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PAAVO JÄRVI

The in-demand
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rediscovering
Tchaikovsky

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Ushering in **A NEW CHAPTER**

As Paavo Järvi settles into his role as Chief Conductor of Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra, **James Jolly** talks Tchaikovsky and more with one of the busiest and most in-demand conductors of today

We're sitting in the kitchen of Paavo Järvi's west London flat in early September, two days after Simon Rattle's BBC Prom with the LSO in an empty Royal Albert Hall. Typically generous and knowledgeable about the work of his colleagues, Paavo – everyone calls him Paavo, which not only confirms his refreshing lack of ego but avoids any ambiguity given his rich family connections – is bubbling with enthusiasm. 'What brilliant programming – Gabrieli, Beethoven's *Moonlight*, György Kurtág, Thomas Adès and Vaughan Williams: that's the kind of thinking I love to encounter in the concert hall. Amazing! I was glued to the television.' Suddenly, he jumps to his feet – he wants to show me how he got through the weeks of lockdown. I follow as he throws open a door. 'It may not be much,' he says, as we look down on a modest bamboo-edged garden, 'but I spent so much time here, just thinking, during the summer when the weather was really beautiful.'

'As in chamber music, I shape phrases, he shapes phrases back. Paavo's conducting is alive, really alive!' – Steven Isserlis, cellist

It's hard to imagine such a workaholic as Paavo ever staying in one place for weeks at a time with no conducting, but, as was the case for a lot of musicians, lockdown provided time for reflection – albeit a reflection niggled by pain at the perilous situation of the players he usually works with on a weekly basis. His London flat, which he's owned for many years, is usually little more than a bolthole, a place where he keeps his substantial library of scores and orchestral parts, and where he spends the occasional night when he's

not with his regular orchestral partners in Bremen (the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, of which he's Artistic Director), Tokyo (NHK Symphony Orchestra, Chief Conductor) or Estonia (where he's Artistic Advisor of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and head of the Estonian Festival Orchestra, of which he's the immensely proud founder), or making one of his numerous guest appearances with the likes of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Philharmonia Orchestra and the Orchestre de Paris (whose Music Director he was until 2016). And now there's his association with Zurich, where he's just ended what was a decidedly on-off first season as Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Tonhalle Orchestra.

Paavo is rather like one of those people who remains the best of friends with his exes – he doesn't believe in messy musical divorces. Viewed from the outside, his is an elegantly managed career, each new appointment taking him a few steps higher in the profession. 'There's often a natural cycle, where things have almost organically reached the end of some sort of a road, and it's not negative,' he reflects, in his slow, measured way. 'It's not a personal thing. It's a logical, organic evolution. If you look at the orchestras that I have been with, I'm nearly always now a principal guest or laureate or something, because the relationship evolves into something else. And for the musicians, too: if you have 10 years of looking at the same face, I think it can get tiring. And there's nothing worse than somebody overstaying their welcome, like a guest who doesn't leave!' Not for nothing, then, is he Conductor Laureate of the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Laureate of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

As posts have come and gone in Cincinnati, Paris, Frankfurt and Tokyo (from which he steps down in 2022), one ensemble remains a constant: the Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, with which Paavo has been associated for 25 years. What keeps things fresh in this north German city, he explains, is that it's a project-based partnership. 'It's not like I'm

there every Monday and doing the subscription concerts. They don't have any of that stuff. We do a project and then we take the project on the road, and then I don't go there again for a while. Then I come back again and

do another very intense project, and then I leave.'

One musician who has performed and recorded with Paavo in Bremen, Frankfurt and London is the cellist Steven Isserlis, who is an undoubted fan. 'Paavo's got a wonderfully clear technique to start with; he's one of the few conductors whose every beat I can follow. It's very natural conducting. And he's so calm as a collaborative artist – there's no panic about him. He does it as chamber music, which is great: I shape phrases, he shapes phrases back – his conducting is alive, really alive! He's full of ideas but allows the players to play – they love to play for him because he lets them express themselves. He keeps a tight grip, but he's not a control freak. And he enjoys it – his enjoyment is infectious. There's no ego clash with him, so I can talk directly to the orchestra at times; then he'll talk to them. So we sort of do it together, and I love that. And he's still growing as a conductor, he's learning new works, and he's getting deeper and deeper into the great 19th-century German repertoire.' I'm sure a similar response would have come had I spoken to Christian Tetzlaff, Viktoria Mullova, Lars Vogt, Lisa Batiashvili and his many other regular concerto partners.

Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra – which, like Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, takes its name from its home – has a distinguished history that dates back to 1868. It has



Recording sessions for the new Tchaikovsky set: 'The Tonhalle don't have this Tchaikovsky tradition like in Russia,' says Paavo. 'They were discovering every moment'

boasted some fine chief conductors including Volkmar Andreae, Hans Rosbaud, Rudolf Kempe and Charles Dutoit. But the one who proved most transformative was the American David Zinman, who was in charge from 1995 to 2014. Paavo is quick to pay tribute to his predecessor-but-one. 'The Tonhalle is a hidden gem, in a way. I think it's really one of the great orchestras of the world – and I've conducted all of them. Somehow, they're at a place where they can just blossom. As far as the musicianship is concerned, it's real high-quality playing. I know very few orchestras like this. And why? Because Zinman has been a fantastic builder. He spent a lot of time with the orchestra and did things like Beethoven symphonies that are important to an orchestra's health. He wasn't just doing *Fountains of Rome* every other day. We did Mahler's Fifth with them on tour and I just couldn't believe how inside-out they know this piece, or how well they know a Brahms symphony ... This kind of thing really shows the basic – the very basic – level of the orchestra. And they're very responsive. It's a relationship. We speak the same language.'

'He has a wonderful curiosity, looking outside the box. That's important, especially now' – Ilona Schmiel, Tonhalle Executive Director

Everything was in place for a suitably celebratory first season in Zurich, and then Covid-19 struck. 'All these amazing things were planned – we were coming to the Proms, to the Elbphilharmonie, and so on. They were all cancelled, of course, but that happened to everybody.' In terms of recording projects, a set of the complete Tchaikovsky symphonies was to have been released by Alpha; but changes had to be made. 'We were supposed to be getting the entire box-set out in one go,' Paavo explains, 'but then, just on the morning of the final concert, which would have been recorded for the completion of the set, somebody tested positive in the orchestra. The rehearsals were done, I even have a recording of the run-through from the dress rehearsal.' And so, for now, we have just the Fifth Symphony and *Francesca da Rimini*, while the complete box will emerge to mark the start of the 2021-22 season.

One person who has been watching Paavo's career for many years is the Tonhalle's Executive Director, Ilona Schmiel. A few jobs ago, she was running Bremen's concert hall Die Glocke, where the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen plays. When, in 2004, she became the Artistic Director and Manager of the Beethovenfest Bonn, it was one of the first groups she sought out to play all the Beethoven symphonies. A bright light in Germany's musical life, Schmiel moved to Switzerland in

2014 to head up the Tonhalle-Gesellschaft Zürich, which runs not only the orchestra but also the orchestra's home (as well as looking after its temporary venue, Tonhalle Maag, until the orchestra can return to the lakeside Tonhalle proper at the start of the 2021-22 season when major renovations are complete). 'When I arrived,' she recalls, 'I was also responsible for the guest conductors. Of course, I immediately put Paavo on the list as a priority. In December 2016 he conducted the orchestra for only the second or third time ever and they just clicked. He conducted Schumann's Third Symphony, and it was a bit like coming home for me as I sat there in the concert hall. He was amazed by the work of the orchestra and their sound, and how fast they got the flexibility he needs when he conducts. It was also about that time that we were starting to see who might be the successor to Lionel Bringuier. The timing was perfect.'

Paavo's credentials for the post couldn't have been better: he has the experience, he has a wonderful technique (is there a more elegant conductor on the podium today?), he has a vast repertoire but is also very strong when it comes to the core Germanic works, and he has the flexibility that comes from working with chamber-sized ensembles (the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie in its 'basic' configuration) as well as full-sized symphony orchestras. And the relationship was two-way, as Schmiel points out: 'The orchestra was absolutely at the right moment to realise what they were getting. They responded to so many of his ideas and they found something fulfilling together. It's like a journey. Paavo has a wonderful curiosity and he looks outside the box – and that's something that's so important, especially now. We have to be so careful how we develop orchestras and cultural institutions and how we make them fit for the future.'

This summer, Schmiel recalls, 'the most important thing for us to do was to perform. In the middle of June, when the first flight was allowed from the UK to Zurich, I called Paavo and said, "You have to come," and he said, "I will be there." I picked him up from the airport and the next morning, June 16, we had our first rehearsal under totally new circumstances – social distancing on stage and all that stuff. What was great was that Paavo suggested some very unusual repertoire for this orchestra: Dvořák and Richard Strauss serenades, Honegger's Second Symphony, Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* and so on – and it really brought everyone together. Now we have more than 75 musicians on stage again and so we need to be careful,

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALBERTO VENZAGO



Top: Tonhalle Maag, September 2020; bottom: with Tonhalle architect Elisabeth Boesch

but also confident and comfortable. But we have to play, and we have to perform. And we have to show that culture is essential in these times and that's why we need a strong partnership to get this message across to the politicians and civic leaders.'

As to how Paavo sees his role as a conductor, his answer is one of the most neatly expressed I've heard. 'Everybody has to find the relationship that works and then really make the most of it. Being loved everywhere is an unnecessary pursuit – it's not in the job description to be loved. If a conductor is afraid to make any corrections because they somehow fear they would be misunderstood or not invited back (which of course often happens), that's simply fruitless. A good conductor is someone who goes to an orchestra, and as a result the orchestra plays better and develops, and he or she leaves a better orchestra behind.'

Paavo is – and it hardly needs pointing out to *Gramophone* readers – a son of Neeme Järvi, and followed his father into the profession with never a thought that he might do anything else. But he isn't just part of a family of musicians; he is part of a family of passionate record enthusiasts. They didn't only listen voraciously to the classics, they explored the byways (and the byways of the byways) with a hunger that neither Neeme nor Paavo nor his younger brother Kristjan have shrugged off. There are very few composers with whom they are unfamiliar – the breadth of Neeme's repertoire (and recorded catalogue) is legendary; and Paavo shares that same passion for exploring what happens between the peaks of the mountain range that is classical orchestral music.

In the last issue of *Gramophone*, Paavo's DG album of the four Franz Schmidt symphonies was chosen as Recording of the Month, and this project is typical of his approach to music: he doesn't want to cherry-pick a composer's output, he wants to embrace the lot. 'What happens when you conduct more than one symphony – and I mean not just doing it once, but really getting to know those pieces – is that you get into the world of that composer. And that changes the way you do the next symphony. If I only did Beethoven's Fifth Symphony but did not know the Fourth or Third or First, I probably would be OK but I wouldn't be seeing the whole picture. I know conductors who have conducted only one Beethoven symphony, or maybe two. Can you imagine a violinist who plays the Sibelius Concerto but has never heard any other music by Sibelius, and whose only reference for Sibelius is the Heifetz or the Oistrakh recording? You can tell by the way they play it that they haven't heard another note of Sibelius! If you want to know something about Sibelius, you must know his symphonies. And you should know *Kullervo* – so much of what would follow is already there. If you learn *Kullervo*, and you really know it, and you really like it, and you can hum along, you can perform a Sibelius Violin Concerto that sounds different. Listen to Pekka Kuusisto playing it and it's different because he knows the rest of the Sibelius output. He knows when it's folk music, when it's not, when it's a kind of quotation from an old theme, and when it's not.'

The Schmidt symphonies, hardly everyday fare for any conductor, are a perfect example of this passion for completism. 'My father, when he was a lot younger, met a Slovak conductor who was very old. His name was L'udovít Rajter, a close friend of Schmidt. They went to his house, and he gave some Schmidt scores to my father, and my father got really excited about the music. And, of course, he's recorded them as well, and I grew up loving that music. It's so dramatic and it's so, kind of, "saturated". It's the world of Mahler's Vienna but at the point where there's nowhere else to go without creating a 12-note language. Basically, you can't get any thicker, any more involved, any more chromatic, and his language is so unmistakably recognisable – he doesn't sound like anyone else. It's not like Zemlinsky, it's not like Mahler. When I was in Frankfurt, I knew I wanted to do those symphonies, but no record company wanted them. So, I did them anyway!' And, as with Schmidt, Paavo's interest in (and knowledge of) the music of Reger and

Hindemith was similarly instilled in him by his father. ‘Their neglect is a pity, but I grew up with a person like my father in the house who said, “Hindemith is a great composer. Listen, it’s great stuff!” And I was really enthused about it, and so most of my knowledge comes from moments like that. I was lucky. The same with Prokofiev: I mean, how many conductors conduct more than the First and Fifth Symphonies?’

The recent Tchaikovsky project, though, brings us right back to the so-called core repertoire. ‘We all know that Tchaikovsky is one of the great symphonists, and there’s no shortage of Tchaikovsky on concert programmes or recordings,’ Paavo admits. ‘I grew up listening to a lot of Tchaikovsky in Soviet Estonia.’ This was a time when Tchaikovsky performance in the USSR was dominated by the undoubtedly powerful approach taken by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra’s legendary and long-serving conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky. ‘His stamp was on it: “This is the right way of doing it

and everybody who doesn’t do it this way just doesn’t know what they’re doing,” was the attitude,’ Paavo remembers. ‘But somehow it didn’t really speak to me. I just felt that with all the amazing playing and amazing discipline, the clarity and all that, somehow it lacked humanity. I conducted all the symphonies and then I stopped – I didn’t do them for maybe 10 years or more. But what changed my mind was when I was in Los Angeles with my brother and I heard some absolutely crazy performance on the radio. And I thought, “This is exactly what I like! It is so over the top, and some people will think it’s totally insanely exaggerated and in bad taste, but I love it. And of course, it was one of the last Lenny [Bernstein] recordings with the New York Philharmonic, and I felt it somehow gave me courage to say, “To hell with everything, and the whole tradition!” As you get a little bit older, you gain in confidence. And so I started conducting them again, and I realised what an amazing series they are, right from the First Symphony – it’s a gem.’

Just as his training took him west from Estonia to the US (to study in Philadelphia, at the Curtis Institute, and in LA with Bernstein), so his ideal Tchaikovsky interpreters came not from the then USSR but from Europe and America. ‘At the end of the day, what you don’t often hear in Mravinsky – or, indeed, in people like George Szell and Fritz Reiner – is “joy”. I hear precision, brilliance, energy, quality, all of those things that we’re in awe of, but I long for the kind of joy that you have in recordings by Charles Munch, or Bernstein, or Georges Prêtre.’

When Paavo arrived in Zurich, Tchaikovsky happened to be the first big project. ‘I thought, “I want an orchestra with a sound where I can actually get what I want.” I could go to some orchestras and they would do it the way they’re used to



Paavo’s gentle lockdown reflections have led to powerful conclusions

doing it, and with maybe a little nuance here and there. What I liked about the Tonhalle is that they don’t have this Tchaikovsky tradition like they do in Russia where there’s only one way and they’ve been doing it that way for years and years. I didn’t want them knowing every phrase of it already, so that there was no, “This is how it’s done,” coming from them. They were discovering every moment of it, and somehow they added their own emotion to it, they reacted to it like music that’s new.’

And we’re back to Paavo’s garden in London and those weeks of reflection. ‘I would sit out there alone, one day more beautiful than the day before. And I’d think, “Why am I doing this?” I loved waking up when I wanted to and making my own coffee, but a lot of questions gradually started to appear, like: “Why do I need to do so much repertoire?” And I’m still grappling with that one because I’m programmed that way. I want to do new things, I want to

learn new things. To be honest with you, I was doing so much that I was nearing burnout. It’s not because I really wanted to do a lot, it’s because of all the things that I had to do with my own orchestras, which of course were priorities and commitments. And then there are orchestras that you can’t say no to, like the Berlin Philharmonic. I mean, that’s something that’s an honour. And there are a couple of other orchestras like this in the world which I have a relationship with – the Concertgebouw and the Philharmonia.

‘I started conducting the Tchaikovsky symphonies again, and I realised what an amazing series they are’ – Paavo Järvi

‘People often misunderstand burnout: it doesn’t just come from travelling, it comes from the repertoire. If you’re a violinist, you can play one or two concertos a year, which very often people do; but for me, every single programme is different. I’d spend three weeks in a row in Tokyo. And it’s really substantial stuff – *Turangalila*, Mahler symphonies, Strauss tone poems, Stravinsky ballets, and so on. You have to keep studying; mentally, you have to retain so much information. Also it’s not just about getting through it, you have to bring something to each piece – and I’m very self-critical.’

As to the future, the months of reflection prompted one decision. ‘If everything miraculously goes back to the way it was before, then I know that I will definitely do less work – maybe 20 per cent less. I feel that I need to. I need more time off. That’s what has come out of this first lockdown. And I’m very sceptical about travelling now. I’m happy to travel one or two hours by plane, but not eight hours.’ For European music lovers, that can only be good news; for those far-flung destinations, just be thankful that he loves making recordings almost as much as he likes giving concerts. 🎧

▶ See our review of Paavo Järvi’s new Alpha recording of Tchaikovsky on page 44

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