

### Esa-Pekka Salonen

**E**sa-Pekka Salonen is widely acknowledged for his work on the podium, having served as principal conductor of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra from 1984 to 1995, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1992 to 2009 (he now holds the title of conductor laureate), and principal conductor and artistic advisor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London since 2006. But even as his public conducting career skyrocketed, he remained active as a composer. This is the second season of his three-year tenure as The Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence at the New York Philharmonic. This year he also begins a five-year affiliation as artist in association at the Finnish National Opera and Ballet, as well as his 14th season 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 has been an active composer since the beginning of his career. He studied horn, conducting, and composition at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki during the 1970s — his composition teacher was the late Einojuhani Rautavaara — and sought further composition study in Italy with Niccolò Castiglioni and Franco Donatoni. If asked to define his professional self at the time, he probably would have replied that he was “a conducting composer.” That changed in 1983 when, at short notice, he substituted for a performance of Mahler’s Third Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, an event that moved him into the major league at the podium and instantly transformed him into “a composing conductor.” He cited the need to find time to compose as a central factor in his decision to step down from directing the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Salonen’s orchestral works are remarkable for the detail of their instrumental writing and texture (the mark of a conducting composer), while his personal voice sometimes reflects particular influences from such forebears as Stravinsky, Messiaen, and Donatoni. Major retrospectives of his work have been presented at the Festival Présences in Paris (2011), Stockholm International Composer Festival (2004), and Musica Nova in Helsinki (2003), and he was the first person named to the creative chair of the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich. He has received prominent honors from the governments of Sweden, France, and Finland, as well as the 2014 Nemmers Composition Prize. In 2006 he was named *Musical America’s* Musician of the Year, and in 2010 he was elected a foreign honorary fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His Violin Concerto (2008–09) earned him the 2012 Grawemeyer Award for Music composition. The New York

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** June 30, 1958, in Helsinki, Finland

**Resides:** in London, England

**Work composed:** December 2003 through April 8, 2004, on commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra; dedicated to Frank Gehry, Yasuhiro Toyota, and Deborah Borda

**World premiere:** June 5, 2004, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the opening of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, California, the composer as conductor, Anu Komsu, Piia Komsu, soloists

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

**Estimated duration:** ca. 27 minutes

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## The Work at a Glance

Esa-Pekka Salonen has described *Wing on Wing* as using metaphors of water and wind, taking cues from the architecture of Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, and its designer, Frank Gehry. He said: “We hear Gehry’s sampled [and modified] voice here and there. Sometimes we can discern words, key words in his work and life. Sometimes words become musical sounds, and they lose their intelligibility wholly or partially.” He added, “I also decided to use the weird sound of a fish from the local waters of Southern California, the Plainfin Midshipman, as an instrument.” Salonen offered this explanation of how the work unfolds:

There are some other unusual colors in the score: two coloratura sopranos join the orchestra sometimes as soloists, sometimes as instruments among others. In the beginning of the piece I pair them with the lowest-sounding woodwind instruments, the contrabassoon and the contrabass clarinet, and create a new kind of hybrid instrument, a sci-fi fantasy of a union between humans and machines. I decided to disperse some of the sounds in the auditorium. The sopranos, some percussion, and the sampled sounds travel to different parts of the hall. The form of *Wing on Wing* can be described in ten sections:

1. Introduction. A chorale and a song of the two sopranos alternate, always in slightly different guises. Faster music starts to grow underneath.
2. Nervous figurations in the strings and woodwinds. The movement congeals into triplets and develops into a metaphor of a strong wind. A storm develops, dissolves, and disappears into nothingness.
3. A new beginning. Another gust of wind develops, but soon calms down to a tranquil section, where the woodwinds play melodies originally introduced by the sopranos. The layering of these melodies becomes very dense. The strings recede, and the woodwinds unite gradually into a chorale.
4. The sopranos return, now out in the hall. An explosion of glittering, metallic sounds. Again the music calms down, this time to a *misterioso* section with tremolos in the strings and fragmentary phrases in the oboes and the sopranos.
5. Plainfin Midshipman enters. These fish sing an E natural.
6. Fast movement again. Sandpaper blocks and strings spin ornaments.
7. Scherzando section. The sopranos are back, now in the normal solo position on stage. Light virtuoso textures, which gradually become another gust of wind (a memory of an earlier moment).
8. The wind solidifies into a triplet pulse. A kind of dance develops.
9. The dance doubles its speed. Joy and energy. Culmination in two huge chords. The music slows down.
10. Epilogue. At the very end we hear Frank Gehry, the Midshipman, and the sopranos for a last time.



This view of Walt Disney Concert Hall, looking toward the main entrance at Grand Avenue and First Street, in downtown Los Angeles, evokes a ship with sails fully open — a “wing on wing” configuration in sailing terms.

Philharmonic performed the New York Premiere of his Cello Concerto in March, with Yo-Yo Ma; the cellist also joined the Orchestra for performances of the work in London and Hamburg on the EUROPE / SPRING 2017 tour.

*Wing on Wing* was composed for the opening of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, designed by the architect Frank Gehry. Its wood-paneled auditorium suggests the hull of a particularly elegant, soul-embracing ship, but this composition has more to do with the building's exterior. Salonen wrote:

In sailing terminology, when a sailboat opens both the foresail and the main sail to a 180-degree angle to produce the maximum amount of sail area, the beautiful sculptural constellation is called "wing on wing." Frank Gehry uses that as a metaphor for the view of Walt Disney Concert Hall from the corner of Grand Avenue and First Street. My composition *Wing on Wing* is, of course, not an attempt to translate

architecture into music, which would be an impossible task anyway. Nor is it a musical portrait of Frank Gehry, but rather an homage to an extraordinary building by an extraordinary man. At the same time, it celebrates the efforts of every man and woman whose dedication, skill, and faith made a fantastic vision into reality.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (one doubling piccolo and bass flute, one doubling piccolo, and one doubling alto flute), three oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet (doubling bass clarinet) and contrabass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three sets of orchestra bells (one onstage, two in the hall), vibraphone, suspended cymbals, bongos, crotales, Alm-glocken (tuned cow bells), bell plates, tom-toms, tuned gongs, sandpaper blocks, tam-tams, four large triangles, congas, wind machine, metal chimes, tubular bells, sizzle cymbal, log drums, two harps, celeste, electronic sampler, two sopranos, and strings.

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## Sources and Inspirations

What in the world is a Plainfin Midshipman? Salonen's *Wing on Wing* employs a sample of the "singing" sound of this fish that is found in waters off the Pacific coastline. The mating call of the male Plainfin has been described as sounding like buzzing bees, the hum of a generator, or a didgeridoo. It's made through rapid contractions — more than 6,000 per minute — of the gas-filled bladder that keeps the fish afloat, causing a vibration in the water that can be heard on land. Except the "singer" males need to look out for the other "sneaker" male Plainfins, who do not vocalize, but do slip into nests to fertilize eggs. When the composer says he used the sounds of this "weird" local fish, he wasn't kidding. The fish also have light-emitting photophores along their bodies that look a bit like the buttons of an accordion, which are used to attract prey or to camouflage the fish in the depths it usually occupies. Although the Plainfin Midshipman does migrate to shallow pools during breeding season for nesting, and can breathe through its skin for long periods at low tide.

— The Editors

*The Plainfin Midshipman's photophores are visible along the jaw and cheeks.*

