

## Jukka-Pekka Saraste returns to Cleveland with “Beethoven’s Fateful Fifth”

by Mike Telin



After presenting two concerts at New York’s Carnegie Hall on the 20th and 21st of January, The Cleveland Orchestra then headed south for their Florida residency. And on Friday, February 9 at 7:30 pm, they will return to their home base of Severance Music Center to present the first of three performances of Schubert’s *Symphony No. 6* and Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at

3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

This week also marks the long-awaited return of Finnish conductor Jukka-Pekka Saraste. “It’s a pleasure to come back to Cleveland. It’s been a while — my last time was when I was in Toronto [as music director of the Toronto Symphony] — so it must have been about 20 years ago,” he said during a Zoom conversation from his home in Helsinki.

How does he prepare to conduct a work as popular as Beethoven 5? “I have to think and find my way of doing it,” he said. Saraste said that he recorded the complete Beethoven symphony cycle some years ago with the WDR Symphony Orchestra and he recalled having found No. 5 to be the most rewarding. “I thought that it kind of fitted my mood at that time very well. It’s so energetic and the opening motive is like a signal to the world about classical music.”

When asked about the program’s title — “Beethoven’s Fateful Fifth” — the conductor said that when Beethoven composed the piece, he was experiencing turmoil in his life. “Clearly for him, it was an effort to cling on to something that he was starting to lose. Not only his hearing, but also other things in his life. So he either goes into destruction or

survives.” He added that the composer’s will to survive is clearly heard in the work’s finale. “The ending is like a victory.”

Does Saraste have a favorite section of the symphony? “The transition of the third movement into the finale is something that I find extremely exciting. The anticipation of the finale and the almost non-expression of the pianissimo before exploding — that’s something that even as a young violin player I thought, that’s my favorite part.”

Does Saraste think Beethoven 5 is overplayed? He said that when you actually look at the archives, many times you find that it’s not performed as much as you think. “It’s a funny thing. When I was planning a program in Norway with the Oslo Philharmonic Festival, I suggested Beethoven 5, and the festival people said, ‘But it’s played so often.’ And then they checked, and it was last played eighteen years earlier. This happens sometimes with that piece.”

Turning our conversation to Schubert 6, the conductor said that it’s a piece he has always loved. “It’s so operatic. I know that in Vienna, the superstar of that time was Rossini, and you can hear the echoes of that happy operatic music in this piece, particularly in the last movement.”

In general, Saraste is enamored with the music of Schubert. “If I had to put on any piece of classical music just to listen to, I would put on his piano sonatas. I think he’s a genius with melody and harmony, and the way he develops the harmony to keep things moving forward is fascinating.”

Speaking of fascinating, Saraste’s conducting career began at an early age. “Yeah, it happened very early, but I had the opportunity to develop my conducting in a nice environment.” He explained that the conductor of his youth orchestra had studied conducting with John Barbirolli. “He somehow gave me ideas about how you can find the tempos and the characters for music. And then I tried those things myself. I was 12 years old — and I had my own little orchestra by the time I was a teenager.”

But it was playing violin that developed his knowledge of how an orchestra functions. “I always watched the conductors and would think, ‘this works really well, this doesn’t work so well.’ So I tried to learn as much as I could just by watching.”

Then, at the age of 18, Saraste happened to meet the celebrated conducting teacher Jorma Panula at his violin professor’s birthday party. “I asked him if he had space in his studio, and he said, ‘Come to the audition,’ which went very smoothly — and we became good friends immediately. There were only two other conductors in his studio, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Osmo Vänskä, and it was very interesting because I was a string player,

Osmo was a clarinet player, and Esa-Pekka was a horn player. So each of us had our own approach to the orchestra and our own specialties in the orchestra, which I think was quite good for each of us.”

Saraste noted that generations of successful conductors have come from Finland. “I think it’s because of something I would call independence of mind. The Finnish conductors are not copying each other or the professors — they are able to be themselves, whether you like it or not.”

Still, after many years of being a conductor, what keeps Jukka-Pekka Saraste inspired? “It may sound like a cliché, but I think if I can do Sibelius 2 for the 250th time and feel that it was a little bit better than the one before, then that is one motivation to keep going.”

Mentoring young conductors is now an important part of Saraste’s musical life. Six years ago he and his team created LEAD, a foundation with a mission to support the emerging careers of the next generation of young conductors and aspiring orchestra leaders.

Saraste said that LEAD was born out of a common topic of conversation: finding good leaders. “Then I started thinking — what does that mean to be a leader? And our team started thinking that maybe we could offer some kind of mentoring. We put together an orchestra that consists of highly skilled string players that all have the capacity to become leaders — section leaders, or concertmasters, or whatever.”

The Fiskars Summer Festival and the [LEAD Foundation](#) also host masterclasses for conductors. “But these masterclasses are a bit different from the usual ones because there are at least three or four conductors in the same room, and the feedback is very different from each of us. I think the conductors who are being mentored have access to different styles and personalities, which probably is what has made the Festival unique and very successful at the same time.”

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