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The Met and Montclair

by Greg Waxberg

David Chan's schedule is about to become much busier. This fall, the MET Orchestra's Concertmaster is excited to take on a second leadership role as he becomes Music Director of the newly-formed Montclair Orchestra in New Jersey, the first time in his career that he will be a music director.

Upon hearing this news, some music lovers might be thinking, "David is a conductor?" Yes, indeed. "It was a gradual process," he says of learning to conduct. "Gradual" because, during his career as a concertmaster, he has often been asked to rehearse violin sections at conservatories and summer festivals, which led to rehearsing all strings and then rehearsing an entire orchestra prior to a conductor's arrival. "Through that, I've had to cultivate my own conducting skills. At first, I was just kind of 'aping' the whole thing, and then it became a more organized study as I began to think seriously about how to approach it as a craft, rather than just to get by. When working with entire string sections, I needed more conducting technique to get the most out of the rehearsals. Then it became an actual desire to conduct, participating in the shaping of the whole thing and having a greater awareness of the complete score and how all the pieces fit together."



Photo by Marci Clark

As part of his learning curve, David absorbed the expertise of established conductors "who were kind enough to take time with me." He is particularly grateful to former Metropolitan Opera Principal Conductor Fabio Luisi ("a wonderful musician with a graceful and superbly clear technique"), frequent Met conductor Maurizio Benini ("rare and refreshing honesty, musician to musician"), and Metropolitan Opera Assistant General Manager John Fisher ("an excellent conductor and a very fine musician"). Then, of course, there is another significant inspiration, which David explains by way of the violin.

"As a violinist teenager, my model was Jascha Heifetz. I wanted to play like him. I wanted to sound like him. I studied his fingerings. Thirty years later, I'm my own musician, but, without

that sort of model to aspire to, you have no highwater mark that represents the ultimate for you. With conducting, I have been fortunate to play with many great conductors at the Met, and especially to play under one of the greatest maestros of all time, at close proximity, [Met Music Director Emeritus] James Levine. He has been my greatest influence. I have the advantage of observing his technique, the things he says in rehearsals, the way he coaches singers, the things that are musical priorities for him." One overriding musical idea has been "Levine's constant quest for maximum vitality and expression, without exaggeration or disturbing the organic flow or overall architecture. Once you've experienced that sort of degree of intensity and depth of expression, it's really hard to settle for any less."



David conducting l'Orchestre Dijon Bourgogne and soprano Ying Fang (Photo by Jean-Louis Bernuy)

With these years of conducting and musical inspiration under his belt, it's easy to understand why David was eager to expand his conducting and take the next step to music director, and the timing and locale worked well with the "second" incarnation of The Montclair Orchestra (more about that later). "It seemed like a really wonderful opportunity. I live in New Jersey, so this is in my community, relatively speaking. Contributing to the cultural life of northern New Jersey feels like giving something back to the community, and it's not often that you get the chance to participate in something new. It's also a very lucky situation because I have a short commute

that doesn't require a plane ride." Now that he has this opportunity, having been selected from nearly 100 candidates from around the world, David is also anticipating the various other facets of being a music director: leadership, planning, educating himself about new music, and understanding the specific talents of the artists with whom he will be performing.

This new stage of his career begs the obvious question: How will he make time for his commitments? He now has two orchestras—the Met, where he has been concertmaster since 2000, and Montclair—is a soloist and chamber musician, is on the faculty of The Juilliard School and Mannes School of Music, and has a family. "We planned the Montclair season around my commitments at the Met, choosing weekends that would be conducive for me to be at Montclair rehearsals, so I will have a full Met season without any compromise. I have been very careful not to accept as many outside violin engagements as I might have in the past. I am committed to teaching and happen to have fewer students in my studio this year. And my wife [MET Orchestra violinist Catherine Ro] and three children are most important of all."

Being a concertmaster and being a conductor/music director require different types of leadership, but David believes they can only enhance each other. "The biggest challenge in transitioning from violin to conducting," he says, "is the difference in physical response. The effort in your hands while playing versus how you conduct is a different feeling, and that took time to get used to. Also, with conducting, you're not making the sound, and the players themselves already bring a lot to the table. A huge part of conducting is to manage the players' talents in the right way. Some of that is leading them in the right direction and some of it is

staying out of their way. Some is organization of tricky passages. You also need to analyze what might be missing or what might work well. The best conductors have a vision and plan for the entire work, but also listen to what is being given to them by the players."

With that idea in mind, who are the players David will be leading in Montclair? A combination of professionals from the MET Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Orchestra of St. Luke's; freelance musicians; amateurs from the Montclair region; and top music students from local universities and conservatories. The orchestra is particularly pleased about being a training ground for students. "Performing with professionals in a professional setting of condensed rehearsal schedules will better prepare them for the 'real world' of post-graduate training orchestras and their professional careers," says Andre Weker, President and Chairman of The Montclair Orchestra. "Our fellowships for students from music programs at Montclair State University, Rutgers University, Juilliard, and Mannes are more than a simple 'gig,' but a chance to learn from the best."

These musicians are coming together, Andre says, "to fill a musical void in Montclair, a town that boasts numerous cultural resources and many music options, but has been lacking a proper standing orchestra for many years." For history mavens, this is, technically, the second Montclair Orchestra because the first Montclair Orchestra, established in 1922, merged with other musical groups to eventually become the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra.

Working with a new orchestra, David faces some inherent challenges. One is funding, and making it sustainable. Another is creating interest among the community, and making it sustainable. "Some of that is accomplished by innovative programming—doing things that other people aren't doing—and some of it is accomplished by simply being good. There's never any replacement for being good," he says. At the same time, and a likely contributor to innovative programming, David has the advantage of a blank slate, saying, "We can be flexible in our early seasons because we don't know what will be successful. We don't have an established audience and board expecting us to fulfill a preset pattern, so we can try everything." (That to-be-determined success includes venues, a big variable for 2017-18 from the perspective of locations, acoustics, and proximity to dining and parking.)

Intriguingly, while the orchestra is filling a cultural void in Montclair, plans are in progress for the ensemble to collaborate with organizations that already exist in the area, which may account for some of that future innovative programming. On the list are institutions such as



David's wife, MET Orchestra violinist Catherine Ro, and their three children

the Montclair Art Museum and Montclair Film; organizations that focus on underserved communities; schools; and professional orchestras.

David's programming for the first season of five concerts, all of which he will conduct, is intended to accomplish two goals: variations in ensemble size to give the audience a variety of sounds, and unusual, yet logical, programming. As examples of ensemble sizes, the first concert in October, with 80 musicians, includes the overture to Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* and Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*; the concert in March, with 40 to 50 musicians, features the full version of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* with three soloists from the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Program, as well as Shchedrin's *Carmen Suite* with four percussionists playing 24 percussion instruments. The smallest ensembles will be dedicated to Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* and Shostakovich's *Two Pieces for String Octet* in February.

In the "unusual programming" category, David is eager to group pieces together in unexpected ways. In December, the theme of Change will include Pärt's *Fratres* ("change at a glacial pace"), Richard Strauss' *Metamorphosen* ("the motive is varied over the entire piece"), and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* ("change through the year"), with David as soloist. "Most symphony orchestras, when they play *Metamorphosen*, play a gigantic Strauss tone poem on the second half. I've never been to a program where *Metamorphosen* was followed by Vivaldi," he says.

For a variety of reasons, the musicians are excited to come together. Whether for camaraderie, performing with friends, meeting new musicians, playing closer to family, having a new orchestra to play in, providing a learning experience for students—or for all of these or other reasons—they are certain to ensure wonderful and memorable results. In the words of David Krauss, MET Orchestra Principal Trumpet for 16 years, "In this time, one of the great benefits has been hearing David Chan play and lead our orchestra. It was kind of a no-brainer to play in The Montclair Orchestra, and I was happy to be asked. Any performance with David is going to be a great one, and I look forward to playing with and under him."

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