

Conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali returns to Severance Music Center

by Mike Telin



After making his Cleveland Orchestra debut last November by stepping in for Franz Welser-Möst, Finnish conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali received a great honor — a return engagement.

On Thursday, July 17 at 7:00 pm, Rouvali will lead the second Summers at Severance concert in Mandel Concert Hall. The program includes Beethoven's *Symphony No. 2*, Stravinsky's *Jeu de cartes*, and Ravel's *Suite No. 2* from

Daphnis et Chloé. Tickets are available [online](#).

“Hello!” Rouvali said enthusiastically, answering his phone from his farm outside of Tampere, Finland. I ask him if it's still a good time to talk. “Yes, I was just cutting the grass before departing to America, because in one week the grass will be like a jungle if I don't cut it now.”

He tells me that he and his wife found the property six years ago. “We wanted to have a place in nature, a place to calm down and have a balanced lifestyle. It's a beautiful area, surrounded by lakes. And because hunting and fishing are my hobbies, it's a little bit tricky to do that if you live in the city. So you need to have your own land.”

Rouvali is excited to be returning to Cleveland “Last time the Orchestra was really nice and I must say very skillful. What I found exciting was that they have such good rhythm, which is so important for me. I enjoyed the Hall and the acoustic very much, and the balances between the brass, winds, and strings was something I had never heard before. I definitely learned a lot from them.”

The conductor said that what he likes about this week's program is that it has a little bit of everything. "I've always liked Beethoven's symphonies one and two. They're both so humorous and I'm happy when I conduct them. But No. 2 is full of jokes — there's so much comedy and lightness."

He said that *Jeu de cartes* has wonderful swinging rhythmic patterns. "It also has a childish, out-of-this-world humor inside it. I always think that it is the perfect music for *Alice in Wonderland*."



And the Ravel? "I can't wait to hear it inside that hall, with full winds, brass, and percussion. It's going to be fantastic," he said. "There are so many great solo moments too. And of course with Ravel there are many small details, but when they all come together they create a special sound."

Santtu-Mathias Rouvali began his musical life first as a drummer and then a percussionist. "I was always interested in rhythms and it's natural for me to think in a rhythmic way. I also played a lot of marimba and xylophone which combines rhythm with harmony and melody. But I really feel the rhythm when I'm conducting."

Speaking of which, what first drew him to conducting? "To make it short, I was in the Youth Orchestra here in Finland and we were playing Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. I was playing timpani and reading the score and thinking — I understand this. I can play the score, I can sing the score. So I went to the conductor, who was Hannu Lintu, and asked him if he would give me lessons. He guided me through the process, and that's how it all started."

Does Rouvali ever miss being part of that big orchestral sound? "I do, but that's why I still play drums in a big band — I'm a big fan of Glenn Miller. In fact, my orchestra in London, the Philharmonia, has a Big Band and we've given concerts with the orchestra where I was guiding everything from the drums." Click [here](#) to see that for yourself.

With so many musical interests how does Rouvali divide his time and his brain to go from one to the other. "My secret is that when I am not working I have the farm where I can relax and have time to think, time to learn the new repertoire and maybe play some bar gigs with the band — play some soul and some rock. But free time is important. You need to rest and have a sauna in the evening and think about what you want to do."

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