

Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich – Paavo Järvi’s first concert as Chief Conductor and Music Director – Arvo Pärt’s *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte* & Sibelius’s *Kullervo*

The veteran Tonhalle Orchestra, founded in 1868, isn't one to rest on its laurels. Its energy and administration these days is young, imaginative and determined. In its present temporary concert hall in Zürich's West district – a sonically flattering space built in seven months while the old Tonhalle, a magnificent lakeside auditorium inaugurated by Brahms in 1895, is being restored, scheduled for re-opening in March 2021 – artists, musicians and audience mingle freely. Airs and graces, diva pretensions, elitism, don't go down well here. Along corridors of industrial piping and rough-sawn wood, wandering reception areas, anyone can talk to anyone about anything, from music to murals, politics to psychology, art to aesthetics, life. The enthusiasm and drive, the urge to create a diverse, welcoming twenty-first-century environment, is palpable. During the 2019/20 season, forty-five orchestral concerts, thirty-six chamber programmes and eight guest-artist dates are planned. The spread is wide, including lunchtime, rush-hour and late-evening events, jam sessions, and family concerts and school/youth projects, the variety of themes taking in not just standard repertory but also film and literature. Focussed artists include the enticing prospect of Martin Fröst, Pekka Kuusisto and the Latvian accordionist Ksenija Sidorova. Pollini, too, is scheduled.

With Paavo Järvi taking up the reins as chief conductor, a grounded new chapter is under way. Bringing with him the experience of a chain of distinguished European appointments including the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, Frankfurt Radio Symphony and Orchestre de Paris, he identifies well with the Tonhalle psyche. An approachable man of vision but pragmatism, eloquent with words, he speaks passionately about his ideas. Overseeing the orchestra's return to its original home, the prospect of rehearsing and making music in such an ambience, acoustic and atmosphere, of “playing the hall” like a matured instrument, the vibration of the stage flooring extending out to the audience, is something clearly meaningful. “You can build a new hall”, he says, “but not an old one.” Seeing the Tonhalle retake its place among the great European venues of its past – the Concertgebouw, the Musikverein, the Rudolfinum – is something he, like those around him, views with understandable pride and anticipation.

Järvi's previous tenures have seen significant recording or video projects - cycles of Beethoven in Bremen and Sibelius in Paris, for instance. With the Tonhalle, with whom he's just released a Messiaen album recorded earlier this year, he'll be undertaking the Tchaikovsky Symphonies for Alpha Classics. He'll also be in charge of a conductors' training academy. And under his watch the Estonian composer, islander and self-confessed *Tausendsassa* (jack of all trades) has been given the orchestra's Creative Chair. There's a buzz in the air.

Inaugurating Järvi's appointment, this gala concert was about statement, history and the big stage. The audience, with a healthy young to middle-age spread, included some famous faces. Arvo Pärt for one, a spry eighty-four-year-old. Paavo's father, Neeme, for another. The ghost of Paavo's godfather, Paavo Berglund – prominent in the revival of Sibelius's early, posthumously published symphonic cantata *Kullervo*, whose first London performance of it I remember reviewing in late-1970 – haunted the room, the orchestra playing from his marked parts.

At around seventy-seven minutes, Järvi took a resonantly spacious view of the work. A musician who's lived all his life with the sound and engine of Sibelius's music, he set the pulse and temperature early on. The strings – antiphonal violins, cellos and violas before the podium, double basses to the upper left – possessed a rich, dark patina, digging deep in the third movement, their *pizzicato* accord penetrating and warm; the woodwinds excelled, not least oboe and cor anglais; the brass glowed and rasped. Long gone the days when Sibelius's revolutionary timpani writing was apologised for, the attack, precision and detail was remarkable, the swells and cadences (the whiplash signing off the third movement for instance) rattled home with the touch and drama of a complete master at the helm. Järvi, a cultured presence, has never been the most demonstrative of conductors, but here he gave way to an animation and physical intensity that produced some startling moments, encouraging the orchestra to heightened levels of commitment and response. His long-breathed paragraphing, developing momentum and climax from circling, cellular repetitions, impressed, with especially characterful results in the fourth and final movements. Tempo too was finely attuned, that of the fourth movement, 'Kullervo goes to War' – as tricky to set (and for the strings to articulate) as the first movement of the Third Symphony – tightly sprung and inexorable.

The Finnish brother-and-sister duo of Johanna and Ville Rusanen brought their customary vocal authority to the third movement, she possibly more-fiery than I have heard before, and he certainly rising to a convincing progression of character and theatrical tensioning. Placed high above the orchestra, the men of the combined Estonian National Choir and Zürich Sing-Akademie, just under seventy strong, the former adding a gravelled, powerful timbre to the old Finnish dialect of the text, projected lustily, necessarily slightly rough-edged yet all of a piece. By the end – the demise of the ill-fated *Kullervo* impaled on his sword of the hour – the orchestra thundering mightily, the choir at full voice, each pause immaculately sensed and delivered – the awareness of being at a great performance, of five tone-poems forged into a single entity, was inescapable. Astonishing to think, reflecting on the virtuosity and stylistic breath of the evening, that this was the Tonhalle's first-ever outing of the work, and there had only been ten hours of rehearsal – two days – beforehand. The players, around a hundred of international mix but with a Swiss core, attributed it to the security of Järvi's beat and the clarity of his communication, getting what he needs with the minimum of fuss.

The concert opened with a little gem from Pärt, not a commission but a gift, an orchestral re-working of his brief B-A-C-H-based *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte ...* from 1976 (originally *Portrait of a Musicologist Against the Background of a Wasp Nest*), more familiar these days in its 2001 incarnation for piano, wind

quintet, strings and percussion. Familiar music unfamiliarly slanted, it worked beautifully, its delicate casting suggesting a gentle prelude or *entr'acte*, the B-major close (the coda alluding to the B-minor Prelude from Book One of the 'Forty Eight') drawing a hushed curtain across time. "Tintinnabulation", Pärt says, "is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity." The reception was warm, the communication between conductor and composer touching in a familial way.

Bringing together the well-known and the unexpected is Järvi's ambition for his new orchestra. But not all, he promises, will be dark and northern, though it may well be emotional and intense. His encore, Sibelius's A Song for Lemminkäinen, Opus 31/1 (1895) – Lemminkäinen the shamanistic figure of Finnish mythology, the archetypal war-hero of the Kalevala – showcased choir and orchestra robustly, horns in full cry, rhythm at a premium, the cut and canter of things to come in ascendant, brilliant light. One of those memorable nights.