

Esa-Pekka Salonen review: powerful punch

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There will be plenty of opportunities this weekend to appreciate Esa-Pekka Salonen's gifts as a conductor in the Berkeley concerts he's leading with the Philharmonia Orchestra. But before we get to that, what an extraordinary composer he is!

Thursday's "Composer Portrait" concert in Hertz Hall, the opening salvo of Salonen's Berkeley residency presented by Cal Performances, was a nonstop explosion of delight and amazement. The program included just four fairly short works, across a range of moods and characters, yet they all displayed Salonen's ability to pack a wealth of artistry into a small canvas.

There are times, in fact, when I think that Salonen's work could serve as a handy checklist of what music can and should be. It's rhetorically transparent - even a first-time listener always has a sense of where the piece is going at any given moment - but never predictable. It's beautiful and dramatic and witty and tender and briskly inventive; I never get to the end of a piece by Salonen without feeling a wistful pang that it's over so soon.

What is perhaps most impressive is how many of his pieces are built around a clear motivating idea that gives the music a shape without exhausting its level of inspiration. Salonen often sets out to write a piece that does some particular thing or embodies some formal invention; knowing what it is helps you hear the music, but doesn't substitute for the experience.

Take, for example, the string quartet "Homunculus," which got a fervent and lovely performance by the Calder Quartet. The title comes from a 17th century theory of human reproduction that imagined a tiny but perfectly proportioned man - a homunculus - inhabiting each sperm cell who then grows in the womb into a full human.

Salonen's goal, he says, was to write a single small piece that embodied all the attributes of a full-size quartet - and so he did. Within its single 15-minute span, "Homunculus" encompasses four standard movement types, including a scherzo and a lyrical slow movement, all of which cluster together in a quick succession of ideas.

What's striking about the piece, though, is not so much the premise as the suavity and tact with which he executes it. Each successive musical idea is so distinctive and so arresting that the dialogue is easily followed; there's an explosive climax that seems to come out of nowhere yet makes perfect sense in retrospect.

Something similar happens in "Dichotomie," a bravura piano showpiece superbly performed by Gloria Cheng. Its two movements are "Mécanisme," in which a motoric rhythmic pattern unexpectedly shows signs of life, and "Organisme," in which, conversely, a series of fluid rhapsodic phrases morph into mechanical repetitions.

Again, that description is accurate enough, but it doesn't convey the music's full splendor - the vivacious, driving charm of the first movement, or the humorous effect as the second movement collapses into glissandos that sound like a parody of Ravel.

The program, which also included some onstage conversation between Salonen and Cal Performances director Matías Tarnopolsky, began and ended with virtuoso displays by cellist Kacy Clopton. She began with a remarkable rendition of "Knock, Breathe, Shine," a wonderfully versatile three-movement etude for solo cello, and concluded as the soloist (with the Eco Ensemble led by David Milnes) in the chamber concerto "Mania."

"Mania" is a virtuoso display of compositional technique, in which the goal is to keep the music constantly moving moving moving while still varying the tempo and shape of the musical line. There are fast and slow passages, busy and sparse passages - but the frenetic impulse never flags. It's a piece that leaves the listener enjoyably wrung out.

Esa-Pekka Salonen with the Philharmonia Orchestra: 7 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. \$30-\$150. (510) 642-9988. www.calperformances.org.

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