

# PHILZUID'S MUSICAL ODYSSEY

Step into the captivating world of Duncan Ward, Chief Conductor of Philzuid. As a forward-thinking maestro, he is on a mission to move hearts, introduce classical music to new audiences, and masterfully conjure magical nights that echo the power and beauty of symphonic craftsmanship. With boundless enthusiasm, Ward crafts unconventional musical journeys, blending unexpected combinations in his programmes. Join us as we explore the passion behind his baton.



Duncan Ward, the accomplished British conductor born in 1989 in Kent, England, emerged from a non-musical family but cultivated a deep passion for it at an early age. His exploration of music was diverse, playing instruments such as the piano and horn, listening, composing, and conducting. Recognised as one of the most versatile conductors of his generation, Ward holds the esteemed position of chief conductor with Philzuid, the symphony orchestra spanning the South Dutch provinces of Zeeland, Noord-Brabant, and Limburg.

Similar to the Oostwegel houses, establishing the ideal ambience is a vital factor in shaping memorable cultural experiences by seamlessly aligning different elements. Reflecting on his role, Ward emphasises the unique opportunity and challenge of uniting a diverse ensemble of musicians under one cohesive vision. “As a conductor, you have this magic opportunity to be in front of a huge group of extremely talented people, all of whom may have their own opinions about how a particular piece of music

should go. It’s my role to unite them behind one vision. The markings and wishes of the composer could be interpreted in different ways from the written paper. So it’s my job to think about how we would like that piece to be played, to make it most faithful to the composer and effective for the audience. To bring it alive through gesture, through sharing my energy with these musicians, and through inspiring them to take a particular direction.”

When creating these special encounters, Ward stretches, it’s important to let go of the idea of a set route plan. “We love the energy of concerts because anything could happen, and the audience is an essential ingredient to that too: the way they’re paying attention, their energy, the acoustics of a particular hall, it all affects the journey of a piece of music a particular night.” His ability to improvise in such a manner finds its origin in his youth, he thinks. “Music was my discovery, my self-learning, and I think that brings a certain flexibility to the way I work. As a conductor, you must be incredibly

alert in rehearsal or during a concert. You need to listen and pay attention to everyone’s actions, all those different parts, you have to be able to analyse them immediately in your head. You have to be very sensitive to a group dynamic. These are people with great personalities, individual stories, and individual talent, and a big part of my job is working with the energy in the room. It’s a very social organism you’re working with, unique.”

Quite a challenge, you might think. But Ward never loses his cool. He has the unwavering belief that anything can be sorted. “People always comment that I’m relentlessly calm, enthusiastic and passionate. No matter how stressful the situation is, how challenging the music is, or how bad it’s going. I believe that by really trusting in the people you work with and inspiring through the way you gesture, your facial expressions, and also obviously in what you say, you can empower people to as a collective outshine the individual possibilities.”



Philzuid's seasonal programme is a dialogue between Ward, the artistic programming team, and the orchestra's artistic commission. "The orchestra's input on the pieces they wish to perform and their feelings about proposed programmes is crucial. Philzuid is particularly diverse in its programming, compared to many orchestras. We do world premieres, things that are fresh off the page, but we also do French baroque from 400 years ago, and a bit of everything in between. Also, not necessarily with me, but we're doing film music and education projects, and this huge spectrum of other exciting things." Ward enjoys combining unexpected elements, creating surprising pairings. "Very famous things, alongside things that people might never have heard. Across the centuries things. A good example is the New Year's programme. People think, Strauss, Vienna, well... not our New Year's programme! There's an unknown fabulous fun piece by Peña Campo, a female composer who is a friend of mine, paired with some dance music from Bernstein, and work by Montsalvatge, a Spanish composer most people don't know. Looking at that programme, it features lesser-known pieces. However, for the audience, it promises to be a party, with each piece offering delightful discoveries."

Creating those moments of joy by surprising people is something Ward loves, and that aligns with the core values of the orchestra as well. This is not only evident in the programming and nuances but also in the way Philzuid engages with the community. "One great example is the Philmobs we've done over the last couple of years. We took the orchestra out into the middle of a square or shopping centre so that anyone could come and play with the orchestra – young, old, amateur, professional. Picture a 400-member orchestra playing a classic hit, led by me with a microphone and baton. The magic is that anyone can stumble upon it. The response is just incredible, it's so



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direct to the heart. No one has to enter the building and sit in silence, it's just there. Everybody is celebrating, even people thinking it's not for them.”

There are other examples of distinctive initiatives aiming to bridge the gap between creators and the public. Like the Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music (MCICM), which is a new interdisciplinary research centre supporting innovations in the classical music sector founded in collaboration with Philzuid, Maastricht University, and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. Or Philsurround, where the audience is invited to take a seat in the midst of the orchestra and experience the overwhelming sound of a symphony orchestra from the inside. “There are many programmes with a completely different format, breaking the mould of what is

the norm. We want to propel this ancient, incredible model of the classical orchestra into the 21st century. Orchestral music has an incredible power of transformation, and therefore it must be open to everybody – from all walks of society and regardless of age. If we can give that access, it's a wonderful and very important thing.”

The fact that Ward discovered classical music by himself, strengthens this sentiment. “Even though people assume it, I wasn't always in this world. So I don't take it for granted. I know what it feels like to experience it for the first time and be totally hooked by it. I also understand the reasons why some people might feel a bit alienated from it. I want to reach out to those people and bring them closer again. When everything is working and you feel the synergy between the



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audience and the orchestra, I feel like I have the best job in the world. I’m flying on the music.”

Now in his third year, Ward feels that bringing his wealth of worldly experience to the South of the Netherlands earns him recognition and appreciation from both the orchestra and the audience. “The warmth gets greater every time I re-enter the stage. I feel like I’m connecting with the community and that they’re touched by what I’ve done and the energy I’ve given.” He believes this is

also because the orchestra itself is so open and giving. “Very warm people and passionate musicians. There are famous orchestras who are an absolute joy to work with but have a very set idea about how to play something, even before you start working. I feel that Philzuid is an open book of flexible responsiveness. It’s not like: we’ve played it like this for the last fifteen years. It’s rather: how shall we do this? There’s this great collective energy of putting together a concert and making it special – every time.”

Ward readily asserts that this attitude likely stems from the unique essence and cultural identity inherent to the region, and we couldn’t agree more – the Oostwegel Collection chose its setting for precisely that reason. “It’s a very special thing and crucial for me because I want to put together experiences for the public that are moving and unforgettable.” ◀