

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Gambit

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Esa-Pekka Salonen is now in his third season as The Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence at the New York Philharmonic. Renowned as both a composer and a conductor, he served as principal conductor of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (1984–95) and music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra (1992–2009). He has been principal conductor and artistic advisor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London since 2006, and in the 2014–15 season he held the first-ever “creative chair” at Zurich’s Tonhalle Orchestra. He also serves as artist in association at the Finnish National Opera and Ballet and is in his 14th year as artistic director of the annual Baltic Sea Festival, which he co-founded to promote unity and ecological awareness among the countries of that region.

Salonen studied horn, conducting, and composition at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki during the 1970s — his composition teachers included the eminent Einojuhani Rautavaara — and pursued advanced composition work in Italy with Niccolò Castiglioni and Franco Donatoni. His early identity as a “conducting composer” changed in 1983 when, at short notice, he took over a performance of Mahler’s Third Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London; it catapulted him into the major league at the podium and transformed him into “a composing conductor.” Nonetheless, in 1998 he told a reporter:

It may sound a bit crazy, but I actually think of myself more as a composer than a conductor. It just so happens that the

conducting side has outweighed the composing.

In 1996 he carved time out from his conducting schedule to write *L.A. Variations*, his first major orchestral piece in some time, and in 2000 he took a year’s sabbatical from the podium to devote more energy to composition. He cited the need to clear his schedule for composing as a central factor in his decision to step down from directing the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009, at which point he was named that ensemble’s conductor laureate.

Major retrospectives of his work have been presented at Helsinki’s Musica Nova, the Stockholm International Composer Festival, and in Los Angeles and Cologne. In 2006 he was named Musician of the Year by *Musical America*, and in 2010 he was elected a foreign honorary fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has received prominent honors from the governments of

IN SHORT

Born: June 30, 1958, in Helsinki, Finland

Resides: in London, England

Work composed: 1998, revised 1999; dedicated to Magnus Lindberg on the occasion of his 40th birthday

World premiere: June 6, 1998, with the composer conducting the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the New York Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 9 minutes

Sweden, France, and Finland, as well as the 2014 Nemmers Composition Prize from the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University. His Violin Concerto earned the 2012 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition; that organization cited it as “such an exciting piece that from the first measure it grips you and doesn’t let you go.” His work with the Philharmonia Orchestra has included the groundbreaking *Re-Rite* and *Universe of Sound* installations as well as development of the interactive iPad application *The Orchestra*, all of which enable the public to experience the sensations of conducting, playing with, and stepping inside the orchestra.

Salonen’s official biography has noted that he was “trained in the austere world of European modernism” and was “enjoying a close relationship with the sunny city of Los Angeles.” That is a telling assessment, although even some of his compositions from the 1980s displayed an approachability that was unusual in new-music circles at the time. One supposes that the contemporary music group Toimii, which he co-founded in 1980 with fellow composers Magnus Lindberg and Otto Romanowski, served as a laboratory for exploring creative ideas and refining his appreciation

for the practical possibilities of performance.

That long-standing friendship with Lindberg gave rise to *Gambit*, and Salonen dedicated this piece to him as a birthday salute. This intersection is especially fortuitous in the context of a New York Philharmonic concert, since Lindberg also served as the Orchestra’s composer-in-residence from 2009 through 2012.

Salonen’s orchestral works make virtuosic but realizable demands on players and are remarkable for the detail of their instrumental writing and texture. *Gambit* is a convivial, optimistic piece, gentle and shimmering at its opening and closing, but mostly marked by jaunty rhythmic élan and inviting contented smiles as it moves from one clearly enunciated paragraph to the next.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet) and B-flat contrabass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, vibraphone, wood blocks, bass drum, marimba, temple blocks, log drums, crash cymbals, congas, large claves, large tam-tam, orchestra bells, piano, harp, and strings.

In the Composer’s Words

Gambit is, as the name suggests, a shortish work for a large symphony orchestra of overture character. It is based on a few gestures, or archetypes, which are combined and juxtaposed in different ways during the nine minutes of *Gambit*. The two main ones are a descending, mainly pentatonic scale-like gesture and a basic rhythm (and combinations thereof). The archetypes themselves do not change much, only the environment in which they appear. There is no variation in the traditional sense of the word.

Some harmonic progressions as well as the persistent minor third figure in the introduction are deliberate, free quotations from Magnus Lindberg’s music. I have dedicated *Gambit* to this talented friend of mine as an homage on his fortieth birthday.

— Esa-Pekka Salonen

