

Gemini

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Esa-Pekka Salonen has been a frequent presence at the New York Philharmonic, thanks, in part, to his position as The Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence from 2015 through 2018. This program presents Salonen as both composer and conductor. He is widely acknowledged for his work on the podium, having served as principal conductor of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (1984–95) and music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1992–2009). He has been principal conductor and artistic advisor of London’s Philharmonia Orchestra since 2008, and in the 2014–15 season 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. With the 2020–21 season he will begin his tenure as music director of the San Francisco Symphony.

Salonen studied horn, conducting, and composition at the Sibelius Academy in his native Helsinki during the 1970s — his composition teacher was 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 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.

In 2006 Salonen was named Musician of the Year by *Musical America*, and in 2010 he

was elected a foreign honorary fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His Violin Concerto earned 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 developing the groundbreaking *RE-RITE* and *Universe of Sound* installations as well as the interactive iPad application *The Orchestra*, both of which enable users to experience the sensations of conducting, playing with, or stepping inside the orchestra. He also serves as an advisor to the Sync Project, a global initiative to harness the power of music for human health.

In Short

Born: June 30, 1958, in Helsinki, Finland

Resides: in Los Angeles, California, and London, England

Work composed: *Pollux* in 2018 on a co-commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, Gustavo Dudamel, music and artistic director, and the Barbican Centre, London; *Castor* in 2019 on commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with generous support from Elizabeth and Justus Schlichting

World premiere: *Pollux* on April 13, 2018, in Los Angeles, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, conductor; *Castor* on October 18, 2019, in Los Angeles by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with the composer conducting; the two works, combined as *Gemini*, on October 26, 2019, in Los Angeles, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the New York Premiere of the combined work

Estimated duration: ca. 23 minutes

In the Composer's Words

Esa-Pekka Salonen shares these thoughts about *Gemini* and its two constituent parts:

Pollux has a ritualistic character, based on a mantra rhythm I heard ... during dinner in a restaurant in the 11th arrondissement in Paris. A post-grunge band played on the background track, and I wrote down the bass line on a paper napkin not knowing exactly what it was and who the musicians were. I couldn't get it out of my head, and decided to use a heavily modified version of it in *Pollux*. The pattern has been distilled to pure rhythm, and slowed down to less than quarter speed of the original.

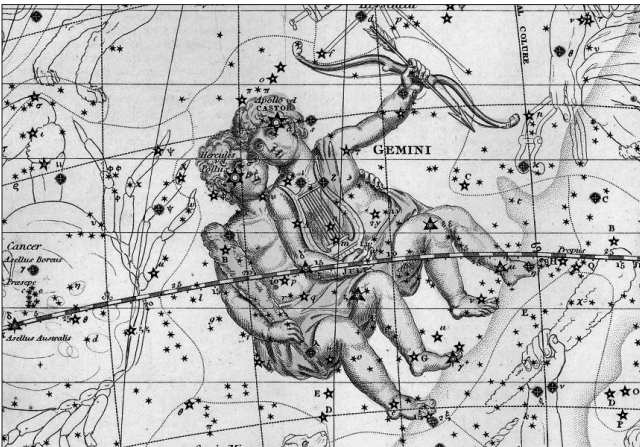
Another source of material is a chorale [here wordless] based on the first lines of Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (*Sonnets to Orpheus*):

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung! There rose a tree. O pure transcendence!
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!

I was very taken by the funny and surreal Salvador Dali-like image of a tree growing out of the ear. The metaphor is far from obvious, but it is clear that Orpheus can unify art and nature by the sheer force of his song. Every musician I know would like to be able to do that.

Pollux oscillates between cloud-like formations (that's where demigods dwell) and more clearly defined textures of the Orpheus music. After the final, *fortissimo* incarnation of the chorale, a nostalgic English horn solo brings *Pollux* to home. At the very end there's an Aeolian echo (a scale used in ancient Greece), a simple chord consisting of natural harmonics in the strings. I was trying to imagine something much older than most music.

Castor is the mortal twin brother of *Pollux*. They share their musical DNA, but *Castor* introduces some completely independent material. *Castor* is mostly hyperactive, noisy, and extroverted. The music gesticulates wildly, often in extreme registers. Two pairs of timpani and two bass drums are the rhythmic fundament upon which freer, ornamental lines build. A light, dance-like episode develops into a manic episode dominated by a trochee figure. It burns itself out and sinks onto a low B-flat (the second lowest note on the piano). A massive canon, *fortissimo*, starts in the strings and the horns, rises to the orchestra's highest range, and sinks into an abyss.



Castor can be played separately as an independent short orchestral work, or following *Pollux* without pause, *attacca*. The two pieces performed together are called *Gemini*, not surprisingly.

Castor and *Pollux* shine in the constellation *Gemini*

Castor and *Pollux*, the two movements of his newest work, *Gemini*, are named for the twin half-brothers of mythology, whose names also grace a pair of stars in the constellation Gemini. *Pollux* was composed first, on commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Salonen recounts how the extended piece, *Gemini*, took shape:

During the composition process of *Pollux*, I encountered a strange problem: my material seemed to want to grow in two completely opposite directions. ... My solution was to write two independent

but genetically linked orchestral works. *Pollux*, slow and quite dark in expression, is the first of them. *Castor*, extroverted and mostly fast, followed later.

Instrumentation: four flutes (one doubling alto flute, two doubling piccolo) and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet) plus contrabass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, vibraphone, two bass drums, harp, piano (doubling celesta), and strings.

About the Twins

Gemini took shape as Salonen began referring to the two music identities emerging in his compositional sketches as “brothers.” He realized that they would not, could not, coexist in a cohesive, formal unit as a single movement piece. He adds:

This made me think of the myth of the non-identical twins Castor and Pollux, who share half of their DNA, but have some extreme phenotype differences and experience dramatically different fates. In the Greco-Roman mythology, Pollux was immortal, as he was fathered by Zeus. Castor was mortal, as he was sired by Tyndareus, the king of Sparta, although his status changed post-mortem. The mother of both was Leda, who while being already pregnant by her husband had a tryst with Zeus, who seduced her in the form of a swan. (There’s something intriguing in the idea of this famed beauty having a penchant for large water birds.)



Statues of Castor and Pollux grace the stairs leading to Rome's Piazza del Campidoglio