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Business as usual: Paavo Järvi gets the band back together in Pärnu

By [Mark Pullinger](#), 15 July 2021

A full hall, no social distancing or face masks, hugs between desk partners at the close... was this an archive stream? Although only a third of the population is fully vaccinated, Covid cases in Estonia remain low and the Pärnu Music Festival is back in full swing. Even the international contingent of the [Estonian Festival Orchestra](#), founded by [Paavo Järvi](#) in 2011 to bring together top orchestral musicians with young talent from Estonia, is back, among them leader Florian Donderer, clarinetist Matt Hunt and French horn principal Alec Frank-Gemmill. Business as usual.



That "business" is one of passionate music-making aligned with a true festival spirit. Pärnu is a friendly festival, artists rubbing shoulders with the public. Starry soloists in famous concertos are rapturously received, but the public is inquisitive too, used to Järvi's eclectic programming. So here we had a big name violinist in a relatively familiar concerto, followed by less familiar fare by one of Estonia's greatest composers.

Antonín Dvořák's *Violin Concerto* isn't as famous – or ubiquitous – as his Cello Concerto, but it's a fine work, given a persuasive performance here by the Peter Pan of the violin, [Joshua Bell](#). In the *Allegro ma non troppo* opening, he was less aggressive than some in the declamatory sparring with the orchestra, but his tone sounded lithe and silky in the beautiful main theme. He brought out the lyrical lines of the slow movement quite magically, eyes often closed in contemplation, while the finale really danced, Bell indulging in plenty of knee bends as he leant into phrases. Apart from a few moments of untidiness at the climax of the slow movement, the EFO proved sympathetic partners.



Asked to name an Estonian composer, I imagine Arvo Pärt would be the first name to trip off the tongue of many respondents. Less well known is the music of [Eduard Tubin](#) (1905-82), which is a shame because he should register on your radar, especially if you enjoy the symphonies of Sibelius and Nielsen (check out the Fourth, the *Sinfonia lirica*). Neeme Järvi has been a staunch advocate, both in the concert hall and on disc, and Paavo long ago recorded the Fifth Symphony. Here he conducted the *Music for Strings* and the suite from the *Kratt* (The Goblin), the first Estonian ballet.

The *Music for Strings* opens in quite an austere fashion – a passacaglia, no less – and the bright sheen of the EFO strings heightened that to the point of aggression, not helped by the reverberant hall, but their sense of fearless attack was impressive, as was their cohesion.



The score of *Kratt* was drawn from Estonian songs and folk melodies. Tubin began composing it in 1938, to a libretto by the dancer Elfriede Saarik, who later married the composer. The folklorish plot involves a peasant farmer who, against the odds, creates a magical goblin which will gather riches for him. But to bring *Kratt* to life, the peasant must offer three drops of blood to the devil. Unsurprisingly, things don't end well, but along the way there is much humour, evident in Tubin's score, which has more than a hint of the sardonic young Shostakovich about it with its pungent clarinet lines and the strutting, military gait of the *Long Dance*. Donderer double-stopped furiously, sliding and slurring in the *Peasant Waltz* and the helter-skelter woodwinds joined the chase in the *Buck Dance*. Best of all were the thunderous timpani and grinding brass in the – scream emoji – *Dance of the Exorcists!* It's not subtle music, but great fun, drawing whoops from the audience.

Järvi then wheeled out two of his favourite encores: Shostakovich's cheeky *Tahiti Trot* and Sibelius' *Valse triste*, the latter given a swift reading that drew to a fierce, defiant climax before the softly whispered ending. Business as usual.

This performance was reviewed from the Pärnu Music Festival live video stream

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Reviewed at [Pärnu Concert Hall](#), Pärnu on 15 July 2021

PROGRAMME

Dvořák, Violin Concerto in A minor, Op.53

Tubin, Music for Strings

Tubin, Suite from *Kratt* (The Goblin)

Shostakovich, Tahiti Trot, "Tea for Two" for orchestra, Op.16

Sibelius, Valse triste, Op.44 no.1

PERFORMERS

Joshua Bell, Violin

Estonian Festival Orchestra

Paavo Järvi, Conductor

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[Alexander Hall, 17th July](#)

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[Stefan Pflüger, 16th August](#)
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- [Valse triste, Op.44 no.1](#)
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Mark Pullinger
Mark has been Bachtrack's English editor since 2014. He is an experienced critic, writing over 500 reviews for the site, as well as contributing to Gramophone and Opera Magazines. He is a member of the Music and Dance Sections of The Critics' Circle. He also writes programme notes and is an occasional blogger at [Beckmesser's Quill](#). Mark has a particular passion for the operas of Verdi as well as Russian and French repertoire. Outside the concert hall and opera house, Mark enjoys cooking and travel and is probably at his happiest let loose in a French patisserie.

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