

## Stéphane Denève Makes a Final Debut – In New York

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By [Amanda MacBlane](#)

New York City is a final frontier for French conductor Stéphane Denève, the popular chief conductor of the Brussels Philharmonic and the SWR Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra as well as principal guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Over eight years with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (2005-2012), Denève achieved the dream – revitalizing and growing the audience all well serving up plenty of 21st-century repertoire.



Conductor Stéphane Denève (Uwe Ditz)

A noted specialist in French music including lesser-known composers like Albert Roussel and Guillaume Connesson, Denève, 43, is known for building rapport with audiences. His genuine and wide-ranging enthusiasm has made him a favorite visitor in Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles, among others. Yet he has only conducted in New York City once, a single performance with the then-leaderless Boston Symphony at Carnegie Hall in 2012 that received a warm but reserved reception.

So the stakes are high for his return to conduct the New York Philharmonic and perhaps even more so following last week's news that the orchestra will be looking to replace Alan Gilbert, who has announced his plans to leave in 2017. Denève brings a program that plays to his strengths: Fauré's *Pelléas et Mélisande* Suite, James MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3 and Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. Yet, for Denève, there is a bittersweet edge to this engagement. "I am a little bit sad because it is the last time that I'll be having a debut," he noted in a phone interview. "I'm entering into the age where I'll only be 'coming back.' It's a strange feeling."

To mark this milestone, Denève is bringing along one of his closest friends (who was best man at his wedding), pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, performing the concerto by Scottish composer James MacMillan, with whom Denève bonded during his tenure at the RSNO. While Denève happily accepted Tchaikovsky 4 (a piece that was ironically rejected as "too popular" by his Stuttgart colleagues), the MacMillan is clearly the bigger jewel for him. "It's just a great, moving piece of music," he said. "It's extremely meaningful to bring these very close friends with me for my debut and to have this piece that we believe in and that we want to make the audience love as much as we do."

As he enters the heart of his career, Denève is eschewing comfort in favor of an ambitious and valiant quest to expand the accepted canon of orchestral masterpieces. “We are the only art form that doesn’t have a production of our time which is as successful as the classics,” he explained. “People still love Shakespeare but they are also very happy to discover the new play from a new writer.”

According to Denève, it is the responsibility of everyone involved—musicians of the orchestra, conductors, soloists and management—“to avoid the trap of only performing a rapidly shrinking repertoire of the past.” He also warns against ghettoizing contemporary music, which fails to help the core orchestral audience get over their prejudices against “modern music,” a semantically fraught term that annoys Denève, who says it is used to include everything going back to Ives 100 years ago.

For Denève, who will conduct at least one 21st-century work on every single program in Brussels this season and who has been inundating his German audiences with Adams, MacMillan, Lindberg and Dutilleux, a good concert contains three elements: one great classic revisited, one rarity from the repertoire and one piece of our time.

To help orchestras around the world with the third element, Denève and the Brussels Philharmonic are starting the Centre for Future Orchestral Repertoire, a centralized database of works written since 2000. Its goal is to identify trends in new orchestral music across the globe and help pan out those golden nuggets that can join their predecessors in the great canon of orchestral masterworks.