

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Narrative bio - December 2018

Esa-Pekka Salonen is an uncompromisingly original figure in music, and through his many high-profile conducting roles and powerful compositions he has refined and brought to fruition his vision for the present and future of the symphony orchestra. He is a complete artist; neither a composer who conducts, nor a conductor who composes; a representative of classical music for both insiders and a mainstream audience. "The concert experience has become predictable," Salonen told *The New York Times* earlier this year. "I'm not talking about artistic quality or content of the program, but the ritual itself." His remedy for this perceived stagnation of the classical performance draws from multimedia engagement, technological integration, and an appeal to young and radical compositional voices to write for the orchestra.

Salonen was born in Helsinki in 1958. Hearing Bruckner's fourth symphony and Messiaen's *Turangalila* were the two musical encounters that made him decide on a career in music early-on. Having played the French horn in grade school, Salonen attended the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where he was fully immersed in the then-current rhetoric of European compositional ideology. In high school, tired of the usual essay subjects he was assigned, he wrote one on the defeat of tonalism; his peers chose other topics. Salonen formed a new music-appreciation gang with fellow avant-gardist students Magnus Lindberg and Kaija Saariaho called Korvat Auki! ("Ears Open!"), as well as a performance ensemble called Toimii ("It Works"). These ensembles functioned as both performance groups and workshops, where ideas and compositions were created, critiqued, and polished on a scale not previously known in Finland. Salonen studied composition with Einojuhani Rautavaara in Finland and later with Franco Donatoni in Siena and Niccolò Castiglioni in Milan.

Between the free-for-all ethos and heavy scholasticism of his respective outlets during the Sibelius Academy years, Salonen's talents as a composer were nurtured and refined, and he emerged with a strong compositional voice steeped in avant-garde ideals. Salonen also had become a talented conductor—elected to the role by his composer friends—and he studied under Jorma Panula. After completing his

composition studies, Salonen conducted the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra for the first time in 1979 and has returned to the orchestra frequently since.

Salonen's international conducting career began in 1983, when a last-minute schedule change resulted in him subbing for an absent Michael Tilson Thomas when London's Philharmonia Orchestra performed Mahler's third symphony. Salonen still considered himself more a composer than a conductor, and this career-changing move didn't initially strike him as anything more than a one-off opportunity. "It wasn't a make-or-break thing for me. I wanted to do my best, but I wasn't planning on a conducting career," Salonen told *The Guardian* in 2007. By the next morning, "the phone and fax went mad with all sorts of very important people from the music business. With hindsight, I am grateful that I didn't know who they were." Easy and natural communication with the musicians led to his appointment as the Philharmonia's principal guest conductor from 1985 to 1994. He simultaneously became a coveted guest conductor on the international circuit, earning a permanent role as principal conductor of the Swedish Radio Orchestra from 1985 to 1995. He is now Conductor Emeritus & Creative Advisor to the Philharmonia and Conductor Laureate of the Swedish Radio Orchestra.

Salonen made his United States conducting debut in 1984, when he was invited to guest-conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic by Ernest Fleischmann. "I had no idea what to expect," Salonen noted in a 2008 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, "but the one thing that I didn't expect was when an older player came to talk to me after the first concert and said, 'Consider this your future home'. Something was going on, because I felt the same. I sensed with an absolute certainty that this orchestra, in whatever way, was going to be a very important part of my life." This shared chemistry at his debut led to his appointment as Music Director, effective in 1992. As Music Director, Salonen conducted 973 concerts, 23 tours, and oversaw the construction and 2003 opening of the LA Phil's home, the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall. Salonen served as Music Director for 17 years before stepping down in 2009, and now holds the honorary title of Conductor Laureate.

Salonen's European musical upbringing shows through in his early compositions. Drawing from the uncompromising tradition of the modernist composers of his youth,

early works such as *Floof: Songs of a Homeostatic Homer* follow the strict rules of European modernism, avoiding the traditional boundaries of melody, harmony, and rhythmic pulse in an endless pursuit of newness, but exhibit a playfulness atypical of the genre, with a forward-thinking outlook reflective of his years in the Sibelius Academy. Kaija Saariaho, Salonen's Sibelius Academy schoolmate and co-founder of Korvat Auki!, describes this in a June 2018 *Gramophone* cover story: "His early compositions, written when he was quite young, were intuitive, joyous, beautiful," before "he went through a more cerebral phase during his compositional studies, when the beauty was often replaced by humor and clever ideas."

Salonen's compositional style took a dramatic turn during his years in LA, which he directly attributes to the creative atmosphere and spirit of freedom endemic to California. In a 2015 interview with Alec Baldwin on his podcast *Here's the Thing*, Salonen described his experiences: "That's the thing about Southern California, the freedom, the optimism of the culture, the curiosity....Any colleagues you're talking to—composers, conductors, and other artists—they say the same thing: that coming to California was essential for them to become the artist they wanted to be, or had the potential to be."

Works such as *LA Variations* showcase this new creative energy, while still displaying his earlier Modernist roots in their technically demanding intricacy and harmonic structure. "My focus moved from an ideological principle to a pleasure principle," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2008, revealing that he was comfortable exploring his own ideas outside of the confines of European Modernism. Saariaho sees in this era a re-awakening of Salonen's personality within his work, building on his life experience since completing conservatory. "Starting with the *LA Variations*, he has found his expression as a composer that corresponds to his personality. From that point forward, too, we can recognize his experience as a conductor in his compositions," she continues. "His music has those elements he brings alive when conducting: splendid orchestration, natural breathing, physical drive, humor, and beauty." *LA Variations* was a hit, and has been performed more than 100 times around the world, a development that surprised the composer. "*LA Variations* was meant as a completely local thing," he explained to the *Los Angeles Times*. "A local guy—a new local guy but a local guy nevertheless—writing a piece for the local band for the local audience. That was the deal."

Salonen wrote *Karawane*—a work for chorus and orchestra based on a short poem by Dadaist Hugo Ball—in 2014. At its New York premiere *The New York Times* described it as “...the product of a mature master, working with confidence and patience on a larger canvas. The chorus’s hypnotic incantations have the undergirding of a glistening orchestral landscape, sometimes swaying, sometimes blooming.” *Karawane* has recently appeared in London’s Beechwood Tunnel as part of 2018’s *Tunnel Visions: Array*, a free light-and-sound installation and part of the Barbican Centre’s *OpenFest*. As part of the performance, the walls and ceiling of the tunnel became a canvas for a newly-commissioned animated digital artwork inspired by *Karawane*, allowing an astonishing 17,000 people to journey through the piece of music every half hour over a two-day period. Salonen’s works have historically lent themselves well to public installation and multimedia uses; in 2014, choreographer Justin Peck created an outdoor celebratory piece set to Salonen’s 2005 piece *Helix* as part of a performance commissioned by Glorya Kaufman Dance at The Music Center.

In spring 2018 Salonen wrote a new composition for the LA Phil and hinted at a new work yet to come. *Pollux*, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, premiered at Walt Disney Concert Hall and was subsequently brought on tour to Boston, Washington, D.C., New York, London, and Paris. Salonen describes the composition process of *Pollux*: “My material seemed to want to grow in two completely opposite directions. Finally, I realized that these very different musical identities (I had referred to them as brothers in my sketches) would not fit into one cohesive formal unit, a single piece. They simply couldn’t coexist. This made me think of the myth of the non-identical twins Castor and Pollux, who share half of their DNA but have some extreme phenotype differences, and experience dramatically different fates...My solution was to write two independent but genetically linked orchestral works. *Pollux*, slow and quite dark in expression, is the first of them.”

Salonen has a history of writing works for friends, which incorporate their musical personalities. He has written three concerti—one each for cello, piano, and violin—for soloists Yo-Yo Ma, Yefim Bronfman, and Leila Josefowicz. Co-commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Barbican Centre, and Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Salonen’s cello concerto premiered in Chicago in 2017.

Salonen's violin concerto, commissioned by the LA Phil, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the New York City Ballet, premiered in Los Angeles in 2009. Salonen's piano concerto, co-commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the BBC, the NDR Symphony Orchestra, and Radio France, premiered in New York in 2007. All three premieres were conducted by Salonen, and showcased the talents of their respective soloists against the commissioning orchestras.

Though written with his friends in mind, the three concerti draw heavily from Salonen's idiosyncratic compositional voice. The piano concerto, for example, features a long, science-fiction-inflected segment titled "*Synthetic Folk Music With Artificial Birds.*" In his program notes Salonen writes, "I imagined a post-biological culture, where the cybernetic systems suddenly develop an existential need of folklore. Composing intelligence creates music that somehow relates to an area that long ago was called the Balkans. All this is accompanied by bird-robots. A Homage to Stanisław Lem." In 2018, Salonen conducted a Los Angeles performance of all three concerti—with their respective soloists performing—and his composition *Wing on Wing*, which was composed for the LA Phil's inaugural season at Walt Disney Concert Hall and includes recordings of Southern California's plainfin midshipman fish and distorted samples of the voice of architect Frank Gehry. The *Los Angeles Times* said of the performances, "Following form for Salonen is not following form."

Salonen's compositions have appeared in recorded form on multiple occasions, many under his own baton. A 2000 collection from Sony Classics brought together the then-new compositions *LA Variations*, *Five Images After Sappho*, *Mania*, and *Gambit*, along with a new recording of 1982's *Giro*, all with the LA Philharmonic. In 2005, Deutsche Grammophon released *Wing on Wing*, a disc featuring the eponymous composition as well as the works *Foreign Bodies*, *Insomnia*, and *Dichotomie*, all performed by the Finnish Radio Orchestra with sopranos Anu and Piia Komsu, and conducted by Salonen. The *Los Angeles Times* described this collection as "the most unabashedly beautiful and introspective music that Salonen has written." In 2012, Deutsche Grammophon released *Out of Nowhere*, a pairing of Salonen's violin concerto and the symphonic poem *Nyx*, featuring Leila Josefowicz and the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra with Salonen conducting.

Despite the variety of Salonen's musical interests, he has fashioned profound links with a handful of ensembles, all of which are represented on the spring 2018 release *Esa-Pekka Salonen: The Complete Sony Recordings*. On 23 discs he conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic. On another 12 discs he conducts the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and on 14 he conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra. These discs form the most comprehensive portrait of Salonen as both composer and conductor, covering decades of his career. Also in 2018, Pentatone Music released Salonen's take on Stravinsky's *Persephone*, featuring Andrew Staples, Pauline Cheviller, and the Finnish National Opera's chorus, children's chorus and orchestra. In 2019 Sony will release a recording of his cello concerto with Yo-Yo Ma and the LA Phil.

Salonen's high-profile career as a conductor has led to many lasting positions as a guest conductor in the finest orchestras in the world, and a close relationship with some of the brightest names in opera. Salonen was especially close to Patrice Chéreau, with whom he collaborated on Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2009, with a revival at La Scala in 2010 and a posthumous tribute production at Paris Opera in 2017; and Strauss's *Elektra* at the Aix-en-Provence festival in 2013 and the Metropolitan Opera in 2014, which would be the legendary director's last production.

Salonen has also frequently collaborated with Peter Sellars, starting with a landmark 1992 production of Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* at the Salzburg Festival. The production stood out in a festival known for more conservative works; as *The New York Times* noted, "this was only the opera's second production since its premiere in Paris in 1983, and really the first to take it seriously on dramatic terms." Sellars's controversial production, starring José van Dam and Dawn Upshaw, was accompanied by the LA Phil and Arnold Schönberg Choir, both under Salonen's baton. Sellars and Salonen again joined forces with a 1996 production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, backed by the LA Phil. The production, set in an LA prison complex in the modern day, tied Stravinsky's later years in Beverly Hills with Salonen and Sellars's LA during the years of mass incarceration. The openly political work included articles and statistics on prison reform, selected bible passages, and art by California prisoners, and gained much critical acclaim upon its premiere. Sellars's 1997 production of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, staged in a desolate post-nuclear setting,

enraged the composer to the point of disowning the production, though he greatly approved of Salonen's conducting of the Philharmonia. Sellars and Salonen's 2004 *The Tristan Project* presented a multimedia reappraisal of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, joining music by the LA Phil with a stage production by Sellars, all with Bill Viola's heavily symbolic video interpretation superimposed. *The Tristan Project*, initially performed across three nights—one for each act—was later brought to New York, where the LA Philharmonic performed the project in its entirety as an evening-length engagement in 2007. Sellars and Salonen again collaborated in 2016, with a production of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at Aix-en-Provence.

Salonen has been a frequent conductor at Aix, with the aforementioned appearances with Chéreau and Sellars as well as a Katie Mitchell production of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 2016. In 2019 Salonen is slated to make another appearance, conducting the Philharmonia in an Ivo van Hove production of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Salonen has also made many appearances at Salzburg, where, in addition to his appearances with Sellars, he conducted Janáček's *The Makropulos Affair* in a 2011 production by Christophe Marthaler. Salonen's numerous appearances at Paris Opera include a 2015 evening featuring two Krzysztof Warlikowski productions—Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*—for which he conducted the Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Paris. Salonen again conducted the MET Orchestra in spring 2017 for three performances at Carnegie Hall. Since 2016 he has served as the first-ever Artist in Association of the Finnish National Opera and Ballet, where he will begin his first-ever *Ring* cycle in fall 2019.

Salonen was named Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of London's Philharmonia Orchestra in 2006, and started in 2008. In addition to characteristically ambitious takes on traditional programming, such as 2016's comprehensive *Stravinsky: Myths and Rituals*, which assembled works from across Stravinsky's life with an interactive documentary website and brand-new video content, Salonen's time with the Philharmonia has been marked by forward-thinking high-tech projects. His enthusiasm for emerging technologies has taken the orchestra out of the concert hall and into digital space, with a series of innovative and immersive technological innovations. *The Orchestra*, an app for iPad released in 2012, incorporates footage of Salonen conducting eight pieces from 300 years of classical music. The user has the ability to

single out individual sections and video feeds, which combine with a real-time graphic score to give the user an expanded and exploded view of the orchestral structure. Salonen and the musicians of the Philharmonia provide commentary and background on their respective roles, adding additional depth to the experience. In a 2012 review, *Slate* magazine praised both the selections and their presentation, proclaiming that “it’s not only one of the best albums—you know, a longish compilation of music—you could purchase for someone this holiday season; it’s an app that could easily change how you consume classical music outside of the concert hall. Or how we introduce new listeners to symphonic works in the first place.”

In the *RE-RITE* digital residency installation, Salonen and the Philharmonia invite visitors to step into the Orchestra as they perform *The Rite of Spring*, giving them the opportunity to see and hear the individual parts of each section, try their hands at percussion and conducting, and learn how the interlocking parts of an orchestra come together to form a cohesive whole. This concept was revisited in *Universe of Sound*, an interactive installation featuring projected footage of the Philharmonia performing *The Planets*.

Both of these installations found successors in the Philharmonia’s virtual reality projects *The Virtual Orchestra* (2016), *Beethoven’s Fifth* (2017) and *Mahler 3* (2018). Available on-site and via PlayStation VR and YouTube VR, these immersive experiences have made an enormous impact at home and abroad, appearing in various UK locales as well as high-profile international expositions such as Austin’s South By Southwest festival. The Philharmonia’s approach to VR combines high-definition video, spatially calibrated audio recording and playback, and cutting-edge display technology to create a thoroughly realistic environment. As Neil Fisher put it in a *Times UK* review, “to be plopped, virtually, in the midst of the principal string players, facing Salonen’s downbeat, is an intoxicating experience.” The Philharmonia’s forays into VR build on the immersive educational experience explored in the orchestra’s previous digital projects, seeing them to their logical conclusion with today’s technological offerings, while setting the Philharmonia up for more innovation as new technologies emerge.

Salonen’s role as a technological innovator in the classical music world has made him something of a spokesperson for the genre, and a representative of its future in the

21st century and beyond. This role was formalized in 2014 when, in recognition of Salonen's ready adaptation of technology and especially Apple products in his compositional practice, Salonen and his 2009 violin concerto were made the subject of an iPad commercial. As Alex Ross put it on *The New Yorker's* website, "The very phrase 'classical music,' implying an art devoted exclusively to the past, banishes it into limbo. But I imagine that many composers will be pleased at the sight of Salonen's mass-market breakthrough. Very simply, it says: We exist."

Salonen's Finnish roots and passion for environmental awareness made their way into his advocacy as well, and in 2002 Salonen co-founded the annual Baltic Sea Festival, now in its seventeenth year, which invites celebrated artists to promote unity and ecological awareness among the countries around the Baltic Sea. The festival, hosted in Stockholm, serves multiple purposes beyond a forum for musical exhibition. "Our primary interest is to present the very best musical and artistic products from the Baltic Sea region," Salonen writes. "The second aspect is to bring emerging phenomena and ensembles to the forefront. The third aspect is political and environmental. I'm not so naïve that I believe that classical musicians will be able to save the Baltic Sea from environmental abuse. But I do believe that our chances to improve the situation will be much greater if we contribute to raising the general consciousness, by permeating the festival with an ecological theme." In a 2014 conversation with the *Financial Times*, Salonen elaborated on the political aspects of the festival, and the Baltic Sea at large: "There are a couple of difficult borders—NATO and non-NATO, EU and non-EU. My thought was we should try to ignore these borders and look at it as a cultural and historic region that has had a lot in common over the years." Salonen served as Artistic Director of the festival from its founding until 2018, when he stepped down to focus on other projects.

Salonen is the recipient of many major awards, including the UNESCO Rostrum Prize for his work *Floof* in 1992 and the Siena Prize, given by the Accademia Chigiana, in 1993; he is the first conductor to receive it. In 1995 he received the Royal Philharmonic Society's Opera Award and two years later, its Conductor Award. Salonen was awarded the Litteris et Artibus medal, one of Sweden's highest honors, by the King of Sweden in 1996. In 1998 the French government awarded him the rank of Officier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Salonen was also honored with the Pro Finlandia Medal of the

Order of the Lion of Finland and the Helsinki Medal. In 2012, Salonen's Violin Concerto was awarded the University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition. Most recently he was honored with the 2014 Nemmers Composition Prize, which included a residency at the Henry and Leigh Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University and performances by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. To date, Salonen has received seven honorary doctorates in four different countries. *Musical America* named him its Musician of the Year in 2006, and he was elected an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2010.