

ESA-PEKKA SALONEN ON BEETHOVEN

Esa-Pekka Salonen - Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor, Philharmonia Orchestra

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[Excerpt from Symphony No. 7, 2nd Movement]

Esa-Pekka Salonen

There's no particular reason why Beethoven *this* year. I just felt that it would be nice, it would be interesting, exciting, at this stage between me and the Philharmonia to play Beethoven. For me it's the second full Beethoven cycle ever. I did one in Los Angeles, which was roughly the same kind of concept: all symphonies, all piano concertos, interlaced with contemporary pieces.

[music continues]

Beethoven's symphonies are the works against which everything else relates. Our contemporary ideas of form, texture or dramaturgy, or the psychology of form would be different or non-existent without the work that Beethoven did. It really is about the form and the way the form has a dialogue with the listener and how the form, in itself, is the narrative.

[Excerpt from Symphony No.7, 1st Movement]

And sometimes he satisfies your expectation, sometimes he very skilfully guides you to a totally different place, and then you are in that different place without noticing how you got there. And that's the true mastery of his composing.

And sometimes he kind of paints himself into a corner. I conducted his 7th Symphony a few days ago, and there's this one bit in the finale where this precisely happens: that he kind of locks himself into a pattern that just keeps repeating and gets louder and starts to get really annoying and you think, "OK, how is he going to get out of this? How can anyone get out of this?" It's like a cage and then, finally, he gets out of it, but in a totally different way from what you expect he would. I am referring to this recap moment in the finale where he gets stuck in this (*He excitedly sings the passage from the fourth movement*) ... and this stupid thing goes on forever. And then you think, "OK, now that's it: he's stuck!" Then what does he do instead of creating some even louder bang? He lets this thing kind of *morendo* away and then the recap is... (*He sings softly the passage before the recapitulation*). So he actually goes completely contrary to what you think he would do. Of course we know what he's going to do, now, because we've heard this piece hundreds of times, but still I am delighted, astonished and touched every time I experience this.

We are in a very interesting junction in Beethoven's performance tradition, because we have come through the heavy German romantic way of playing this music, then we witnessed the "Lutheran reformation" with all the early music specialists. Personally I am not so interested in ideology either, not so interested in the idea of something being "right" and something being "wrong". I think I am in a slightly different business. I see myself as trying to provide experiences: as interesting, exciting, profound, moving, annoying, challenging, as satisfying an experience as I possibly can. And therefore, while my approach is very respectful, nevertheless I do not see much point in trying to recreate a performance from several hundreds years ago.

My audience has heard Brahms, Strauss, Stravinsky, Birtwistle and Stockhausen; and they have heard Madonna, Lady Gaga and God knows what. Our minds are different and our expectations are different, I mean we really relate to music differently because of this.

We, performers, are servants of the composer and the moment we do something that draws attention to ourselves, rather than to the music itself, something is wrong.

I think that the beauty of this kind of music – that we, unfortunately, have to call "classical" music because there is no better word for it – is that not only does it tolerate and survive different points of view and different kinds of cultural approaches and different kinds of aesthetic approaches and on so forth, but it also requires that, in order to stay alive. This great tradition needs constant rethinking, constant renewing and developing, constant research. And while it is one of the most prestigious thing for an orchestra and a conductor to do, it is also a very inspiring thing, because you know that you are kind of part of this amazing tapestry fabric that we call history.

[Excerpt from Beethoven: Symphony No.7, 4th Movement]

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