



Valerie Barber PR

Sakari Oramo

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Total Immersion: Esa-Pekka Salonen — composer, conductor, audience member

A night off for the Finnish maestro as Sakari Oramo led the BBCSO in a performance of his works at the Barbican

★★★★☆

By Richard Fairman

The composer doubling as conductor, or vice versa, started life as a 20th-century phenomenon. Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler led the way in spectacular style. Among later multitasking musicians Britten and Bernstein were notable.

In the month that Finland celebrates 100 years of independence, the BBC judiciously picked a Finn for the latest profile in its Total Immersion days, devoted to living composers. Esa-Pekka Salonen is a familiar face in London as principal conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra, but there is more to him than that.

“Most people know you just as a conductor,” declared the BBC announcer in the onstage interview, indecorously stressing the word “just”. Salonen remained tight-lipped, but then silence is probably politic when the host is throwing an all-day party in your honour.

A late-afternoon programme brought together choral music by Salonen and his teacher, Einojuhani Rautavaara, skilfully sung by the BBC Singers under Nicholas Chalmers. The brilliant detail of some of Salonen’s earlier pieces was the main pleasure here, prompting a short discussion on how similar the techniques are to his music for orchestra. One’s “tool box is as it is,” he remarked ruefully.

Even more than usual, the evening’s orchestral concert was the main event. This is where Salonen the conductor’s lifetime experience of the inner workings of an orchestra really tells. In most pieces he creates an iridescent orchestral landscape full of light and detail — coincidentally not so far from that of Julian Anderson, the subject of the previous Total Immersion (he was sitting across the gangway from Salonen).

Works such as the brief *Gambit* and the effervescent *Mimo II* for oboe and small orchestra, dazzlingly played here by Nicholas Daniel, flashed past. *Wing on Wing*, composed for the opening of Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, is a huge, celebratory piece that deserves to survive beyond its original purpose thanks to its big imagination and the chance it offered to hear Anu and Piia Komsu, the Finnish high-wire soprano twins. Only the most recent work, *Karawane*, was disappointing, less original than its origins in Dada had promised. The BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by fellow Finn Sakari Oramo. Salonen, for once, was able to sit back and enjoy the music.