

NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY

XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Gabriel van Aalst announces plan to resign as New Jersey Symphony President & CEO

Newark, NJ—The Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Symphony accepted the resignation of President & CEO Gabriel van Aalst, who announced today that he is leaving in September to become the President & CEO of Dayton Live, the primary host and presenter for performing arts in Miami Valley, Ohio.

Van Aalst joined the New Jersey Symphony in October of 2016 and, in his eight seasons of serving as President & CEO, led the organization in many positive directions which further advanced its mission and impact to New Jersey communities throughout the state. Van Aalst's tenure with the New Jersey Symphony will conclude in September and he will provide a smooth transition while working with the board of trustees as it hires a new President & CEO. Craig Silliman, Co-Chair of the New Jersey Symphony Board of Trustees and President of Verizon Global Services, will serve as Interim President & CEO for New Jersey Symphony on an unpaid basis starting in September and until a successor is hired.

Van Aalst says, "It has been a joy to lead the New Jersey Symphony over the last eight years. Sharing this journey with Xian has been a tremendous opportunity that I will continue to look back on with great fondness. I want to thank everyone at the Symphony, from the musicians, staff and board of trustees, as well as our wonderful donors and patrons, for helping to forge a new future for the organization. I am very fortunate to have been a vital part of such a vibrant community as we celebrated the orchestra's Centennial and pathed a vision for the 21st century orchestra. I have incredible memories of attending Symphony concerts and many other events throughout the Garden State, as well as my own personal enrichment in seeing the important work the Symphony does in its expansive education programs and through its impactful community partner programs in schools, hospitals, community centers and more."

Music Director Xian Zhang says, "Working with Gabriel these eight years has been a great journey. His efforts in furthering diversity, equity and inclusion throughout our organization, as well as his leadership during the pandemic, have ushered the Symphony into a new era. While I will miss having Gabriel as a partner in leadership, I

look forward to what the future holds. New Jersey has a treasure of an orchestra that continues to reach new artistic heights, which all residents of the state should take pride in.”

Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees for the New Jersey Symphony, Craig Silliman says, “It has been a pleasure working with Gabriel. He has helped shape the organization as an important institution in the cultural and arts communities of New Jersey, especially with inclusive programming and artistic partnerships. As a subscriber, donor and trustee I have seen his commitment to the Symphony and dedication firsthand. Bob and I wish Gabriel all the best and look forward to seeing the foundation Gabriel has laid with special initiatives and projects flourishing in the future. We look forward to hiring our next President & CEO who will have the opportunity to build on what Gabriel established and take the Symphony to new levels of success.”

Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees for the New Jersey Symphony, Robert (Bob) Garrett says, “I have had the fortune to work with Gabriel while he has served as President & CEO, particularly as we expanded our Music and Wellness programs across the Hackensack Meridian Health hospital system. Craig and I are fortunate for his visionary leadership and hard work, which will leave a lasting impact on the organization and the state.”

Increasing artistic quality and stability

Van Aalst joined the Symphony at the beginning of Zhang’s first season as music director. As leaders together, van Aalst and Zhang have helped to raise the organization’s profile and artistic quality. Zhang extended her contract as music director twice and is currently contracted to be music director until the 2027–28 season, which would extend her time with the organization to 12 years, one of the longest music directorships in the organization’s history. While Music Director of the New Jersey Symphony, Zhang has greatly increased her own profile, regularly appearing with top orchestras including the LA Phil, Seattle Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra and with the MET Opera. In May 2024, Zhang was featured on the CBS Evening News with Norah O’ Donnell in their “Heart of America” segment.

In 2022, van Aalst negotiated the musician’s contract with the Northern New Jersey Musicians Guild, Local 16-248 of the American Federation of Musicians, which resulted in a five-year contract agreement with the Symphony musicians, running through August 2027.

At the time of the announcement, van Aalst said, “This new contract, along with the five-year contract recently signed with our music director Xian Zhang, reinforces the Symphony’s strong artistic and organizational foundation, from which we can continue to serve the diverse communities of New Jersey.”

Leading in diversity, equity and inclusion

The New Jersey Symphony has been a long-time leader in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion. In 1968, the Symphony appointed Henry Lewis as the first Black music director of a major orchestra. In 2016, the Symphony welcomed Xian Zhang as its first woman music director as well as its first Asian music director. Expanding on this foundation, van Aalst has been a champion for more, and in 2021, the Symphony announced its first-ever Resident Artistic Catalyst, Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR). DBR has introduced audiences to bold and newly commissioned works, including *Autumn Days and Nights*, *Farah (Joy) for Voice and Orchestra* and *i am a person who _____ Black people*. He has participated in thought-provoking on-stage speeches and has performed with the orchestra in many of his works. In the 2024–25 season, Allison Loggins-Hull will become the Symphony’s Resident Artistic Partner, succeeding and expanding on DBR’s trailblazing work.

In another DEI success, van Aalst secured an initial \$1 million gift to launch the Colton Fellowship program for musicians from underrepresented communities. The Symphony launched the multiyear program with a pilot for two string players in the 2019–20 season. The program has continued strong and was recently expanded and extended to include a conducting fellowship, which is currently occupied by Cuban-born Fellow Jessica Rivero Altarriba. Fellows have been successful in advancing their careers and signing on with new positions at major orchestras, showing the life-changing impact these programs have by bringing new opportunities to underrepresented communities.

Navigating the pandemic

Van Aalst led the organization through an extremely difficult period for the entire world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially hard hit by the necessary social distancing requirements were arts institutions whose business model revolved around large crowds attending in-person events. The Symphony secured PPP loans and other government funding to keep the organization running while producing virtual concerts, reaching millions at a time when in-person attendance was not possible. The virtual concerts have won multiple Emmy awards and were featured on NJ PBS.

The pandemic allowed the Symphony to dedicate its time to focus on major projects, and van Aalst led the organization in its first-ever professional branding engagement with an outside branding agency, as well as moving to a new ticketing, CRM and eCommerce system. The infrastructure improvements and branding design and messaging frameworks helped the organization to more quickly recover from the effects of the pandemic, and single ticket sales are now exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

Seeing the organization through its Centennial

A major milestone event for the organization during van Aalst’s tenure was the 2022–23 Centennial Season, which was highly regarded by press and patrons as a blockbuster season for the organization. A Centennial Gala in November 2022

celebrated the organization's 100th birthday and featured Yo-Yo Ma performing Dvorak's Cello Concerto, and DBR closing out the program with an audience participatory work and a streamer cannon blast. The Centennial season also concluded a successful \$50 million capital campaign, which significantly went over goal and raised a total of \$61 million, providing vital support to the organization and its many initiatives.

About the New Jersey Symphony

The Emmy and GRAMMY Award-winning New Jersey Symphony is redefining what it means to be a nationally leading, relevant orchestra in the 21st century. The Symphony is renewing its deeply rooted commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion by championing new, and often local, artists; engaging audiences for whom the inspiring depth and breadth of classical music will be a new experience; and incorporating the broadest possible representation in all aspects of our organization—all to better reflect and serve our vibrant communities.

Internationally renowned Chinese American conductor Xian Zhang began her tenure as the New Jersey Symphony's current music director in 2016. Since her arrival, Zhang has revitalized programming with an industry-leading commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in mainstage concerts. Since 2021, Zhang has worked together with composer, violinist, educator and social-justice advocate Daniel Bernard Roumain, the orchestra's Resident Artistic Catalyst, to offer programming that connects with diverse communities in Newark and throughout New Jersey. In 2024, Allison Loggins-Hull will succeed DBR as the orchestra's next Resident Artistic Partner.

In the 2024–25 season, the New Jersey Symphony will present *Voice of Nature: the Anthropocene* with Renée Fleming, Billy Childs' *Diaspora*, Daniel Freiberg's *Latin American Chronicles*, Allison Loggins-Hull's *Can You See?*, Qasim Naqvi's *God Docks at Death Harbor* and Gabriela Ortiz's *Kauyumari*. Classical favorites on the season include Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9, "Choral,"* Gustav Holst's *The Planets—An HD Odyssey*, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and Igor Stravinsky's *Suite from The Firebird*. Artistic partnerships include Paquito D'Rivera and his quintet, as part of the TD James Moody Jazz Festival; Nimbus Dance performing with *The Firebird* and *God Docks at Death Harbor*; Montclair State University Chorale performing on three programs; as well as Peking University Alumni Chorus and Starry Arts Children's Chorus appearing on the Lunar New Year Celebration concert with Xian Zhang.

For more information about the New Jersey Symphony, visit njsymphony.org or email information@njsymphony.org. Tickets are available for purchase by phone 1.800.ALLEGRO (255.3476) or on the Orchestra's website.

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