

A remarkable night with the Cleveland Orchestra: Salonen conducts Salonen (Oct. 10)

by Daniel Hathaway | ClevelandClassical
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CLEVELAND, Ohio — There's a little Finnish invasion happening at Severance Music Center this weekend. On Thursday, October 10, conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen joined cellist Senja Rummukainen for the Cleveland premiere of his Cello Concerto (to be repeated on October 12 and 13).

The concept of terroir, the combination of factors that gives wine grapes their distinctive character, can also be applied to music. Both the Salonen concerto and its companion piece, Jean Sibelius' Fifth Symphony, breathe a Nordic feeling, expressed more perfectly in notes than in words. And it's not merely coincidental that both works end with references to birds.

The concerto — beautifully constructed thematically, harmonically, and rhythmically — is an enchanting journey for soloist and orchestra alike. Rummukainen was the perfect

match for the sonic and technical intricacies of the piece, and who is better equipped to guide its performance than its composer.

At the outset, a chaotic churning takes place in the orchestra before the soloist and the cello section enter with a simple, melodic line. After some two minutes, the solo cello departs on its own. Rummukainen's richly hued tone darted in and out of the mix, singing clearly through the often thick orchestration, and swirling clouds of notes were clear in all registers of her instrument.



The second movement erupts with a cloudburst of sound, reinforced by the percussion section. Rummukainen's solo lines, captivatingly echoed by electronic loops, rang mysteriously in the hall. Her dialogue with alto flutist Linda White was haunting.

A slow transition into the third movement led the way to a long, complex cadenza for solo cello, before being joined by congas and bongos — played out front by Marc Damoulakis — turning the music into a dance.

The soloist took over and gradually built, as Rummukainen's line slowly ascended into the highest register on the instrument, coming to rest on a high B-flat that faded into the hall amid soft cries of seagulls.

The audience, silent for 30 minutes, gave the musicians a riotous ovation. After several callbacks, Rummukainen offered a bonus: Sibelius' expressive *Theme and Variations in d minor*.

To open the program, Salonen led a lovely performance of Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, a tribute to French baroque dance suites that could be considered a concerto in its own right. Oboist Frank Rosenwein's solo magically opened the *Prélude*, then he seamlessly traded the melodic line with his English horn colleague Robert Walters.

The *Forlane* was regal, full of nuances and subtle shifts in tempo. The tender *Minuet* featured another shapely solo from Rosenwein and Salonen took his time stretching out the ending to beautiful effect.

The conductor established — and the Orchestra maintained — a brisk tempo for the *Rigaudon*, while achieving a beautiful blend. All the phrases dovetailed in a magical, colorful adventure.

Jean Sibelius worried over his fifth symphony, making a second and a third revision before calling it done. Salonen and The Cleveland Orchestra created a majestic opening by the horns and winds with a big sound and blended colors. Bassoonist John Clouser's burnished tone projected wonderfully into the hall. The first movement turns into a folk dance, before ending abruptly.

The gentle middle movement introduces winds playing sweetly in thirds, supported by pizzicato strings, before transitioning to the brass intoning another glorious hymn — “to the Nordic Gods.” In his diary, Sibelius wrote that his inspiration for that noble theme was the sight of sixteen swans flying in formation overhead: “One of my greatest experiences! Lord God, that beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming, silver ribbon...”

Much like the memory of this remarkable concert at Severance.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra.

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