

philharmonia orchestra

February 2009 – Esa-Pekka Salonen on the Vienna Series

Esa-Pekka Salonen – Principal Conductor

This is one of the most interesting periods in all of music. I've always been fascinated by the fact that in such a short space of time so much that was new was being born and developing into lots of different directions, not only within music but also in literature, the visual arts and applied arts. There was so much going on in that one place and time that it is almost a miracle. I don't think there is any place or time in history that would quite compare; for a couple of decades there were no rules.

The fact that we have these two masterpieces as bookends of the series is, of course, a symbol for the journey. You can very clearly see where it's coming from and you can easily hear and discern the diagonals from all the great predecessors: the Beethovens, the Mozarts, the Haydns and Schuberts and so on and so forth. You can follow how the language – the principles – of musical language dissolve first, and then something new crystallises out of this liquid state, and I think this is one of the most fascinating processes in music: to see how old becomes the new.

The guiding principal in these programmes is not necessarily a didactic one. I am not trying to teach anybody anything in particular; it is about the music. I put together works that I love deeply, that I admire and that have a very profound and powerful effect on me. It is a very mysterious thing why Schoenberg still poses this problem, but in all honesty, I have to say that the ugliest Schoenberg pieces are formidably ugly; they possess this very impressive ugliness that you cannot ignore. It is not like some pimple on the skin, it is like a crocodile in your bedroom: you really cannot ignore it. It is right there, it is rather dangerous and will eat you up if you're not careful.

When you think of the best works of Schoenberg they are as good as anybody's best works, and in his very best music he's a visionary: a deeply emotional and very exciting composer. I would say the *Gurrelieder* is a particularly fascinating piece when you think of the journey of Schoenberg. This was a bank clerk who envisioned the hugest piece of repertoire in the classical canon and it is terribly touching and moving to think about this. I'll never forget the first time I heard *Gurrelieder* in a concert, never ever as long as I live. The moment when the chorus comes in for the first time – this almost animal scream that the men produce – I practically fell off the chair, and even though I've conducted it a few times I'm always anticipating when the chorus comes in because it is such a dramatic moment.

Audio Extract – Schoenberg's Gurrelieder

It starts from a very post Wagnerian or Straussian place. As it took such a long time for him to complete it, it ends up on a completely different planet and all this happens within one piece. You would think that the music wouldn't hang together, that it would just fall apart in terms of form and expression but it doesn't. Somehow, despite the fact that Schoenberg is already saying goodbye to a lot of guiding principals there is something about his personality which is so powerful. Whatever he does is always Schoenberg and therefore belongs together, and this is the mystery and miracle of *Gurrelieder*.

The second string quartet starts off as any old post-Romantic chamber music piece. It is very good music but there is nothing special about it. Then the quartet starts going to places where music hadn't been going. He somehow hits the limits of the medium of the string quartet and decides to add a soprano to this. The first line the soprano sings is this very famous line: *Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten* – "I feel air from other planets".

Audio Extract – Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2

This marks the beginning of a very fascinating and extraordinary period in Schoenberg's production – this free, atonal music that is for me, amongst the most extraordinary music ever written by anybody. My own, guiding principal in terms of putting all this music together is the idea that what moves me is likely to move quite a lot of other people. What I find exciting is very likely to have the same effect on other people as well because we are not that different and I believe that at the end of the day there is something universal about a deep musical experience. I think these are wonderful compositions – amongst the best compositions written by anybody – and that is why we want to perform them.