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A Career Filled With High Notes

Michael Tilson Thomas, now in the final season of his 25 years at the helm of the San Francisco Symphony, has left a profound imprint on both the orchestra and the city.

By David Mermelstein
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Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, in 2018

When Michael Tilson Thomas became music director of this city’s estimable but not very exciting or forward-looking symphony orchestra in 1995, he had been working in London and needed an American career boost, and the ensemble was looking for an energetic maestro who would elevate its profile and maybe even lend it “buzz.”

A quarter-century later, their partnership stands as one of the great success stories in U.S. musical history, thanks in large part to Mr. Thomas’s searching intellect, fierce curiosity, and supreme repertorial fluency. His direct connection to musical history, unmatched in our time, hasn’t hurt,

either. As a result, the 109-year-old San Francisco Symphony is now widely regarded as among this country's finest orchestras—right up there with East Coast titans like the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra. West of Chicago, only the Los Angeles Philharmonic challenges San Francisco's dominance.

But nothing lasts forever, and Mr. Thomas, who turned 75 just before Christmas, is midway through his last season at the helm. Fittingly, the exit music, as it were, hearkens back to past triumphs. On Friday, Mr. Thomas and the orchestra will perform Mahler's Symphony No. 6 here, and music by Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Mr. Thomas himself comes the following week. (Mr. Thomas and the orchestra will take the Mahler and most of the Stravinsky program to Carnegie Hall in New York on March 17 and 18.) But not till May and June does the long goodbye kick into high gear, when some favorite soloists, like the pianist Yuja Wang and the violinists Anne-Sophie Mutter and Gil Shaham, join Mr. Thomas and the orchestra for programs featuring Beethoven, Brahms and Wagner, as well as more Shostakovich and Mahler, whose "Symphony of a Thousand" brings down the curtain on what will likely be known as the MTT era.

Though it was widely assumed at the start that this marriage of conductor and orchestra had possibilities, few could have expected it either to succeed or to endure as it has. Once upon a time, quarter-century tenures were not unusual. Serge Koussevitzky transformed the Boston Symphony over 25 seasons, just as George Szell effectively created the Cleveland Orchestra in a similar span. Eugene Ormandy gave Philadelphia 44 years, but that's a record for this type of symbiosis.

More recent musical unions of such duration have tended to generate at least some controversy. Seiji Ozawa's 29 years in Boston struck many observers as far too long. And Franz Welser-Möst's residency in Cleveland, which began in 2002 and is currently contracted through 2027, has earned decidedly mixed notices.

But not so Mr. Thomas and San Francisco, whose first collaboration dates to 1974. Though not every review has been stellar, naturally, this team has delivered consistently rewarding performances marked by programming that ably mixes the familiar with the adventurous. And when the music is widely known, Mr. Thomas and his players have often invested it with enough originality that it feels newly minted. A performance of Schumann's "Spring" Symphony in February 2015 was one such case. It was imbued with such vigor and novel phrasing as to make me wonder whether I had ever really heard the piece before.

A compact disc of that performance is available on the SFS Media label, which was founded in 2001 and whose catalog now contains 34 releases. Mr. Thomas played a significant role in pioneering the self-produced method that has kept recordings of U.S. orchestras available while major record labels have lost interest in such content. The latest release is a superb pairing of American hymns with Charles Ives's groundbreaking Third and Fourth Symphonies. (A valedictory album of music composed by Mr. Thomas is forthcoming.)

Ives's music, along with that of other so-called American Mavericks—like Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell and Carl Ruggles—has been a mainstay for Mr. Thomas and the San Franciscans. In his early years with the symphony, such scores were a notable pillar of the conductor's invigorating concert programming. One hallmark of Mr. Thomas's tenure in this city has been his fidelity to a core group of composers who have always meant much to him. Along with the Americans already mentioned, pride of place goes to Mahler and Stravinsky (whom a young Mr. Thomas knew well during the Russian composer's dotage) as well as Beethoven and the still very active John Adams.

"Beethoven is a real person to me—Mahler, too," Mr. Thomas said to me in January following a symphony rehearsal, over salads at his kitchen table in this city's Pacific Heights neighborhood. "I'm looking to have as personal a relationship with a long-dead composer as I do with those who are living."

After 25 years, Mr. Thomas's mark on this ensemble is unmistakable. He has hired 50 of its 108 players, and he has demonstrably honed the orchestra's technical precision. But his most lasting imprint may extend beyond the doors of Davies Symphony Hall, the orchestra's imperfect but beloved home since 1980. For this conductor has made classical concertgoing a defining aspect of life in San Francisco—something plainly evident at the September gala that marked the opening of his final season, when luminaries from across the city, including the mayor, the police chief and senior executives from all four of the area's major-league sports franchises, paid onstage homage to Mr. Thomas. (House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and California Gov. Gavin Newsome also participated in the festivities.)

"I've expanded the definition of what classical music can be," Mr. Thomas said, musing on his legacy after our meal. "Being on stage at Davies feels like my living room."

The transition to a new music director will be as seamless as such things can be thanks to the surprise selection of Esa-Pekka Salonen, who assumes the job in September. His 17-year tenure in

Los Angeles redefined that city's orchestra, and his term in San Francisco will likely prove special in its own way. But he will be 62 years old when he takes over and is almost certain not to serve anywhere near as long as Mr. Thomas has.

Mr. Thomas's legacy, though, can only partly be attributed to his longevity in the job. Occupying time and space does not alone guarantee impact. But his durable mark on San Francisco, both the orchestra and the city, will resound for years to come.

—*Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on film and classical music.*