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From Pärnu with Love: Tchaikovsky 2 fizzes under Paavo Järvi

By Mark Pullinger, 22 July 2019

“Erkki-Sven Tüür's *Sow the Wind*, Mussorgsky's *Songs of Dances of Death* and Tchaikovsky 2... this is not good box office!” admitted [Paavo Järvi](#) at the reception following the final concert of the Pärnu Music Festival. There's a ring of truth to this. Most orchestral managers would shudder in the face of such a programme, but box

office considerations and pandering to sponsors are far from Järvi's mind in his Pärnu planning. Yet the concert hall, regardless of the programme, was packed for the [Estonian Festival Orchestra's](#) finale and the audience was rewarded with terrific performances.



Ain Anger and the Estonian Festival Orchestra

© Taavi Kull

Environmental concerns lay behind Tüür's work, which was premiered by Järvi with the Orchestre de Paris in 2015. Although there is no explicit attempt at programmatic music to depict the biblical quotation “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind”, Tüür does develop small details – ululating clarinets, glockenspiel flecks, a dialogue between violins – and hurls back an apocalyptic storm of orchestral power that tested the hall's limits. It was a particularly great workout for the EFO's busy percussionists, bowed cymbal, cowbells and gongs to the fore.




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Pärnu isn't far from St Petersburg and the rest of the evening was devoted to two Russian composers. In his *Songs and Dances of Death*, Mussorgsky dresses Death in various disguises to claim his victims: a nanny, to rock a feverish child to eternal sleep; a serenading lover; a woman seducing a drunken peasant, inviting him to dance a Trepak; a Field Marshal, commanding officer over an army of skeletons. The songs are usually heard in Shostakovich's 1962 orchestrations, but Järvi chose Kalevi Aho's 1984 setting, made for the great Finnish bass, Martti Talvela. Estonian [Ain Anger](#) completely beguiled, his charcoal bass enveloping the audience like a warm hug. Towering over Järvi, he powered over Aho's percussion artillery – thundersheet cannons in The Field Marshal – with sepulchral ease, his characterisations vividly drawn. We were then treated to Gremin's aria from *Eugene Onegin*, sung with a velvet caress at a tempo that avoided syrup. The strings swooned, the audience swooned and demanded Anger sing it all over again so we could swoon a little bit more.



Paavo Järvi and the Estonian Festival Orchestra

© Taavi Kull





The “Little Russian” Symphony derives its name from the Ukrainian folk tunes Tchaikovsky employed, “Little Russia” being the imperialist term once used to describe the country. It's a symphony packed with wonderful music, yet it needs a vivid performance to make it come alive. And that's exactly what Järvi and the EFO delivered. Alec Frank-Gemmill, principal horn of the Gothenburg Symphony, glowed in the opening variant on *Down by Mother Volga* in the slow introduction before Järvi wound the tension superbly to launch into the first movement's *Allegro vivo* section, the strings crackling with energy. The second movement march was humorously done, the woodwinds like puckish monks sneaking back into the monastery after a night on the tiles, while double basses and cellos really powered the scampering Scherzo. But it was the finale which took one's breath away. After playing up the mock bombast of the opening brass fanfare, Järvi punctured it completely with the cheeky string interplay on variations on the folk song *The Crane*, finishing with a gloriously unbuttoned coda.

Three encores followed – the icy cool of *Valse triste* developing into something almost volcanic at its climax; perky Alfvén and Lepo Sumera's *The Spring Fly*, an Estonian favourite whose opening clarinet phrase alone had the audience applauding, causing Järvi to invite the orchestra to stand... and clarinettist Matt Hunt to corpse when attempting to restart. All tremendous fun.

Paavo Järvi has created something very special here, bringing musicians from around the world together to play in such a relaxed, picturesque environment where music – rather than commercial sponsorship – is the driving force. Yet the economic situation is delicate. As Järvi shrugs, “If you know an oligarch or two...”

Mark's press trip to Estonia was funded by Red House Productions



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“The strings swooned, the audience swooned and demanded Anger sing it all over again”



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Reviewed at Pärnu Concert Hall, Pärnu on 21 July 2019

PROGRAMME

Tüür, Sow the Wind...

Mussorgsky, Songs and Dances of Death

Tchaikovsky, Eugene Onegin: Gremin's Aria

Tchaikovsky, Symphony no. 2 in C minor "Little Russian", Op.17

Sibelius, Valse triste, Op.44 no.1

Alfven, Bergakungen (Mountain King Suite): Herd-maiden's dance, Op.37 no. 4

Sumera, The Spring Fly

PERFORMERS

Ain Anger, *Bass*

Estonian Festival Orchestra

Paavo Järvi, *Conductor*



Pride of Pärnu: Estonian Festival Orchestra revels in Nielsen

Mark Pullinger, 19th July

In Estonia's summer capital of Pärnu, holiday spirits and family pride abound in the EFO's first concert of Paavo Järvi's festival.



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Mark Pullinger, 14th August

The Estonian Festival Orchestra makes its Proms debut in a refreshing Baltic-Nordic programme.



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Paavo Järvi brings the Estonian Festival Orchestra to Zurich

Sarah Batschelet, 23rd January

Paavo Järvi conducted the Estonian Festival Orchestra that he founded in select works by Northern composers.



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Stefan Pillhofer, 16th August

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Mark Pullinger

Mark is one of Bachtrack's editors. He is Chair of the Music Section of The Critics' Circle and member of its Dance Section. An experienced opera critic, with a passion for Verdi, he can often be found propping up a standing place at the ROH. He also reviews concerts and dance, with a particular love for Russian and French repertoire. Mark contributes to Gramophone and Opera magazines and blogs at Beckmesser's Quill.

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