



Critical Acclaim

Esa-Pekka Salonen, 2023–24

San Francisco Chronicle: [Review: S.F. Symphony gives exciting piano concerto an irresistible world premiere](#) (October 13, 2023)

“The second half of the concert was devoted to one of the most thrillingly dynamic accounts of Beethoven’s Second Symphony I’ve ever heard live... The tempos were swift and aggressive, the phrasing hard-edged. It was glorious. Salonen bounded onto the stage afterward for the curtain call, his face wreathed in a smile and with an almost breathless air of accomplishment. He knew exactly what he’d just pulled off.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [A Tale of Three Orchestras at the California Festival](#) (November 28, 2023)

“Salonen confirmed his standing as one of the best conductors of Igor Stravinsky on the planet with a vigorous, impressively polished performance of the Symphony in Three Movements, very much set in the composer’s craggy, irresistibly rhythmic style. Salonen had the orchestra in peak form this afternoon; the brass had bite, the balances were good all around, and everybody was playing as one.”

Musical America: [Sibelius and Solidarity on the Davies Hall Stage](#) (March 19, 2024)

“While Salonen’s tenure has been marked by a commitment to new music, commissions, collaborative partnerships, and other innovations, the Sibelius bill confirmed his distinctive command of symphonic staples—such as the opening tone poem, *Finlandia*. In a cohesive, darkly compelling performance, the conductor banished lushness and sentimentality in favor of an urgent, driven incisiveness.

“Sibelius’s lustrous First Symphony took on a near-mystical glow. As this expansive and dynamic work unfurled, Salonen and the orchestra covered its terrain with vigor, delicacy, and insight. Each movement had something fresh to behold.”

Musical America: [A Stirring Example of Salonen’s Vision in San Francisco](#) (June 10, 2024)

“Salonen led a subtly articulate account of the score, full of surges and retreats that heightened the singer’s shifting emotional terrain without upstaging it. Individual details—a bassoon’s lament, the celesta’s twinkly shimmer, a muted trumpet’s strangled cry—stood out for a moment before giving way to *Erwartung*’s ceaseless, shifting flow.”

Seen & Heard International: [Captivating Russian works from Sheku Kanneh-Mason and the San Francisco Symphony led by Salonen](#) (June 15, 2024)

“Salonen picked up a microphone to introduce *Fairytale Poem*, and the audience greeted him with a torrent of applause, a heartfelt tribute to a music director who recently announced that he is leaving the orchestra a year from now... The orchestral version provided ten minutes of sonic delights, especially the fascinating interactions among woodwinds, harps and percussion.”

San Francisco Chronicle: [While tensions run high between S.F. Symphony leadership and musicians, Salonen scores with beautiful Bruckner](#) (June 23, 2024)

“If every Bruckner performance were as successful as Salonen’s ‘Romantic,’ this non-fan might just become a Bruckner admirer. [Salonen brought] grandeur and a glorious majesty to a work that in lesser hands could easily devolve into vulgarity or pompousness... He shaped each phrase carefully and with remarkable flexibility in local tempos. His usual orchestral sound is comparatively lean and transparent, but for the Bruckner piece, Salonen had the strings dig in to make a richer, warmer, perhaps more Germanic, sound.”

Musical America: [Salonen Circles Back to Mahler 3 to Close SFS Season](#) (July 2, 2024)

“Salonen was at his finest here, leading the orchestra from the Adagio’s murmurous still waters to a crowing, exultant climax. Everything was carefully deployed to deliver maximum effect, the early restraint building narrative tension released in the closing bars. As two timpanis thundered out a dominant-tonic punctuation, the triumphal final phrases of the evening filled the house.”

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Esa-Pekka Salonen, 2022–23

San Francisco Chronicle: [With S.F. Symphony, Esa-Pekka Salonen puts a new and distinctive stamp on Mahler](#) (September 30, 2022)

“Under Salonen’s baton, the orchestra sprang immediately to life from the opening measures... Salonen, though, remained the man of the hour, putting his own imprint on music that has been done here frequently ... and turning it into something sleek and aerodynamic. That priority registered most strikingly in the symphony’s first movement, a huge funeral march punctuated by extended side episodes. In Salonen’s reading, the music emerged with a dazzling sonic glare. Instrumental sections worked in high contrast, rhythms operated with knife-edge sharpness, and the orchestral colors stood out as if against a Nordic landscape.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Esa-Pekka Salonen Leads a Glorious “Resurrection” Symphony](#) (October 3, 2022)

“Salonen’s approach emphasized Mahler’s large-scale thinking and the numerous thematic and rhythmic connections across the symphony. The orchestra’s explosive outbursts were all there – the air in Davies thrummed at the fierceness of the opening phrases – but what lingers most in this reviewer’s memory is the extraordinary grace of Salonen’s conducting and the play of musical lines against each other. However large or loud the forces playing at any time were, the orchestral sound was always transparent and held in equipoise.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [SF Symphony Takes Flight in a Magnificent Firebird](#) (October 10, 2022)

“Conductor and orchestra seemed in perfect sync in this virtuosic, even athletic, performance. Not least of the pleasures was watching Salonen’s lithe and expressive baton, as balletic as the firebird itself. The finale brought the entire audience to its feet seconds after the music ended – and rightly.”

The Daily Californian: [Yuja Wang thunders through Magnus Lindberg’s “Piano Concerto No. 3” with SF Symphony](#) (October 20, 2022)

“Salonen graciously layered the orchestra’s voices and brought out wondrous contrast. He coaxed quiet drones from the basses, the soft and sturdy soil for violins to promenade. The melody moved between instruments like fleecy clouds gliding in and out of sight, smooth and natural.”

The Daily Californian: [SF Symphony spooks with eerie, eccentric ‘Frankenstein and Psycho’](#) (November 11, 2022)

“Music director Esa-Pekka Salonen conducted and set the piece at a thrilling tempo, layering its different parts with precision. His urgent movement titillated fright and excitement... Quiet passages pulsed with

anxiety, taut like the spring of a mousetrap. Wicked anticipation penetrated lyrical lines as their wailing expression departed from beauty and grew feverish and maddening.”

The Wall Street Journal: [Salonen Conducts a Bewitching Premiere in San Francisco](#) (February 23, 2023)

“The conductor made a symphony of vast scale almost intimate at times, drawing in listeners rather than allowing the work to overwhelm. His approach was energized and swiftly paced, yet still grandly conceived... Mr. Salonen [allowed] trombones and trumpets (three each), along with five horns and a tuba, their full-throated glory without ever swamping the splendidly unified woodwinds and strings.”

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Esa-Pekka Salonen, 2021-22

The Daily Californian: [Beloved jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding shows splendor at the Davies Symphony Hall](#) (October 2, 2021)

“New musical director Esa-Pekka Salonen brought his Finnish flair to the night, standing at the helm of the orchestra pit and commanding the symphony with animated baton movements. Known for his modern and bold choices of orchestration, Salonen breathed fresh life into Davies. Salonen navigated the program’s variety with attentive skill. His baton flew with unrestrained fervor, encouraging each section of players to step into the limelight.”

Seen and Heard International: [Esa-Pekka Salonen, Jeremy Denk, Claire Chase and the SFS take wing with colorful bird music](#) (October 19, 2021)

“What stood out to me in all these works was the flow that Salonen drew from the orchestra, with and without strings, big ensembles and small. He shaped tone, color, phrasing and pace into something that felt utterly natural. It brimmed with personality while adhering to each composer’s style.”

Stage and Cinema: [Music Review: EXOTIC BIRDS: DEBUSSY, MESSIAEN AND SAARIAHO](#) (October 19, 2021)

“Esa-Pekka Salonen walked slowly to the podium and when he arrived, he stood, frozen, for an extended period of time, as if he were calling upon a moment of silence and so, when the first bars of Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à L’Après-midi d’un faune* were heard, they seemed to emanate from the stillness of Salonen himself. The limpid movement of his hands and fingers seemed to magically transform a familiar piece of music into a work of pastoral simplicity, bringing new freshness and clarity to the score.”

Musical America: [Salonen Leads a Playfully Realized *Prometheus*](#) (March 2, 2022)

“With his crisp, clear tempos and knack for teasing out bright but well-blended orchestral colors, the conductor made a small feast of the score. Key changes, of which there are plenty, came as energizing jumps.”

The Daily Californian: [SF Symphony’s ‘The Creatures of Prometheus’ scintillates with humanism, wit](#) (March 7, 2022)

“At the helm of the orchestra, Finnish conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen was the picture of panache and lithe grace. His frenetic baton reveled in dynamics, deftly maintaining a heartbeat of liveliness that pulses through quietude lyrical passages or slowed tempos.”

San Francisco Chronicle: [Esa-Pekka Salonen and S.F. Symphony raise the roof with a powerful program](#) (March 4, 2022)

“Salonen and the orchestra joined forces to give Scriabin’s “Poem of Ecstasy” just the muscle and fervor it needs. This is a piece that is consistently trying to melt into a gooey mass onstage, but Salonen wasn’t

having it. He gave the music all the billowy lyricism it needed and brought things to a potent, full-barreled close that left the audience poleaxed.”

Musical America: [Salonen, San Francisco, Stravinsky: A Moment to Remember](#) (March 15, 2022)

“Salonen was an animated presence on the podium, punching out the spiky rhythms or coaxing a sweet exhalation from the violins. Even a lightly clashing cymbal seemed charged with meaning.”

Seen and Heard International: [Salonen and Sellars effectively link Stravinsky’s Oedipus Rex with Symphony of Psalms](#) (June 12, 2022)

“Salonen’s ability to drive the music with great expression, precision and sonic variety consistently grabs the audience’s attention.”