

Christian Thielemann to Succeed Daniel Barenboim at Berlin State Opera

The conductor, an acclaimed Wagnerian, was named to replace Barenboim, who stepped down in January after three decades because of health problems.



By Javier C. Hernández

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For months, the Berlin State Opera, one of the world's premier opera houses, has been in a state of uncertainty. Its revered leader, the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim, resigned in January after three decades in charge because of health problems. Musicians and cultural leaders questioned whether anyone would be able to match his impact and influence.

But on Wednesday, German officials said they had found their maestro: the acclaimed Wagnerian Christian Thielemann, the principal conductor of the Staatskapelle orchestra in Dresden, who will take over as general music director of the Berlin State Opera in September 2024.

"It was a perfect match," Joe Chialo, Berlin's senator for culture, said in an interview. "This is a new beginning."

Thielemann, 64, the heir to storied maestros like Wilhelm Furtwängler and Herbert von Karajan, for whom he once served as an assistant, praised the opera house's "long and illustrious tradition" and thanked Barenboim for his "wonderful work and constant support." As a child, he said he traveled from West Berlin to East Berlin to catch performances at the opera house.

"I'm proud I can be part of this tradition," Thielemann said in an interview. "Daniel is such a wonderful musician and he has inspired me always."

Barenboim, who has known Thielemann since he was 19, said that "his musical talent was already obvious back then and he has since developed into one of the outstanding conductors of our time." He said he was pleased to see him take the helm of the opera and its renowned orchestra, the Staatskapelle Berlin.

"I have been at the helm of these very special musical institutions for over 30 years, and I am sure that, under the leadership of Christian Thielemann, they will continue to maintain and expand their exceptional position in Berlin and international musical life," he said in a statement.

Thielemann, who is from Berlin and led the Deutsche Oper there from 1997 to 2004, will face significant challenges at the State Opera, including restoring a sense of stability after a tumultuous period.

The institution has been in flux over the past couple years as Barenboim, 80, a towering figure in classical music who has built an artistic empire in Berlin and helped define German culture after reunification, grappled with health issues. He was diagnosed last year with a serious neurological condition, and he said in January that the illness made it impossible for him to carry out his duties.

The uncertainty of his condition placed strains on the opera house. It was left scrambling to find substitutes for Barenboim, including for a highly anticipated new production of Wagner's "Ring" cycle last year, for which Barenboim tapped Thielemann at the last minute.

Thielemann and Barenboim have a complicated history. When Thielemann was at the Deutsche Oper, he complained publicly about its low level of government support compared with Barenboim's State Opera.

At the same time, accusations spread that Thielemann had made antisemitic comments about Barenboim, who is Jewish. Thielemann denied making the comments at the time.

The two men never broke and have spoken and met regularly over the years.

Thielemann said on Wednesday that the two men had a strong relationship and that Barenboim was a critical influence in his career. “I owe him,” he said.



Daniel Barenboim at the State Opera in Berlin in 2017. Odd Andersen/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

When he stepped in for Barenboim last year, Thielemann deepened his bond with the Staatskapelle Berlin and became a favorite of the orchestra’s players, who were influential in his selection.

When Chialo started his term as Berlin’s top culture official in April, he made arrangements to meet Thielemann.

“The orchestra was jumping up and down and preferring him,” Chialo said.

Elisabeth Sobotka, the Berlin State Opera's incoming artistic director, said she felt Thielemann’s vision and musical approach were close to Barenboim’s.

“There was a very, very special atmosphere between him and members of the orchestra,” she said. “It all comes very naturally to him, and the musicians trust him.”

Thielemann rose to prominence in his 20s, winning posts at German opera houses, including in Düsseldorf and Nuremberg. He led the Munich Philharmonic from 2004 to 2011, leaving amid disagreements with the orchestra’s managers. He served as music director of the Bayreuth Festival in Germany, a showcase for Wagner’s work, from 2015 until 2020. He was the artistic director of the Salzburg Easter Festival in Austria, founded by von Karajan, from 2013 until last year.

While he was once a regular in the United States, he has reduced his commitments there significantly over the past couple decades. But last year, he made a triumphant return, taking the podium of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for the first time since 1995 in performances of Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony.

Succeeding Barenboim will not be easy. During his tenure, he brought the Staatskapelle to new heights, leading international tours and securing hundreds of millions in government grants to finance his ambitions. He persuaded officials to build the Pierre Boulez Saal, a Frank Gehry-designed hall housed in the same building as a music academy. And he pushed a costly renovation of the opera house’s main theater that was finished in 2017. The State Opera last year had 587 employees and a budget of roughly 81.4 million euros, or about \$85.9 million.

Barenboim maintained his grip on power, despite occasional troubles. In 2019, members of the Staatskapelle

accused him of bullying; later that year, though, the opera house, saying that it could not verify the accusations, extended his contract.

As his health worsened last year, Barenboim initially resisted resigning his post and told friends and family that he planned to return to the podium. But even as he kept up some appearances, attending rehearsals and teaching classes in Berlin, it became increasingly apparent that he could no longer lead the opera house full time.

Thielemann said he hoped to bring more operas by Richard Strauss to Berlin, including the rarely staged “Die Schweigsame Frau,” and that he was eager to find ways to connect with younger audiences.

“If people think, ‘I don’t go to an opera house because I think it’s so stiff and I don’t feel comfortable,’ then one has to take away the fear from them,” he said.

Thielemann’s career has had its share of drama; he has left some positions under tumultuous circumstances. He said he had learned from his years in the music industry.

“When you are young, you are more temperamental and you make more mistakes,” he said. “I’m trying to be a little bit wiser, especially coming into a so well-organized institution.”

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