

An array of talented pianists highlight BSO's new season

Thursday Posted at 9:00 AM

By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

Has it really been five years? In March 2011 a young Latvian conductor stepped in for the ailing James Levine at Carnegie Hall, leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra for the first time in a riveting performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony.

A few years later, Andris Nelsons has permanently replaced Levine, bringing his breezy, accessible style to an organization that was desperate for stability and a jolt of energy.

His popularity hasn't wavered since then, and now, about to begin his third full season as music director, Nelsons looks ahead to a new season that features great pianists, multiple premieres, a survey of Brahms' complete orchestral works, and the beginning of a new resident artistic endeavor with British composer/conductor Thomas Adès.

The 2016-17 season opens on Saturday, Sept. 24, with the flamboyant pianist Lang Lang joining Nelsons and the BSO in a one-night performance that includes Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto.

"We have a lot of amazing pianists this season," Nelsons says. "We start with Lang Lang, but later in the year we have Hélène Grimaud coming for the Brahms concertos, and Yefim Bronfman, Mitsuko Uchida, Emanuel Ax, Kirill Gerstein, Radu Lupu. It's a parade of great pianists, and we also start Thomas Adès's artist relationship."

Pianists aren't the only thing that highlight the upcoming season. Continuing to stage opera, Nelsons and the BSO mount Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier," with an amazing cast including soprano Renée Fleming, on Sept. 29.

“It’s not that I miss opera conducting, or that I’m trying to compensate,” Nelsons says, referring to his first conducting job, with the Latvian Opera Orchestra, and his subsequent guest appearances at the Met and at Bayreuth. “But I do want to do more opera concertante. It’s my intention to do it every season, and at Tanglewood.

“The text is crucial in opera, of course, but the balance of the orchestral colors and the harmonies is equally important. It’s a puzzle; there’s moments when the bass is shining, and moments when the soprano is shining, and moments when the harp is important. I try to approach it the same way onstage as I would a symphony.”

Commissions from Eric Nathan, Timo Andres, Julian Anderson, Sophia Gubaidulina, George Benjamin and Matthias Pintscher dot the BSO season. Additional contemporary works from Adès, Terry Riley, Toru Takemitsu, and Jörg Widmann give the season a decidedly modern flavor.

“Here in Boston we have an amazing team with Mark and Tony,” Nelsons says, referring managing director Mark Volpe and artistic administrator Anthony Fogg. “We come together and discuss what we need in every situation—anniversaries, guest conductors, guest artists. Then we build a season. Our commissions are a big part of it, and they are planned years in advance.

“While I’m just as excited to perform a piece like ‘Symphonie Fantastique,’ and show off how this orchestra plays French music, I’m thrilled that we are performing Widmann. And I just got a first score from Eric Nathan, and that work looks great.

“We’ll have a commissioning partnership with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and with Thomas Adès here composing, playing piano and teaching - well, he will be part of the family too.”

The Gewandhaus relationship - Nelsons begins in Leipzig as music director of that orchestra as well in 2017 - will be a trendsetting combination. While many conductors serve as guest conductors around the world in addition to their permanent positions, very few take on two major orchestras simultaneously.

“We have a lot of plans,” Nelsons says of the relationship. “They will always be two great and independent institutions, and it will stay that way. But it’s already started - when we went on tour last year to Leipzig, the BSO musicians immediately felt a friendship with the Gewandhaus players.”

Nelsons has also announced an extension of his Tanglewood commitment, which will now include two weeks at the beginning of the summer season and two weeks at the end.

“I have never really taught,” he says, “and sometimes my presence can be a distraction from the great ideas and thoughts of our guest conductors and teachers. But at the same time I want to be involved, and find a balance between planning and participating.”

The Boston Symphony Orchestra, with Andris Nelsons conducting, opens the 2016-2017 season on Saturday, Sept. 24 at Symphony Hall, with pianist Lang Lang as guest artist. Lang Lang performs Prokofiev’s Third Piano Concerto, and the orchestra also performs Shostakovich’s “Festive Overture” and Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” For tickets (\$95-\$300) call 888-266-1200 or visit www.bso.org.

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