

David Lockington set to debut as Pasadena Symphony music director

David Lockington earns praise conducting orchestras across the country and around the world.

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David Lockington will debut Saturday as the Pasadena Symphony's music director, attended by the usual glowing sentiments that come with arrivals and beginnings.

But in a 30-year career as a conductor that has been full of comings and goings crisscrossing the United States, it's noteworthy that some of the London-raised Lockington's biggest raves have come as he took a final bow and walked out the door.

He's taking over the Pasadena Symphony after what amounted to 21/2 years of serial dating by the orchestra as it brought in a series of guest conductors after a messy parting with longtime music director Jorge Mester in mid-2010.

Lockington led a concert program in 2012, and early this year the orchestra's search committee of musicians, managers and board members decided there was no need for further tryouts — Lockington was a match. He's committed to three seasons through mid-2016.

"First and foremost, he's a superb musician," said Paul Jan Zdunek, the Pasadena Symphony's chief executive. "He's got a good mix of being disciplined but friendly and collaborative. He's really good about interfacing with everyone from third-graders to our most long-term donors.... He's not only at ease but actively enjoys it."

Lockington, 57, will conduct matinee and evening performances Saturday at Ambassador Auditorium, leading a program of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," Leonard Bernstein's "Serenade," featuring violin soloist Anne Akiko Meyers, and Dmitri Shostakovich's "Festive Overture."

It's one thing for an executive like Zdunek to herald an incoming music director's virtues. But here's what critics have said about Lockington as he stepped down from past directorships in Cleveland and Long Island, N.Y.:

"In four seasons, Lockington waved his magic baton ... and achieved a transformation," former Cleveland Plain Dealer music critic Donald Rosenberg wrote in 1997 as the conductor exited as leader of the Ohio Chamber Orchestra. "Cleveland remains in his debt for building the [orchestra], devising innovative programs and treating listeners as cherished friends.... [His] contributions to our musical life long will be treasured."

Justin Davidson of Newsday said much the same thing in 2000 while taking Lockington's measure at the end of his three-season run leading the Long Island Philharmonic. "Lockington was just the tonic the Philharmonic needed.... Many of his achievements are ... audible and concrete."

Like the Pasadena Symphony, which Zdunek said has a \$3.5-million budget this season (including its summer incarnation as the Pasadena Pops, led by Michael Feinstein), the Long Island orchestra operated with relatively modest funds in the shadow of a classical music juggernaut — the New York Philharmonic as opposed to the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

It too relied on musicians who are part-time employees typically involved with other gigs. In Pasadena, Zdunek said, about 80% of the musicians play all five of the Saturday double-headers that make up the classical seasons

Interviewed this week in the Pasadena Symphony's offices, Lockington cut a trim, personable, gentle-voiced and somewhat Bernstein-like figure with pronounced dark, arching eyebrows under unruly silvering hair. The fond adieus he's received were, of course, gratifying, he said: "That's what my whole goal has been, just to make a difference."

His steadiest job, since 1999, has been leading the Grand Rapids Symphony, an orchestra with a core of 50 full-time musicians playing 10 concert programs a year. Saying he's accomplished what he set out to do in the city where he's lived since the early 2000s, Lockington announced this year that he will step down in mid-2015 after 16 seasons.

Since 2007 he's also been music director of the Modesto Symphony in Northern California's Central Valley, and last year he became principal conductor of the regional orchestra of the Spanish province of Asturias. He said it's "completely open-ended" where he and his family will live after he finishes his work in Michigan.

It remains to be seen whether Pasadena Symphony audiences will hear him play the cello in concert, as he has with other orchestras he's led, or whether getting Lockington means a musical reintroduction to his wife, former Los Angeles child prodigy Dylana Jenson. The Sherman Oaks-raised violinist won international acclaim in her teens after having been dubbed "the 11-year-old Bobby Fischer of fiddlers" by the Los Angeles Times in 1972. They sometimes perform together, and Lockington conducted the London Symphony Orchestra for her 2009 CD of violin concertos by Samuel Barber and Shostakovich.

Saturday's Pasadena Symphony program is the only one Lockington picked for his inaugural season. "We've laid out a lot of things for next season, but nothing's tied down yet," he said.

Multicultural programming has been one of his consistent interests. In Grand Rapids, an annual "Symphony With Soul" explores the work of African American composers and involves collaborations with gospel music choirs.

The interest is deeply personal. Soon after marrying in 1983, Lockington and Jenson, whose mother is from Costa Rica, adopted the first of three African American or biracial children they've raised. They're also birth parents to a daughter — the only practicing musician of the brood, although Lockington said she plays her cello only at occasional wedding gigs, concentrating mainly on her job in Grand Rapids as an advocate for people with disabilities.

Lockington's musical life flows from his home life growing up in suburban London. His father, Hugh, who died in 2000, was a podiatrist and avid amateur musician who played the cello, rehearsed regularly with musical ensembles in his home and conducted his son's first youth orchestra.

"He was a sweet, enthusiastic man and an encourager of every person he met," Lockington said. He's tried to follow those cues as a conductor. "Everybody has to be handled with dignity and respect. You still have standards and can be demanding, but you can do it from a positive outlook."

Lockington came to the United States in 1978 for graduate work in cello and conducting at Yale. He joined the Denver Symphony as a principal cellist and eventually became the orchestra's assistant conductor.

"As it dawned on me I wasn't going to be a soloist, I thought, 'I'll be really good at conducting when I'm really old,'" Lockington recalled. "And that's been my life. I've seen it grow."

The core lesson he's learned over the years, he said, is that "the driving force everywhere is that [audiences] want to have an emotional experience. My goal as I get older is to conduct the best orchestras that are available to me. I feel now I've got a set of skills that work for me, and I've got however many years ahead of me to reflect what's inside of me with the most freedom and greatest skill."

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Pasadena Symphony

Where: Ambassador Auditorium, Pasadena

When: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday

Cost: \$35 to \$105

Info: <http://www.pasadenasympphony-pops.org> or (626) 793-7172