

Susanna Mälkki Returns to lead The Cleveland Orchestra

by Mike Telin



“I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to work with The Cleveland Orchestra — I think it’s a crown jewel,” Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki said during a recent telephone conversation from her hotel in Cleveland. “I’m very happy to be here and I’m really looking forward to these concerts.”

On Thursday, February 29 at 7:30 pm Mälkki will return to Severance Music Center to lead The Orchestra in

performances of Paul Hindemith’s *Mathis der Maler Symphony* and Anton Webern’s arrangement of J.S. Bach’s “Ricercar” from the *Musical Offering*, along with Clara Schumann’s *Piano Concerto* with the young British pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason as soloist. The program will be repeated on Friday, March 1 at 11:00 am (no Webern) and Saturday, March 2 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

I began our conversation by asking about her previous visits to Cleveland.

Mike Telin: You made your debut with The Cleveland Orchestra in 2015 — Is this your fifth appearance with the Orchestra?

Susanna Mälkki: I think it’s something like that: I’ve been to Severance three times and then last summer I was at Blossom.

MT: The program is very interesting — do you see a connection between the three pieces?

SM: It started with the idea of *Mathis der Maler*, which is a piece I’ve done quite a lot recently. I asked whether the orchestra was interested in it and apparently they were happy to do it, because it’s not played very often.

It's an incredible symphonic piece that is a combination of different moments from his opera. I'm happy to be championing it because I think — unjustly — that Hindemith has a reputation of being very academic.

It's also a very dramatic piece — the topic of the opera is dramatic. It has some sublime beauty, is very powerful, and has such luminosity. It's one of my favorite pieces at the moment.

You asked how the pieces go together. I think that Webern's arrangement of the Ricercare and the Hindemith are at least cousins in the sense that they use classical counterpoint. I think it's classical — some people might say neoclassical — but it's an interesting piece. That's basically how the opening and closing pieces are related.

And of course Clara Schumann's concerto is something different, but it has the same cultural roots. This is a very early piece by her but I think it's a wonderful concerto. It's just really fun.



MT: Have you worked with Isada Kanneh-Mason before?

SM: I haven't, and I'm looking forward to meeting her tomorrow. I worked with her cellist brother Sheku a couple of years ago — we did Elgar together in London. But this is the first time I'll be working with her.

MT: You left your position with the Helsinki Philharmonic after the '22-'23 season — am I correct that you are without a music directorship of an orchestra at the moment.

SM: Yeah, I'm a free agent.

MT: What made you decide to become a free agent?

SM: It's an interesting time for me. I'm very drawn to opera so that's one reason — I'm working more in opera houses than before. And as you know, opera takes up a lot more time on the calendar than orchestras. Since I'm very keen to do that, I thought I should give myself the chance to really explore it.

Also, I was invited to the Helsinki Philharmonic to make a difference, and we had a fantastic seven years of exploring all kinds of repertoire. We did some nice recordings as well. I'm very happy to see that the orchestra is now in a very good place.

There are so many different ways of making a career, and when you are a music director of an orchestra you have a lot of responsibility. You dedicate yourself to the position, and then you take a breather and go on to the next challenge, so it's a nice curve.

MT: I understand completely why you would just want to take on new challenges. And I saw on your website that you have quite a few opera engagements. Congratulations.

SM: Thank you. There was no drama involved, and the repertoire is so huge that there's enough music for several lifetimes. I have some big pieces coming up. And now I can tell you the super news. The Met announced their next season, and I'm so thrilled to be conducting *Fidelio* in the spring — that's a huge thing.

MT: I saw that and again, congratulations. Now, if you don't mind, the last time we talked you shared some of the highlights of your conducting career. But you ended by saying the most extraordinary journey is always in the music itself. Can you share some of the those musical highlights?

SM: I have to think. I absolutely loved the years in Helsinki because I worked with many people I grew up with, and lots of friends. It was very special to go on tour with them, because there was this pride about Finnish culture playing Sibelius symphonies with them — so there was this kind of meta level of thinking.

And I feel so blessed to be able to have worked with such incredible orchestras like Cleveland. But it's really about the experiences — not only the repertoire but also the different cultures. I stepped in at the Gewandhaus last year, and that was extraordinary. I also went to Barcelona last year — we did Puccini's *Il trittico*, which may surprise you.

I'm remembering all of this from the top of my head, but I think I would still agree with what I said earlier — the music is always the essence.

I've been exploring Bruckner whose music I actually waited quite a long time to take on. I didn't want to do it too early because I have such a respect for his music. But now I'm keen to do more. And when you enter into that realm — that kind of musical universe — it's larger than life. Definitely doing my first Bruckner No. 8 was very memorable, and things like that make you really humble.

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