

Gustavo Dudamel, Superstar Conductor, Is to Lead Paris Opera

In a coup, the venerable company has hired as its next music director the rare classical artist to have crossed into pop-culture celebrity.



Gustavo Dudamel rehearsing for his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 2018. He has dipped his toe in the operatic repertoire but is better known as a symphonic conductor. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By [Zachary Woolfe](#) and [Laura Cappelle](#)

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When [Alexander Neef](#) was named the next director of the mighty Paris Opera in 2019, he did not have a particular candidate in mind to succeed the company’s music director, who was leaving after a decade. “I felt I should consult with the musicians,” Neef said by phone recently, “and see who for them, what for them, how for them the future looked like.”

He had made his Paris debut [in 2017, with “La Bohème,”](#) and hit it off. “I felt this connection with the house, the musicians, the choir, with the whole team,” Dudamel recalled in an interview on Thursday at the company’s ornate Palais Garnier theater. “I was here for one month and a half and I was feeling like I was at home.”

Yet it still seemed an unlikely marriage, given Dudamel’s packed schedule and the fact that, even if that “Bohème” was a success, it had still been his only engagement with the company. Indeed, while he has dipped his toe into the operatic repertory in Los Angeles, [at the Metropolitan Opera](#) and elsewhere, he has been largely known as a symphonic conductor.

“But I thought,” Neef recalled, “why not ask?”

That ask eventually resulted in a coup for the company, which announced on Friday morning that Dudamel would be its next music director, starting in August for an initial term of six years, overlapping for much of that period with the Los Angeles position, where [his current contract](#) runs through the 2025-26 season.

The appointment marks a turning point in the heady career of an artist who made his name as a wunderkind with orchestras in North and South America and is now, at 40, taking the reins at one of Europe’s [most venerable opera companies](#), founded in 1669 as the Académie d’Opéra by Louis XIV.

Dudamel said he had not required much convincing when Neef offered him the permanent position.

“It’s a big and beautiful responsibility,” he said.



Dudamel in the Palais Garnier, one of the Paris Opera's theaters, on April 15. "I have been developing my opera career in the way that I wanted to," Dudamel said. "I took my time." Julien Mignot

Dudamel — who was born in Venezuela in 1981 and was trained there by El Sistema, the free government-subsidized program that teaches music to children, including some in its poorest areas — occupies a unique position in music. He is sought by leading orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic and Vienna Philharmonic. But he also appeared in a [Super Bowl](#) halftime show; was the classical icon Trollzart in the animated film "[Trolls World Tour](#)"; is conductor of the score for Steven Spielberg's upcoming film version of "[West Side Story](#)"; and [inspired a messy-haired main character](#) in the Amazon series "Mozart in the Jungle." In 2019 he received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

His renown will surely be a shot in the arm for the Paris Opera, which like other arts organizations is warily eyeing the need to reintroduce itself to its core audience after the long closures of the pandemic, at the same time as it aims to capture new operagoers. Handsomely subsidized by the French government, the company has [expanded its audience](#) in recent years, but still faces the pressure of roiling debates about racial representation and the relevance of expensive-to-produce classical art forms.

“Our future is not validated by our history,” Neef said. “This Covid crisis has put us in a pressure cooker and reinforced and amplified the need to give people real artistic reasons for why we need to exist, why this has value.”

He added that Dudamel was “already a very credible ambassador for that. What he’s done successfully is, he’s broken down barriers.”

It is no longer the norm — especially outside German-speaking countries — for opera music directors to start as pianists and singer coaches and work their way up through the ranks, as [Philippe Jordan](#), 46, Dudamel’s predecessor in Paris, did. While Dudamel lacks that upbringing in the nuances and logistical complexities of the art form, and his operatic appearances have been sporadic, he is not unknown at major houses. He made his Teatro alla Scala debut in 2006, when he was in his mid-20s, and had his first appearance with the Berlin State Opera the following year. He first conducted at the Vienna State Opera in 2016, and at the Met in 2018, with Verdi’s “Otello”; on Wednesday he finished a run of “Otello” in Barcelona.

“I have been developing my opera career in the way that I wanted to do, and I feel very good about that,” he said. “I took my time.”

Neef pointed out that Yannick Nézet-Séguin, 46, the Met's music director since 2018, did not start there with an enormous repertory, either. "The question is not about quantity," Neef said. "And these things are a little bit deceptive: When you look at the list of operas Gustavo has conducted, it's from Mozart to John Adams. He's been conducting opera as long as he's been conducting symphonic music."

Asked which works he is most looking forward to tackling, Dudamel replied, "Everything." In Paris this fall he is scheduled to conduct Puccini's "Turandot" and Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro." In addition to mainstream repertory, he said he hoped to work with living composers from Europe as well as North and South America, including Adams, Thomas Adès and [Gabriela Ortiz](#).

He added that he is keen to conduct the Paris Opera Ballet, the company's in-house dance company. Dudamel said his mentor, [José Antonio Abreu](#), the founder of El Sistema, often took him to the ballet to learn about conducting.

"It was part of my education," he said. "Even for my way of seeing the music."

His appointment will involve significant travel between Paris and Los Angeles, but his commitment to the Philharmonic is one Dudamel said he has no intention of curtailing. "I will share my time between the two families," he said. What he will cut back on is guest conducting, a process he said he started a few years ago in order to shift his focus to longer-term projects.

"The way we're going to organize it is the way he works in L.A., too," Neef said. "Long periods that hang together, rather than a lot of travel."

Neef added that Dudamel would be a charismatic and visible link between the company's main stage productions and its educational endeavors. In Los Angeles, Dudamel has contributed to the Philharmonic's robust educational outreach, especially the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, a program inspired by El Sistema that was founded in 2007.

He also continues to also hold the post of music director of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela, but after he [criticized the Venezuelan government](#) in 2017, the country [canceled his planned international tour](#) with that ensemble. While he has not been able to perform with the Simón Bolívar since then, he still works with it remotely and has sometimes met outside Venezuela with groups of its players; during the pandemic he has had sessions with them over Zoom.

His appointment comes two months after the [release of a report](#) on discrimination and diversity at the Paris Opera. The report focused on changes to the repertory, school admissions process and racial and ethnic makeup of the ballet company. At the same time, opera companies around the world have been called on to make their staffs, artists and productions more representative.

Dudamel said in the interview that he would press for that conversation to continue at the Paris Opera over the long term. “Sometimes we pretend to do changes,” he said, snapping his fingers to indicate overly fast decisions. “In that way, you cannot develop something that is strong for the future.”

Neef said that alongside Ching-Lien Wu, the company’s recently appointed (and first female) chorus master, Dudamel’s hiring was part of an effort to change the face of the company’s executive ranks and how it thinks about diversity and equity.

“It’s already what he lives and who he has been in L.A. and other places,” Neef said. “I think there’s great opportunity to be gained from that experience for us, to have someone with that experience at the table at the highest level.”

The next step is for Dudamel to learn French. “I’m starting!” he said, before adding, “I’m very bad with languages.”

One carrot will be the opportunity to finally read one of his favorite books — Rousseau’s “Confessions,” which he discovered as a teenager and brings with him everywhere — in the original. “I will try,” Dudamel said, smiling.



Dudamel pulls double duty in Paris

He's not leaving the L.A. Phil but will join celebrated, troubled opera company.

MARK SWED
MUSIC CRITIC

Gustavo Dudamel will become music director of Paris Opera beginning Aug. 1, the company is expected to announce Friday morning, and Los Angeles will share the conductor with the City of Light for at least five years.

Dudamel, who remains artistic and music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, will join one of the world's largest and most celebrated opera companies. Paris Opera extends across the city in two grand opera houses: the historic Palais Garnier and its main theater, the modern Opéra Bastille. The institution includes a famed ballet company and has a long reputation for progressive staging as well as for political shenanigans.

WITH L.A. THROUGH 2026

For Dudamel, whose L.A. Phil contract runs until 2026, the six-season appointment in Paris further solidifies his connection with Europe. Since marrying Spanish actress Maria Valverde in 2017, the Venezuela-born Dudamel has taken Spanish citizenship and divided his time between L.A. and

Madrid. He also has continued to enjoy favored status with Europe's elite orchestras, such as the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic, as well as with such stellar opera companies as La Scala in Milan and the Vienna State Opera.

It's not an anomaly for a symphony orchestra and an opera company to share a music director. Yannick Nézet-Séguin heads the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Antonio Pappano has been going back and forth between London's Royal Opera and Rome's Santa Cecilia Orchestra (which he will soon exchange for the London Symphony Orchestra). Fabio Luisi's carbon footprint is measured by commutes between Zurich Opera, the Danish National Symphony and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

In fact, given Dudamel's increasing operatic activity, which has included operas as well as opera-themed programs at Walt Disney Concert Hall and operas in concert at the Hollywood Bowl, a position with a major opera company has been all but inevitable. He just finished conducting Verdi's "Otello" in Barcelona this month.

"I am incredibly inspired and excited by Dudamel's appointment in Paris," L.A. Phil Chief Executive Chad Smith said in an interview, taking great pride that "the L.A. Phil

provided Dudamel with the opportunity to grow into a major opera conductor."

"With Paris as a place where Dudamel can delve more deeply into opera, it creates a perfect balance with his orchestral home in L.A.," Smith added.

Dudamel will remain here at least through the 2025-26 season, Smith emphasized, and the conductor will not change the number of weeks he spends in L.A. Dudamel's involvement in Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, which is opening a Frank Gehry-designed center in Inglewood this year and contemplating another one in South Gate along the L.A. River, should only increase.

"The appointment," Smith said, "opens up the possibility for real collaboration with Paris Opera."

Dudamel has had little experience with the Paris Opera, or the city, for that matter. His only appearance with the company was in 2017, conducting an oddball new production of "La Bohème" that launched Puccini's fin de siècle Parisian bohemians as astronauts into outer space. But in his planned comments for a news conference Friday, Dudamel mentioned ideas based on his experience with opera and ballet while at the L.A. Phil. These include introducing the Paris company to John Adams, whose opera "The Gospel According to the Other Mary" Dudamel premiered in 2012. He also will



L.A. Philharmonic

GUSTAVO DUDAMEL
is adding to his duties.

announce a ballet commission from Thomas Adès, whose score for “Inferno” Dudamel premiered with the L.A. Phil two years ago. Among directors Dudamel plans to work with in Paris is Netia Jones, with whom he collaborated for L.A. Phil’s staging of Oliver Knussen’s “Where the Wild Things Are.”

Radio France, clearly anticipating the appointment, ran five 90-minute programs on Dudamel in the last week of January, ostensibly in celebration of the conductor’s 40th birthday. Dudamel’s appointment by Paris Opera’s new general director, Alexander Neef, clearly marks a new vision for a company that traces its beginnings to the birth of the Paris Opera Academy in 1669.

Dudamel in Paris, moreover, adds a new chapter to L.A.’s curious history with Paris Opera that began in 1985. That’s when the L.A. Phil’s legendary executive director at the time, Ernest Fleischmann, suddenly announced that he had accepted the post of head of Paris Opera — only to change his mind 10 days later. Fleischmann got wind of the political nightmare that he would face in attempting to realize his visionary ideals.



Shortly before that, Fleischmann had appointed the young Korean conductor Myung-whun Chung as an assistant conductor to then-L.A. Phil Music Director Carlo Maria Giulini. In 1989, Chung became the Paris Opera's music director for its new Opéra Bastille, which opened in 1990. He was succeeded by James Conlon, who became L.A. Opera's music director two years after leaving Paris in 2004. That's when yet another visionary, Gerard Mortier, took over the company and set out to make Paris Opera an avatar of the avant-garde. Among Mortier's first projects in Paris was a staging of L.A. Phil's "Tristan Project," a collaboration between Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen, director Peter Sellars and video artist Bill Viola. That has led to an ongoing relationship between Salonen and the company.

Still, Dudamel steps into a huge challenge for even a protean conductor. Paris Opera stages about 30 operas a year and gives nearly as many performances as there are days in the year. If he reaches out to predecessors Chung, Conlon and the newly departed Philippe Jordan, Dudamel will surely get an earful about French operatic politics.

Impressive as the government-supported company's \$270 million budget may be, when Stéphane Lissner resigned last year as head of the company, he described it as financially "on its knees."

UP FOR A CHALLENGE

But a new regime brings new promise. Dudamel has rare versatility and the ability to learn new scores with amazing swiftness, as he has often demonstrated in L.A. He has developed relationships with important directors, notably Sellars and Christopher Alden. Seeing Dudamel work in L.A., Neef said in Friday's announcement, played a significant part in his choice. Neef, who was appointed by French President Emmanuel Macron and presumably counts on support from Élysée Palace (for now, anyway), has a history of venturesome opera-making in Toronto — where he commissioned Rufus Wainwright's first opera, "Prima Donna" — and in always-adventurous Santa Fe.

An institution that has lasted 352 years must regularly reinvent itself. "Art," Dudamel planned to tell Paris on Friday, "is the future."

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Gustavo Dudamel to Be Next Music Director of Opéra National de Paris

By [David Salazar](#)

The Opéra National de Paris has announced that Gustavo Dudamel will be the company's new music director for the next six seasons, starting on August 1, 2021.

The Venezuelan-born conductor has led over 30 opera productions including five at La Scala and 13 in Los Angeles with the [LA Philharmonic](#) and LA Opera. Among the operas he has conducted are "[Otello](#)," "[Carmen](#)," "[Tannhäuser](#)," "[Così fan tutte](#)," and contemporary works by [John Adams](#) and Oliver Knussen.

"From the first downbeat, my experience with the artists of the Paris Opera was simply magnificent," Dudamel said in a press release. "The immediate sensation at that decisive encounter – feelings of trust, connection, musicality, and a shared vision – were born from this first meeting in 2017. The exceptional level of the musicians of the Orchestra and the artists of the Chorus and the strong bond that we were able to weave together during the rehearsals and the performances of 'La Bohème' are what made me accept Alexander Neef's proposal."

"His appointment reflects our determination to reach out and commit ourselves to an ambitious project that will continue to enhance the reputation of our institution through opera and ballet productions, along with symphony concerts not only in our theatres, but elsewhere, in a repertoire ranging from classical to contemporary," added the [Paris Opera's general director Alexander Neef](#) in the press release. "His proven commitment to artistic and educational projects and his conviction that culture should be accessible to all will provide new momentum and accompany us in our mission."

In 2009 Dudamel was named Chevalier in the French Order of Arts and Letters and in 2019, he was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.