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# Listen

## Remembering **Arthur Rubinstein**

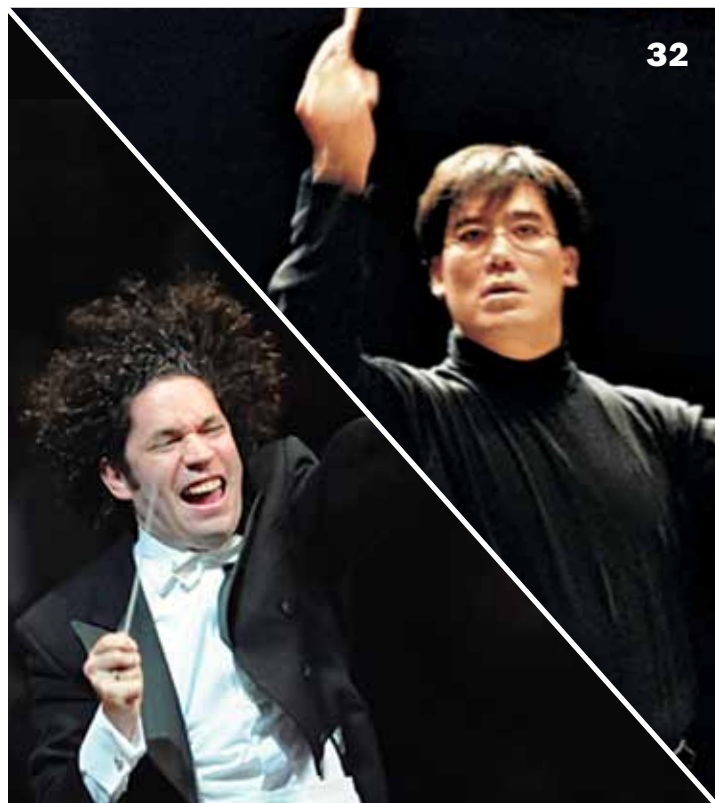
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# East Coast West Coast

Two young maestros  
of New York and Los Angeles  
flex their muscle.

By Damian Fowler





**I**magine a bizarre alternate universe where audiences go wild for chamber music and a performance of a Mozart clarinet quintet is punctuated with whoops and hollers you might expect at a rock concert. Well, that's the kind of reception that Gustavo Dudamel is getting in his new hometown of Los Angeles, where he will begin his reign as music director of the LA Philharmonic later this year. In the City of Angels, it's called Dudamania.

On this occasion, the twenty-eight-year-old Venezuelan conductor is, unusually, playing second violin for an evening of chamber music.





His name on the bill is enough to ensure that Walt Disney Hall is packed to the rafters with fans whose lack of classical etiquette (clapping between movements) is anathema to purists, but gold dust for concert houses in search of new audiences.

Meanwhile, on the East Coast, the New York Philharmonic is getting ready for its new music director, Alan Gilbert, who'll be taking over next season. Like Dudamel, the new maestro is being celebrated for his precocious musical talent: at forty-two years old he is one of the old orchestra's youngest leaders. But don't expect whoops and hollers at Avery Fisher Hall any time soon. Gilbert works his magic with finesse and a quiet confidence, with none of the razzle-dazzle of his West Coast colleague.

The comparisons were inevitable. When the nation's two biggest cities announced their new conductors ("so young," cooed the classical commentators), a jolt of excitement rippled through the music world. Dudamel had already electrified audiences with his guest conducting, not only with major orchestras around the world, but with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, which champions talented young musicians in Venezuela. And Gilbert's more than forty guest appearances with the New York Philharmonic since his debut in 2001 made the orchestra sparkle with a different energy — lush strings, bold colors and clarity. On the podium he's anything but the grand old maestro of the high art tradition. And his presence holds the possibility of more innovation — a dirty word in some circles.

"The past two music directors have not moved that orchestra forward at all," says Mark Swed, the classical music critic for the *LA Times*, referring to maestros Kurt Masur and Lorin Maazel. "But Alan has obviously started to get the machine to move a little bit further."

When I first met Alan Gilbert last year, he was dressed in jeans and sipping a cocktail at the relatively new downtown club Le Poisson Rouge, where — so the tagline goes — art and alcohol mix. It's a club that provides a venue for the progressive end of classical music as well as a stage for sophisticates from the indie music scene. On



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**Young guns.** Gustavo Dudamel (above) and Alan Gilbert (below) take over the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics, respectively, in 2009.

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are in our DNA.  
But it didn't happen by accident.'*

this occasion, we were watching the Israeli pianist David Greilsammer rattle through a program of solo piano fantasies featuring works by Cage, Janáček and Ligeti, as well as Bach and Brahms. Surely it was a good sign to see the maestro-designate of the New York Philharmonic kicking back south of 14th Street?

"There's a lot that can happen in a traditional concert," says Gilbert, reflecting on his excursion to the Bleecker Street club. "But we are living in a new age when people can get their information in a new way. It would be unrealistic and silly to ignore the possibilities of new modes of delivery, new contexts."

So Gilbert is doing what he can to bring a touch of downtown to Lincoln Center. Inevitably this will ruffle a few feathers at the traditionally conservative Philharmonic, which has been reluctant to get too radical too fast lest the subscribers flee in horror. But Gilbert's inaugural season will see more twentieth-century and contemporary fare than usual. The opening night gala on September 16 features Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* but also the world premiere of a specially commissioned clarinet concerto by Magnus Lindberg, who will be the orchestra's composer-in-residence. And Gilbert hopes to lure new — dare we say, younger — audiences with *Contact*, a new-music series that will consist of world premieres of New York Philharmonic commissions from composers such as Nico Muhly, Arlene Sierra and Marc-André Dalbavie.

"There are only two kinds of music, good and bad," says Gilbert, paraphrasing Duke Ellington. (He's a huge jazz fan.) "I would like to achieve a state of affairs where simply putting something on a program means it's worth listening to, whether it's contemporary or not."

In this regard, the Los Angeles Philharmonic is well ahead of New York. The new season under Dudamel will feature the premieres of nine commissioned works; the U.S. premiere of a Louis Andriessen opera, *La Commedia*; residency by the British composer Thomas Adès; and the long-running Green Umbrella series, which celebrates contemporary classical — that is, music by composers who are still alive and kicking. Speaking of which, composer John Adams has been appointed creative chair of the orchestra and will oversee the world premiere of his LA-inspired *City Noir* at the opening

night gala. And no one's blinking an eye at all this brand-new fare.

Dudamel's arrival is a continuation of a well-established tradition of innovation at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, whereas Gilbert will have to grapple with the status quo to bring about change. "We like to say innovation and risk-taking are in our DNA," says Deborah Borda, the president and chief executive of the LA Philharmonic. "But it didn't happen by accident." The outgoing music director, the charismatic Esa-Pekka Salonen, has laid the groundwork over the last seventeen years of his leadership.

"Dudamel is not coming into a vacuum," says Swed. "This orchestra has had enormous success with Salonen, a composer and a conductor who's had a massive effect in creating a sophisticated new audience." In fact, it was Salonen who spotted Dudamel quite early on, at the age of twenty-four. He immediately called Borda and said, "I've just heard the most remarkable conductor. . . . He's a real conducting animal." By the summer of 2005, Dudamel was making his debut with the orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl in front of 18,000 people. Tinseltown and its orchestra were smitten. Since then, a Dudamel concert in LA, whether chamber music or not, has been a big event.

The object of this affection takes it all in stride. "Music is a social art," says Dudamel in his endearingly broken English. "And the beautiful thing is to bring in new audiences — maybe they were thinking, 'What a boring thing to go to a concert' — and to change their mind, you know, to show that they can enjoy the music."

Watching the diminutive maestro put the LA Philharmonic through its paces at a rehearsal of *Symphonie fantastique*, I was transfixed not only by the wonderful sound he stoked, but the exhilarating variety of his physical gestures — one minute using his baton to slay an invisible dragon, the next swaying his hips to a salsa beat (despite the nineteenth-century music). Then his arms were winding up this "wonderful machine," as he calls the orchestra, to such coiled intensity that you could feel the torsion in his body.

Sinking back into a sofa after rehearsal, Dudamel was still throwing off sparks. Sporting a light-blue Lacoste T-shirt and jeans and a heavy gold crucifix on a chain, he could easily be mistaken for a striker on a South American soccer team — an effect further enhanced by his

long, black, curly hair. But as soon as he speaks, it's clear music is his game. "Music is my life, and I can only see my life inside of the music," he says with a sort of hushed reverence that is completely sincere.

For Dudamel, conducting is its own language, one that he started to learn when he was a little boy growing up in his hometown of Barquisimeto: he recalls waving his arms to "all the recordings we had." At the age of thirteen, as a member of the Barquisimeto Youth Orchestra, he put down his violin and picked up a baton when the conductor was late. "I was moving good my hands, and the orchestra was following," he says, smiling. It wasn't long before, at the age of seventeen, he became the lead conductor of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra — the apex of Venezuela's hundreds of youth orchestras and part of a social program known as *El Sistema*.

His precocious talent was soon recognized locally, and later by great maestros of our day — Rattle, Barenboim, Abbado — all of whom have praised Dudamel's instinctive abilities. "Maybe he's like Mozart," says Borda. "The talent is immense and highly developed."

But even Dudamel can't explain the alchemy that happens when he's on the podium. He talks about giving "freedom" to the orchestra to "do what they know." He uses words like "wonderful" and "beautiful," weak proxies for the sublimity he can coax from the musicians, who seem genuinely delighted by their charismatic young leader.

"What does it feel like up there?" I ask him. He pauses, looking for the words to describe the ineffable. Then he finds an analogy, a line in the poem "Piedra de Sol" by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, which he quotes: "*Los siglos instantes. All the centuries in a single moment.*"

"It is like something that happens like this," he says, clicking his fingers. "But you have eternity in this. This is the music." Suddenly aware he might be getting too lofty, Dudamel leans in confidentially: "But you know, you have to enjoy it. This is the secret."

Gilbert agrees there is something sublime and powerful being at the helm of a mighty machine like the

*'I think Gilbert's going to change  
the sound of the orchestra and develop  
his own sound.'*



**Top dog.** Walt Disney Concert Hall (above). Gustavo Dudamel poses with a Dudamel Dog (right) at Pink's in Hollywood.







New York Philharmonic. “I feel a current of energy that the orchestra provides that’s really strong. It’s possible to enjoy it and ride it,” he says, clearly delighted at the thought. “It’s like riding a beautiful horse that understands your every gesture.”

Thankfully, the musicians in the thoroughbred Philharmonic are equally thrilled with the prospect of Alan Gilbert spurring them on (even if one or two moaned publicly when the Italian maestro Riccardo Muti, on some people’s wish list, accepted the top job at the Chicago Symphony). Last year Gilbert and the orchestra blew the dust off the rafters at Avery Fisher with a stunning account of Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben*, clear evidence of the chemistry that’s developed between horse and rider, musicians and maestro. *The New York Times* raved about the performance, calling it “an urgent, richly colorful and unusually lucid account of Strauss’s opulent tone poem.”

“I think Gilbert’s going to change the sound of the orchestra and develop his own sound,” says Markus Rhoten, the orchestra’s principal timpanist. “He’s training colleagues to listen to each other in a different way, which changes the balance of sound: you want to play your best for him.”

Certainly, Gilbert doesn’t seem too phased by taking on the daunting role of leading the country’s oldest orchestra, following in the footsteps of illustrious names like Mahler, Toscanini and Bernstein. “Of course it’s intimidating,” says Gilbert. “But what has kept me grounded and stopped me flipping out is having been asked to just be myself. I’m not trying to come up with the most brilliant answers every time.”

It helps, too, that Gilbert grew up around the orchestra. In fact, you could say it’s in his blood: his mother plays violin in the orchestra and his father retired from the violin section a few years ago. At the tender age of nine he was hanging around backstage while symphonic music drifted in the ether — no doubt good training for any aspiring maestro. So, for Gilbert, a native son of

New York, this feels like a homecoming. He was given a rapturous reception last summer when he conducted the Philharmonic at a free concert in Central Park in front of 63,000 people. His genial nature and sense of humor came through when, during a pre-concert speech, he turned to the violin section and said, “Hi, Mom!”

The collective chuckle that followed was a great New York moment for the maestro, who says he can’t wait to embrace his hometown all over again. An avid and adventurous cook, he is particularly looking forward to the city’s diverse cuisine, especially that of West 32nd Street’s Little Korea. Korean barbecue has been hard to find in Sweden, where he has lived for the last eight and a half years with wife Kajsa and their two children; Gilbert was the chief conductor of the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, and Kajsa a cellist in the orchestra.

By coincidence, Dudamel’s last permanent gig was in Sweden, too, as the music director of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. He and his wife, Eloisa, are currently looking for a new home in Los Angeles. Already the town has opened its heart to them: the legendary Hollywood hot dog restaurant Pink’s has even named one of its hot dogs the Dudamel Dog. And Antonio Villaraigosa, LA’s first Latino mayor, couldn’t be more delighted about the arrival of this Venezuelan prodigy.

Dudamel’s first official event as music director will be, on October 3, a day of free events at the Hollywood Bowl culminating in a rendition of Beethoven’s Ninth. In New York, Gilbert will lead the first-ever Philharmonic Open Day on September 12, featuring *Symphonie fantastique* and a series of chamber concerts. ■

**Night in the City.** Alan Gilbert conducts the New York Philharmonic in Central Park (left), while Avery Fisher Hall (right) shines.