

Salonen to conduct his Cello Concerto With Senja Rummukainen at Severance

by Mike Telin



“I’m looking forward to coming to the Severance Hall, and working with Esa-Pekka, who is a wonderful musician, conductor, and composer is going to be an amazing experience for sure,” Finnish cellist Senja Rummukainen said during a recent interview. “But getting to play with The Cleveland Orchestra is the greatest thing that’s happened to me — it’s still a bit unreal.”

On Thursday, October 10 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center, Rummukainen will make her Cleveland Orchestra debut with Esa-Pekka Salonen’s *Cello Concerto*. Under the direction of the composer, the concert will also include Maurice Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and Jean Sibelius’ *Symphony No. 5*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Completed in 2017, the Concerto was premiered by Yo-Yo Ma and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Salonen’s direction in March of that year. Since then, the roughly 40-minute, three-movement work has received a remarkable number of performances by Ma and other notable cellists including Rummukainen.

“It was written for Yo-Yo Ma, so I knew it was something special because he’s the greatest cellist of our time,” Rummukainen said. “The collaboration between him and Esa-Pekka is super interesting, so it’s no wonder that it’s already a modern classic. Cellists clearly love it. From a technical perspective it has many challenges — in a good way — but it’s fulfilling to play. And of course the music is great, and that’s the most important thing.”

Following a brief orchestral introduction, the soloist enters in a haunting passage with the full cello section. “It’s an interesting way to start the concerto. It’s also a nice way to acknowledge that we are all in it together.”

The second movement — which the soloist said is the heart of the piece — features electronics and looping. “It’s kind of like time stops. And there’s a beautiful moment where the bass section comes in very slowly, then the solo cello plays this beautiful, expressive melody.”

Although using electronics is still a new venture for Rummukainen, she isn’t too worried. “We have a great sound engineer — Ella Wahlström — who knows exactly how everything should be. She’s worked with Esa-Pekka from the beginning on this Concerto so she’s an expert at it.”

Rummukainen said that learning the piece was the result of one thing leading to another over a period of time. She knew the third movement of Salonen’s *Knock, Breathe, Shine* for solo cello because it was the required piece for the Turku Cello Competition in 2014 — which she won. After learning the entire piece to play during some festival recitals, she took it to the Tchaikovsky competition, where she was a finalist.

“I got a lot of good feedback from that performance and Esa-Pekka also heard it. Then we started to collaborate and recorded some parts of the Concerto, because the third movement of *Knock, Breathe, Shine* has similar motifs to the last movement of the concerto. What I like about Esa-Pekka is that he appreciates everyone. He likes to work with people even if they are not Yo-Yo Ma. So that’s how we got to know each other.

What makes the collaboration with Salonen and The Cleveland Orchestra even more exciting is that it will be the first time the two have played the full Concerto together. “I have played it with other conductors — Jonathon Heyward and the Lahti Symphony and this year with the Gothenburg Symphony and Tarmo Peltokoski, so I’m really looking forward to this concert in Cleveland.”

Although Senja Rummukainen did not come from a musical family she said that her parents appreciate music very much. “They took me to a musical play school when I was a kid and they told my parents about a music school in Helsinki that I should apply to. I began with the piano, but when I started the cello it immediately felt like my instrument. From then on I thought, I’m going to be a cellist. Of course, at the time I didn’t know what that meant.”

Concluding our conversation, I asked Rummukainen if she had aspirations to follow in the foot-steps of other Finnish cellists-turned-conductors like Susanna Mälkki and Klaus Mäkelä. “When I was younger I was interested. I even went to listen to classes of Jorma Panula. But somehow, and I don’t know actually why — perhaps it’s because the cello takes so much time and is of more interest to me — I just stuck with the instrument. I don't think I will ever conduct. I feel like it’s not in my personality.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 8, 2024

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