro could be so open and natural, without any ego. And I thought, if he has such a rapport with the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, maybe I could have one too.

*And now you are to be our music director. What are you going to do in your new position?*

As many different things as possible – I don't want to restrict myself. This orchestra has a rich tradition with such a wide repertoire. That's just what I want to get my teeth into. Prokofiev, for example. Mahler. Wagner. But also Mozart. I want to play chamber music with members of the orchestra, so as to get to know them better. And I will also conduct from the piano from time to time, as I did at my first concert here. That's good training for an orchestra – playing with someone who isn't conducting the whole time. It really comes down to intuition and having the courage to take the initiative. Not that I need to come and improve the orchestra, because it is already playing at the very highest level. The orchestra should be very proud of itself. There are few orchestras that genuinely have their own style, but this is definitely one of them. I can't easily put it into words, but when you think of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra you hear a particular sound, you have a picture of its character. It's a unique orchestra, different from all others. It's an orchestra that isn't afraid to take risks – I think that's why there's chemistry between us.

## Reactions from Lahav Shani, George Wiegel and Yannick Nézet-Séguin

**Lahav Shani:** 'I am over the moon. From the first moment, I felt a rare click with this orchestra. It is so easy to communicate with these musicians, they respond to the smallest sign. Everything I ask of them, I get, and more. And they love to take risks, just like me: never play it safe, always take it to the limit. The possibilities are endless. It doesn't get any better than that as a conductor.'

**George Wiegel:** 'It is a fine tradition in the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra that we are able to find and retain exceptional talent. I am proud that we are continuing in this vein with the appointment of this unique talent, so young and with so much musical potential. It is fantastic that our orchestra is so unanimously enthusiastic about Lahav as their conductor and so in tune with his way of making music: adventurous, with great devotion and intensely expressive.'

**Yannick Nézet Séguin:** 'I have every confidence that Lahav, with his rare and genuine ability, will continue on the beautiful artistic journey that I have enjoyed so much these past ten years with my precious Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. I congratulate him and offer him a warm welcome to the Rotterdam Philharmonic family!'

### Rotterdam's youngest ever chief conductor

When Lahav Shani joins in 2018, at the age of 29, he will be the youngest chief conductor in the history of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. Thus, the orchestra continues its tradition of searching out and developing exceptional young talent. Yannick Nézet-Séguin was 33 when he began as chief conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Valery Gergiev became principal guest conductor at the age of 36. Eduard Flipse, Edo de Waart and James Conlon were also in their early thirties when they started working in Rotterdam.

### Short biography of Lahav Shani

Lahav Shani was born in Tel Aviv in 1989. He had his first piano lesson at the age of 6; he subsequently also learned to play the double bass. In 2009, he went to Berlin to study orchestral conducting and piano. Four years later, he won the prestigious International Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition. Since then, Lahav Shani has conducted, among others, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, the Staatskapelle Berlin, the Wiener Philharmoniker and the Philharmonia and has been appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra from the 17-18 season.