

‘...the unique strength of music as an ambassador for peace...’



World Orchestra for Peace

Founder Sir Georg Solti
Conductor Valery Gergiev
Patron Lady Solti
Director Charles Kaye

Valery Gergiev Conductor – biography –

Valery Gergiev succeeded Georg Solti as conductor of the World Orchestra for Peace when Solti's sudden death left the orchestra's concert in Baden-Baden potentially in jeopardy. Rather than cancel, the decision was taken to ask Valery Gergiev, overwhelmingly the most suitable replacement, if he would step in. Gergiev was so fascinated by the idea that he postponed a prior engagement, in order to take over the programme Solti had planned.

Solti himself had recognised Gergiev as his natural successor. They had met two years before Solti died, after which he told Charles Kaye that the meeting had had a similar effect on him as his own meeting with Bruno Walter years earlier, where the older maestro had told him he must accept the offer of Music Director at Covent Garden for the sake of the next generation. "I sense he is a man of the theatre", he said to Kaye, and later in his memoirs he noted with regret the fact that the really great opera conductors of his own generation had either disappeared or were well past 80, he also wrote "so it is with relief that I welcome the arrival of Valery Gergiev..."

Gergiev was born in Moscow in 1953 to Ossetian parents, and spent his youth in the Caucasus. After learning piano as a boy, he studied conducting at the Leningrad Conservatory and, in 1977, won the Herbert von Karajan Conducting Competition in Berlin. Returning to St Petersburg he took up an offer to assist Yuri Temirkanov, who had just taken over artistic direction of the Kirov Opera at the Mariinsky Theatre. Despite his feeling that "it was not easy for an Ossetian, a Georgian, or a Jew to be accepted there", he revitalised the Kirov and, since taking it over in 1988 he has turned it into a company of worldwide acclaim.

Musically, Gergiev has expanded the repertory both of Russian composers, especially Prokofiev, restaging many forgotten works, and also introduced previously neglected Western works to Russia. In 1997 he staged Parsifal, unperformed there for 80 years, and in 2000 began a new production of Wagner's Ring – the first time it had been performed by a Russian company.

Like Solti before him, Gergiev has worked with many of the world's leading orchestras and opera houses: the Vienna Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra (making his London debut in 1988), the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Rotterdam Philharmonic (Principal Guest Conductor since 1995), and with the Metropolitan Opera (Principal Guest Conductor since 1997), the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, the Teatro Carlo Felice, San Francisco Opera, La Scala, the New Israeli Opera and the Théâtre du Châtelet.

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In keeping with this wide frame of reference, Gergiev is also the founder and artistic director of many international music festivals including Peace for the Caucasus (which highlights the conflict between Georgia and Ossetia), the Mikkeli Festival (Finland), the Red Sea Festival (Eilat), the Kirov Philharmonic (London), the Rotterdam Philharmonic-Gergiev Festival (the Netherlands) and, of course, St Petersburg's annual 'Stars of the White Nights' festival, now in its twelfth year.

For all this internationalism, he remains deeply attached to the Caucasus. "I am Ossetian, first and foremost." After the terrible massacre of children at Beslan, he flew back to Moscow from Austria where he had opened the Vienna Philharmonic concert season to appear on national television, appealing to the people of Ossetia to keep the peace. "I don't know how others feel," he said later. "I feel a little guilty. We who know this region did not do enough to protect peaceful life." He conducted a concert for relief of the victims in London in November 2004.

Recipient of the highest cultural awards in his own country, Gergiev has also been decorated by Germany, Italy and France. In 1996, he was named Conductor of the Year by the jury of the International Classical Music Awards and, in 1998, was awarded a special prize for his outstanding contribution to music by Philips Electronics, which he donated to the development of the Mariinsky Academy of Young Singers. In March 2003, he was made an Artist of the World by UNESCO and in January the following year he was awarded the Crystal Prize for his dedication to the arts and his contribution to cultural dialogue; the prize was presented by the World Economic Forum in Davos.