Levine's Return Is Set

By JENNIFER MALONEY

James Levine, the legendary Metropolitan Opera music director who withdrew from conducting last year after a spinal injury, will return to the podium next spring, the opera announced Thursday.

Mr. Levine, 69 years old, still cannot walk and is using a motorized wheelchair, but in recent weeks he has resumed some of his duties, coaching young singers, leading planning sessions and meeting with the Met's orchestra and chorus.

"I'm feeling better with each passing day," the maestro said through a spokesman. "It has been a long healing process, but with a team of excellent doctors and the unwavering support of my friends and colleagues, I'm looking forward more than I can say to getting back to work."

In the summer of 2011, Mr. Levine underwent three back surgeries to relieve pain from back problems including spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spine that puts pressure on the spinal cord or nerves.

The surgeries were successful. But at the end of August last year, he fell and injured his spinal cord, requiring emergency surgery. He hasn't conducted since then.

In his absence, Fabio Luisi was appointed principal conductor. He moved to New York and was considered the front-runner to take Mr. Levine's job should he step down. Mr. Luisi will continue in his role as principal conductor, said Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, adding that "both Jim and I are very grateful for all that he brings to the Met with his artistry and continuing presence."

Many had feared that Mr. Levine would never return to the stage. When he does on May 19, it will be the first time in two years he holds a baton in front of an audience.

The opera didn't say how he will share duties with Mr. Luisi, who is greatly respected by orchestra members and dropped other engagements to fill in for Mr. Levine at the last minute.

Through a spokesman, Mr. Luisi said it was "heartwarming to hear the wonderful news."

"I join the Met family, and opera fans everywhere, in welcoming him back," he said.
Mr. Levine's doctors said that his upper-body strength has returned enough to conduct. His inability to walk is temporary, the opera said. For now, Mr. Levine will conduct from the motorized wheelchair. The Met's technical department is designing customized, elevating podiums for his comeback performance at Carnegie Hall in May and subsequent opera productions in the Met's orchestra pit.

In all, Mr. Levine will lead three operas in the company's 2013-14 season, including a new production of Verdi's "Falstaff" and revivals of Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte" and Berg's "Wozzeck."

The opera disclosed for the first time on Thursday that Mr. Levine has "a benign form of Parkinsonism," related to Parkinson's disease, that, along with the medication used to treat it, has contributed to the shaking in his legs and left hand. The symptoms were aggravated by his back pain, but aren't expected to worsen and should have little effect on his ability to conduct, said his neurologist, Stanley Fahn, of Columbia University.

Len Horovitz, Mr. Levine's personal physician, said, "James Levine is an inspirational case, whose return to conducting will be a result of remarkable perseverance and hard work."