

# The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

## Esa Pekka Salonen / Four Debuts, One Farewell



LOS ANGELES — Esa-Pekka Salonen conducted his first concert in Green Umbrella, the contemporary-music series presented by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in April 1991, the year before he became the orchestra's music director. On Tuesday night, 18 years later almost to the day, he conducted his last Green Umbrella concert as music director, for an audience of nearly 1,500 at Disney Hall here. The program offered four world premieres, all Los Angeles Philharmonic commissions, and an early work by Mr. Salonen.

This month Mr. Salonen, who is 50 but does not look much older than he did when he took over the orchestra, is giving the final concerts of his tenure. This enthusiastically received program was evidence of the galvanizing impact he has had on the orchestra and the city. There is a potential downside when an orchestra has a separate contemporary-music series with its own subgroup of players: it can ghettoize new music and make it seem separate from old music. But there was no danger of that when Mr. Salonen took over, for he found innovative ways to fold contemporary music into the orchestra's subscription season programs.

A deep involvement with electro-acoustic approaches to music linked the pieces by the commissioned composers here, born between 1974 and 1980. “Li Po,” by the Mexican-born Enrico Chapela, had a circuitous genesis. He became enthralled with the writings of a Mexican poet, José Juan Tablada, who had long been immersed in the life and work of the Chinese poet Li Po. After recording himself reading a free Spanish translation of a Li Po poem, Mr. Chapela transcribed the phonetics of his recorded speech into musical sounds.

Yet you could listen to this work without knowing anything of its origins and still be swept along by the wash of colors, the sputtering mechanistic energy and the riot of instrumental and amplified sounds. For a while it seemed that “Li Po” was going to be an environmental piece, with sounds coming from speakers all over the hall. But then it broke into a raw, swinging triple-meter episode and started to sound like a spectral-electronic riff on “West Side Story.”

Anna Clyne’s “Within Her Arms,” scored for 15 strings gently interacting with electronics, is music for the composer’s mother, very tender, with elegiac melodic phrases and quietly restless, rhythmically staggered contrapuntal lines. During stretches of this ruminative piece, wandering harmonies and hazy textures lent an affecting uncertainty to music that could have been sentimental.

Erin Gee’s “Mouthpiece XI” featured the composer speaking, singing, intoning, chanting and verbalizing sounds and syllables into a pair of hand-held microphones. The fractured vocal part combined with slightly Asian, often droning harmonies. The piece was underwhelming, but you had to admire Ms. Gee’s pluck in performing it: having recently sustained stress fractures in her feet, she was wheeled onto the stage by Mr. Salonen.

During “Deluge,” by the Chinese-born Fang Man, a raw, dense, assaulting piece, I admired the way the composer amassed earthy, electro-acoustic sounds, evoking flood disasters and dizzying chaos. But I yearned for more clarity and, in a way, more specificity.

To conclude his farewell to the Green Umbrella series, Mr. Salonen chose the same piece that ended that first program he conducted in 1991, his own “Floof (Songs of a Homeostatic Homer),” for soprano and four chamber players. Here was music by a young composer audaciously combining postserial techniques with the buzz-saw din of rock. The soloist, Hila Plitmann, fearlessly dispatched the crazed coloratura part, all rapid-fire leaps, high-pitched shrieks and guttural yelps, as monosyllables gradually evolved into words, then phrases, then poetry.

Mr. Salonen now passes Green Umbrella to his successor, Gustavo Dudamel. But there is no time to rest. On Thursday Mr. Salonen conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the first of two programs to conclude his tenure as music director.

**Anthony Tommasini 08/04/2009**

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