MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

Biographical information

Michael Tilson Thomas is Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, Founder and Artistic Director of the New World Symphony and Principal Guest Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. Born in Los Angeles, he is the third generation of his family to follow an artistic career. His grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, were founding members of the Yiddish Theater in America. His father, Ted Thomas, was a producer in the Mercury Theater Company in New York before moving to Los Angeles where he worked in films and television. His mother, Roberta Thomas, was the head of research for Columbia Pictures.

Mr. Tilson Thomas began his formal studies at the University of Southern California where he studied piano with John Crown and conducting and composition with Ingolf Dahl. At age nineteen he was named Music Director of the Young Musicians Foundation Debut Orchestra. He worked with Stravinsky, Boulez, Stockhausen and Copland on premieres of their compositions at Los Angeles' Monday Evening Concerts. During this same period he was the pianist and conductor for Gregor Piatigorsky and Jascha Heifetz. As a student of Friedelind Wagner he was Musical Assistant and Assistant Conductor at the Bayreuth Festival.

In 1969, after winning the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood, he was appointed Assistant Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. That year he also made his New York debut with the Boston Symphony and gained international recognition after replacing Music Director William Steinberg in mid-concert. He was later appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra where he remained until 1974. He was Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic from 1971 to 1979 and a Principal Guest Conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1981 to 1985. His guest conducting includes appearances with the major orchestras of Europe and the United States.

His recorded repertoire of more than 120 discs includes works by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Prokofiev and Stravinsky as well as his pioneering work with the music of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Steve Reich, John Cage, Ingolf Dahl, Morton Feldman, George Gershwin, John McLaughlin and Elvis Costello. He is currently recording the complete orchestral works of Gustav Mahler with the San Francisco Symphony.

Mr. Tilson Thomas's extensive television work includes a series with the London Symphony Orchestra for BBC Television, the television broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic Young People's Concerts from 1971 to 1977 and numerous productions on PBS Great Performances. Starting in 2004 Mr. Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony have embarked on a multi-tiered media project – *Keeping Score* – which includes television, web sites, radio programs and programs in the schools, all designed to make classical music more accessible to a new audience.

In February 1988 he inaugurated the New World Symphony, an orchestral academy for the most gifted graduates of America's music conservatories. In addition to their regular season in Miami Beach, they have toured in Austria, France, Great Britain, South America, Japan, Israel, Holland, Italy and the United States. Prior to their January, 2007 appearance at Carnegie Hall, the New World Symphony was profiled in a major feature story in *The New York Times*. New World Symphony graduates have gone on to major positions in orchestras worldwide. In 1991 Mr. Tilson Thomas and the orchestra were presented in a series of benefit concerts for UNICEF in the United States, featuring Audrey Hepburn as narrator of *From the Diary of Anne Frank,* composed by Mr. Tilson Thomas and commissioned by UNICEF. This piece has since been translated and performed in many languages worldwide.

Increasingly active as a composer, in August 1995 he led the Pacific Music Festival Orchestra in the premiere of his composition *Showa/Shoah*, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Thomas Hampson premiered his settings of poetry by Walt Whitman, Renée Fleming premiered his settings of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the San Francisco Symphony premiered his concerto for contrabassoon entitled *Urban Legend*. As a Carnegie Hall Perspectives Artist from 2003 to 2005, he had an evening devoted to his own compositions which included *Island Music* (for four marimbas and percussion), *Notturno* (for solo flute and strings) and a new setting of poems by Rainer Maria Rilke.

As Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra from 1988 to 1995, Mr. Tilson Thomas led the orchestra on regular tours in Europe, the United States and Japan as well as at the Salzburg Festival. In London he and the orchestra have mounted major festivals focusing on the music of Steve Reich, George Gershwin, Johannes Brahms, Toru Takemitsu, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and the School of St. Petersburg, Claude

Debussy and Gustav Mahler. As Principal Guest Conductor of the LSO, he continues to lead the orchestra in concerts in London and on tour.

His thirteen -year tenure as Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony has been broadly covered by the international press with feature stories in *Time, Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Times* (London) and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* among many others. With the San Francisco Symphony he has presented eight summer festivals including ones devoted to the music of Mahler, Stravinsky, Wagner and American Mavericks. Each of those festivals focused the attention of the international music community on the West Coast of America. With the San Francisco Symphony he has made numerous tours of Europe, United States and the Far East.

Among his many honors and awards Mr. Tilson Thomas is a Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France, received the Ditson Award for contributions to American music and the American Symphony Orchestra League's Lifetime Achievement Award. He was *Musical America*'s Musician of the Year and Conductor of the Year, *Gramophone Magazine'*sArtist of the Year and has been profiled on CBS's *60 Minutes* and ABC's *Nightline*. He has won seven Grammy Awards for his recordings. In 2008 he received the Peabody Award for his radio series for SFS Media, *The MTT Files*.