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Van Zweden Takes the Phil on a Thrilling Test Drive

November 21, 2016 | By Thomas May, [MusicalAmerica.com](#)



NEW YORK—Four-and-a-half years after making his New York Philharmonic debut, Jaap van Zweden ascended the podium on Thursday for his first concert with the orchestra since being appointed Alan Gilbert's successor. The 55-year-old Dutch maestro's tenure as music director won't begin until the 2018-19 season, but his rapport with the players is already keenly palpable and, in the Tchaikovsky warhorse on the program's second half, positively electrifying.

The concert also included a significant new work: the New York premiere of a concerto for viola by the young Los Angeles-based composer Julia Adolphe. Titled *Unearth, Release*, the concerto was jointly commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and the League of American Orchestras for principal violist Cynthia Phelps, who is celebrating her 25th anniversary with the Philharmonic.

Phelps—the first musician Kurt Masur hired after his leadership began—was impressed by her encounter with Adolphe's work when the orchestra premiered her short piece *Dark Sand, Shifting Light* during the Philharmonic's first new-music Biennial in 2014. Unusually, the violist arranged to unveil the new concerto in July, ahead of the New York premiere, as part of the Eastern Music Festival in Greensboro, NC. Adolphe then made some readjustments to her score to fine-tune the balance between soloist and orchestra — which, in the case of the viola, presents particular challenges.

It's hard to believe that *Unearth, Release* is only the second work for full orchestra listed in the composer's catalogue, which to date consists mostly of chamber music and a one-act chamber opera, *Sylvia* (premiered at Brooklyn's Bargemusic in 2013). Adolphe, 28, shows a remarkable gift for sustaining a compelling musical narrative. What's more, she brings a gratifyingly original approach to the concerto format. Our era is oversaturated with tiresomely derivative new concerto commissions that seem content to elevate virtuosity over imagination. Adolphe, in contrast, has crafted a poetically haunting meditation that leaves a lasting impression.

In the note prefacing her score, Adolphe writes that over the concerto's three movements "the viola's voice emerges from dark, dense textures and rises towards light, misty atmospheres." What makes *Unearth, Release* so immediately appealing is the composer's command of color and gesture to heighten emotional response—much as the right word, the right sequence, endows a poem with its incantatory power. She avoids the tyro's mistake of cluttering in too much event but instead leaves space for the viola to resonate as the soloist engages in soliloquy and dialogue. The orchestral writing features colors—prominent solos for bass clarinet and English horn, for example—that mirror aspects of the viola's signature dark hue. Stacks of smoldering harmony dot the landscape as the soloist finds her path through the fog.

Nor does Adolphe need to resort to a panoply of extended-playing gimmicks to make her points. Phelps was a deeply involved protagonist, giving eloquent voice to the concerto's rhetorical spectrum, from the theatrical declamation of the opening movement (the longest, subtitled "Captive Voices") to the kinetic accents of the energetic second ("Surface Tension") and the liberating lyrical serenity—translucently scored—of the finale ("Embracing Mist"). Adolphe's narrative structure is especially daring: instead of (predictably) ending with the exciting chase of "Surface Tension," she caps *Unearth, Release* with slow music of tapering reflection.

Van Zweden was alert to Adolphe's nuanced balances of sonority. In the concert's opening work, the Prelude to *Lohengrin*, the conductor was, if anything, too controlling with regard to the slow swelling of Wagnerian ecstasy. He favored the architectural view over local details, refusing to peer or linger until the final measures, when he held a pronounced breath of silence before easing into the violins' stratospheric, final A major chord. In view of his credentials as a Wagner conductor—he's been presiding over the Hong Kong Philharmonic's acclaimed concert *Ring*, with *Siegfried* to come in 2017—it was frankly surprising to hear a performance more competent than inspired.

His tight rein on Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, on the other hand, produced an exhilarating performance. This score is more or less inscribed in the Philharmonic's DNA, so the fact that Van Zweden drew such a sharply etched, purpose-driven account is remarkable indeed. The Judgment Day summons of the opening made it immediately clear that this wasn't to be a rote performance, another rehearsal of the familiar patterns. Again, the big picture was always in view, and here it paid rich dividends: rarely do Tchaikovsky's climaxes in the first movement build with such fearful fury, while Van Zweden invested the lilting rhythm of the main theme with an

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insinuation of catastrophe.

The orchestra was on fire throughout. One could savor the perfection of the unison string playing and the laser-sharp dynamics of the Scherzo's pizzicato ensemble, the woodwind solos dovetailing like exquisite sculptural carvings, and the sinewy clarity of the brass. All of this contributed to the sense of an epic journey, precision engineered to underscore the vitality of Tchaikovsky's vision. Most startling of all was the fierce audacity of tempo and attitude with which Van Zweden had the Philharmonic sweep through the finale. They moved well beyond the merely triumphant, conjuring a whirlwind closer in spirit to the defiant irony of Shostakovich.

Before the concert began, Philharmonic President Matthew VanBesien announced the winner of the \$200,000 Marie-Josée Kravis Prize, Louis Andriessen, who accepted the commission to write a new piece for the orchestra to be premiered during Van Zweden's inaugural season.

Pictured: Jaap van Zweden, Musical America's 2012 Conductor of the Year.

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