With the 2017–18 season Esa-Pekka Salonen concludes a three-year appointment as The Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence at the New York Philharmonic. He is also widely acknowledged for his work on the podium, having served as principal conductor of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (1984 to 1995) and music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1992 to 2009). He has been principal conductor and artistic advisor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London since 2008, and in the 2014–15 season he held the first-ever “creative chair” at Zurich’s Tonhalle Orchestra. The 2016–17 season was his first of five as artist-in-association of the Finnish National Opera and Ballet.

Salonen studied horn, conducting, and composition at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki during the 1970s — his composition teacher was the eminent Einojuhani Rautavaara — and then pursued advanced composition study in Italy with Niccolò Castiglioni and Franco Donatoni. If asked to define his professional self early on, he would have replied that he was “a conducting composer.” That changed in 1983 when, at short notice, he took over a performance of Mahler’s Third Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, which 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.

Salonen’s composing activity never came to a standstill, even as his conducting career advanced — although for several years in the 1990s it slowed down — and he managed to preserve a distinctive compositional voice. In 1996 Salonen took time out from conducting to write LA Variations, his first major orchestral piece in some time, and in 2000 he took a year’s sabbatical from the podium to devote more time 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 Salonen’s work have been presented at Helsinki’s Musica Nova (2003), at the Stockholm International Composer Festival (2004), and in Los Angeles and Cologne (2005). In 2006 he was named Musical America’s Musician of the Year, and in 2010 he was elected as a foreign honorary fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His Violin Concerto earned him the 2012 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, with that organization citing 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, each of which provides novel perspectives on selected orchestral masterworks, allowing users to experience the sensations of conducting, playing with, and stepping inside an orchestra. He also serves as an adviser to the Sync Project, a global initiative to harness the power of music for human health.

Helix is conceived for a symphony orchestra of full proportions, and with a colorful percussion section that requires five players. Salonen’s work characteristically makes virtuosic demands on orchestral players. In this case, he was composing with a specific ensemble in mind: the World Orchestra for Peace, founded by Georg Solti in 1995 and directed by Valery Gergiev since Solti’s death in 1997. It comprises players from leading orchestras around the world, and, as Solti explained, it is convened periodically to reaffirm “the unique strength of music as an ambassador for peace.” Its membership has included musicians from the New York Philharmonic: violist Peter Kenote, Principal Bass Timothy Cobb, and horn player Erik Ralske (who spent 17 seasons with the Philharmonic, through 2010). “I have worked with many of the players over the years around the world,” said Salonen. “Writing this piece has felt like a more personal undertaking than usual.”

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, vibraphone, four suspended cymbals, orchestra bells, four tom-toms, bass drum, tam-tam, snare drum, harp, and strings.

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**In the Composer’s Words**

Esa-Pekka Salonen has offered this comment about his composition Helix:

I decided to compose a celebratory and direct overture-like piece, which would nevertheless be very rigidly structured, and based on essentially one continuous process. The form of Helix can indeed be described as a spiral or a coil; or more academically a curve that lies on a cone and makes a constant angle with the straight lines parallel to the base of the cone.

The process of Helix is basically that of a nine-minute accelerando. The tempo gets faster, but the note values of the phrases become correspondingly longer. Therefore only the material’s relation to the pulse changes, not necessarily the impression of speed itself. Hence the spiral metaphor: the material (which consists essentially of two different phrases) is being pushed through constantly narrowing concentric circles until the music reaches a point where it has to stop as it has nowhere to go.

The musical expression changes quite drastically in the course of these nine minutes: the idyllic, almost pastoral opening phrase for piccolo and contrabassoon returns much later in the horns and trumpets, fortissimo, surrounded by a very busy tutti orchestra. The closing section shows the material in an almost manic light.

Esa-Pekka Salonen