

# philharmonia orchestra

## **Esa-Pekka Salonen at Classic FM**

### **Anne-Marie Minhall – Classic FM Presenter**

First of all it's a great pleasure to welcome you through the doors of Classic FM Esa-Pekka. Last time we spoke it was in Stockholm in August last year and you were about to take up your position of Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor to the Philharmonia. I wanted to ask you first of all, how's everything going?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen – Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor**

Thank you. It's going wonderfully. Of course I knew the Philharmonia very well even before I took up the title. But it's different, it feels different because it's some kind of a formalisation of a relationship that has been going on for years. I wasn't actually expecting to feel that different about it but I do. There's a sort of sense of really belonging together, the musical fates have merged into something, and I have to say that musically and on a social level as well, it has been a sheer pleasure to work with these people.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

August sees you embarking on a major festival tour with the Philharmonia taking in many cities including your home city of Helsinki. I wondered how that was going to feel for you, taking your orchestra home.

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

Well it's always special and my mum is going to be there so the stakes are high! It's particularly interesting for me of course. Last time I took a foreign orchestra to Helsinki it was the LA Philharmonia, my previous band, and now I will be visiting with my new orchestra. The Philharmonia hasn't been in Finland for many, many years, and I think the last time we did concerts together in Finland was in the late 80s or in 1990 or something like that. So it's almost 20 years ago. So it's about time to go and show up.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

One of the works on the programme will be your piano concerto which was premiered back in 2007. And it's going to be played by the man that you dedicated it to, Yefim Bronfman. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about it. You've written for solo instruments and orchestra before, was it very different writing for the piano and orchestra?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

Well the piano of course is a challenging solo instrument in the sense that it can do almost everything an orchestra can do. What I discovered in this process was that if the piano is doing a lot of things and the orchestra is doing a lot of things at the same time it's very easy to cover the piano with the orchestra activities. So to find the right balance and yet to keep the dynamics between the solo part and the orchestra part interesting was not completely simple.

So I decided to treat the solo piano part, especially in the first movement, as something that is not fixed at one particular point in the picture but it moves in and out a little bit. It sort of zooms in and out a little bit. Sometimes it is completely on the surface playing alone, sometimes only with a few instruments. Sometimes it becomes a chamber music partner: there is a big viola solo accompanied by the piano, and then sometimes it becomes part of an ensemble as part of the orchestra and then sometimes it becomes an orchestral instrument and then sometimes I just let it drown. So the solo part has all these different positions against the orchestra.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

And did you know that you wanted Yefim Bronfman to play it when you were writing it?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

That was the plan from the very beginning. In fact we started talking about a piano concerto already 9 years ago. 7 years ago before I actually wrote it. He's a very good friend of mine, we've played countless concerts together. So he suggested I write a piano concerto for him and I thought it was a great idea, and I just didn't get around to do it. Finally when I was going back to the New York Philharmonic after a time of almost 2 decades, they suggested that I write something for them, for that occasion. That then became the piano concerto.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

Does it feel different when you're conducting your own music?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

In the beginning it does, when the piece is very fresh. Especially when it is completely untried, i.e. I haven't heard it yet. So that certainly does feel different. In the very short time that is usually allowed to us to rehearse you have to get it all in somehow. You have to understand what works, what doesn't work. Is there something you have to change in the score? Is there something you have to make the orchestra play differently? Who is at fault, is it the orchestra or the conductor or the composer? And the fact that the conductor and composer in this case are the same person doesn't help because you still have to go through this process 'did I make a mistake as a composer or as a conductor?' In fact it's rather unpleasant the very first hours. And while my composition teacher used to say 'never go to the first rehearsal' if you're conducting it you don't have a choice. Then from the second rehearsal on things usually gel. The balance will sort itself out gradually and you get used to hearing what you are hearing which is the reality as opposed to what you were imagining. Sometimes they match pretty closely and sometimes there are surprises in life but that's how it goes.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

October sees the culmination of this major project that you've undertaken with the Philharmonia, *Vienna: City of Dreams*. I also want to ask you about the work that's really going to bring this project to a close in a moment, but to take you back to when we were talking about this last time, this is a project that explores the music and culture of this great city between 1900 and 1935. A period of time which you say was a most fascinating one for music because of the changes that music went through.

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

It was an amazing time and I believe unprecedented in history. In the sense that in one place, one city, all that new thinking would take place and within such a small time frame as well. So if you think of the year 1900 for instance, what was going on? Klimt and his pals had just started the Secession movement, Schoenberg was writing *Gurrelieder*, Freud had just published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, all these new theories in physics were discussed, in that very same city. It's one of those amazing moments in arts when for no apparent reason all this energy just emerges in one place. Then there's this feverish activity, a real sense of discovery, new things happening every day, and then comes the First World War. Once that is over the invention and innovation is still going on but it has changed its nature from the opulence and limitless madness of the years before the war. Everybody has sobered up and things are becoming smaller in scale and the expression is becoming more serious perhaps. For the first time there is a social element in all this. What is this art for? Who is going to use it? In fact the social democratic government of Austria after the war was the first government to my knowledge that actually had a cultural budget. So all of a sudden we are in a totally different situation.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

You began the project to rave reviews with Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*. You're ending with Berg's *Wozzeck*. And that's a work which you believe is probably the most important work of that era.

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

It's hard to say really which work would be the pinnacle of achievement. But *Wozzeck* certainly, apart from the fact that it's a masterful composition from every point of view, from the emotional impact, from the expression, the form and all that, it also tells a story which is timeless. Exploitation of the weak by the strong. That theme is as important today as it was then and will always be. In that sense *Wozzeck* is perhaps the most universal of all these works created during those years.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

November marks the 25th anniversary since you first conducted the orchestra. You mentioned earlier Esa-Pekka the LA Philharmonic, you did 17 seasons with them and I wanted to ask you how it felt handing the reins over to Gustavo Dudamel and in fact if you've spoken to him about the orchestra and what to expect and how to work with them?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

I had my farewell concerts with the LA Philharmonic in mid-April and I wasn't quite prepared to that intensity of feeling at the last concert. 17 years is a long time and it really felt like a very decisive moment in my life. When I woke up the following morning the feeling really was 'now this is over'. And I have to say that it was such a relief and such a pleasure to come back to London, to the Philharmonia after the few weeks of break after the last LA Philharmonic concerts. I realised that this is my new life, this is what I'm going to do, this is where music is going to happen for me now. That was a wonderful thing to experience again.

In terms of Gustavo, I'm a big fan of his. I know him very well and I actually happened to be on the jury when he won the Gustav Mahler competition which basically launched his international career. I saw him conduct the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra and I was completely knocked out by the talent and the natural way music flows out of this man. I called the managing director of the LA Philharmonic right away from Bamberg and I said 'look, you have to get this guy to conduct because he's something else. I haven't quite seen anything like this before.' He came to guest conduct and then he came back. I was at his second concert with the LA Philharmonic with my wife and in the middle of the first piece I whispered to my wife 'this is the guy, this is the man, here is the one.'

In many ways it's really inspiring and encouraging for me to see that sort of talent emerging from the new generation. People of my generation then feel that there is continuity, there is a bright future for music indeed and he is going to carry the torch.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

One of the areas you were looking forward to exploring you said when you took up the post full-time with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London was you were hoping to collaborate more with artists and musicians in London. I wondered if you'd made any progress on that.

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

I haven't physically moved to London yet and we are in the process of setting up a home in London. I'm hoping that once we are here I will be able to follow the scene much more than before. I can already tell now that the possibilities in London are limitless, endless, because everybody's here and everybody's passing through London sooner or later. The amount of new thinking on every level that is happening in London is staggering. What especially interests me is of course how to combine the new media and the possibilities of the new media with the kind of music we play. How to make this collaboration seem organic rather than something that is just added on top of the old foundation. This is a challenge but I think we're making real progress in this thinking at the moment.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

Just finally, we all know that conductors have crazy lives. They're very busy, they're travelling, they're conducting, but yours seems to be an extraordinarily packed one as well. You're composing, you have the Baltic Sea Festival which you work on as well, guest conducting with orchestras like the Vienna Philharmonic very shortly as well. Do you ever fear that there's not enough time in the day or that there is too much that you have to do. Or is everything just a great challenge and a joy for you to take on?

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

Well of course we have good days and bad days as everybody does. There are mornings when I wake up and I think 'what the heck am I doing?! Why am I doing this?' And then there are moments when I think 'I am such a privileged person. I'm allowed to work with this kind of material, with this kind of music with these kind of musicians.' That's mostly my feeling. I'm just deeply grateful that I'm doing what I always wanted to do. It's amazing, mostly. In terms of my schedule, I'm actually conducting a lot less in sheer number of weeks than most of my colleagues. I don't conduct maybe more than half the year. I'm trying to carve out some time for composing. And also there is this thing called life that is so much talked about, that you should have one. I'm interested in that concept and I'm trying to develop a life for myself.

### **Anne-Marie Minhall**

Well we wish you continued success in all your endeavours. Esa-Pekka Salonen, thank you very much indeed.

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen**

Thank you very much.