

## Pärnu Music Festival 2021 / July 11-18 [live webcasts]

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Paavo Järvi

### Guest Reviewer, Ateş Orga

William Henry Beable's *Russian Gazetteer and Guide* ("Being an account of ... the principal towns and cities of Russia, Finland and Siberia"), compiled by 1914 hence pre-dating Estonian independence) described Pärnu as "a flourishing Baltic province town and port of Estonian Livonia, with 25,000 inhabitants, situated on the Gulf of Pernau, [dating] from the 13th century, and [containing] remains of its former fortifications. There is a sandy beach and good bathing. The principal industry of the town is the large wood-pulp factory of Waldhof. Steamers ply regularly to Riga, 182 miles distant by rail". The place offered two recommended hotels (du Nord and Bristol), a British Vice-Consulate, and a Lloyd's Agency. Having been the playground of the USSR's elite from Stalin to Gorbachev, it's bigger these days with a population of around 40,000.

July, balmy evenings, sunsets after ten. Parkland, trees and riverside promenade fronting the Concert Hall. Pärnu Music Festival time. An intimate, inviting affair of heart and mind, founded in 2010 by Neeme and Paavo Järvi, reminding me of the post-war days of Britten's Aldeburgh Festival and Glock's Dartington Summer School. An enlightened marriage of culture, connoisseurship and communion.

Paavo Järvi presided over four orchestral concerts, three of them with his Estonian Festival Orchestra (EFO) – a mix of contemporary, romantic or classical repertory, each with a Concerto. Opening (11<sup>th</sup>), the Sinfonietta Riga from Latvia weaved runes and spells with Arvo Pärt's ethereally hypnotic *Summa* (1977/91, arranged for strings) and tintinnabuli-styled *Frates* (1977/92, in the violin, percussion and strings version). Soloist in the latter, Triin Ruubel – concert-master of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, co-leader of the EFO – is no stranger to the limelight. Pale, blue-eyed and flaxed-haired, a 110% team player, quietly yet charismatically reigning over the field, placing the music first, she gave the kind of fearless performance you'd expect: projected and poetic, caressing her instrument (François Pique, 1820), her liquid *pizzicatos* akin to dappled sunbeams through branches, her frail, barely fingered ruminations like some old story half-remembered. Impressive by the most demanding standards, spiritually poignant. It was good to see her return later in the week for Mozart's Clarinet Quintet with the resourcefully imaginative Matthew Hunt. (Festival Gala, 16<sup>th</sup>) – a concert in which Eduard Tubin's 1951 Saxophone Sonata arranged for viola [Andres Kaljuste, Sophia Rahman] and Ester Mägi's 1982 Duos in National Idiom for flute and violin [Maarika Järvi, Sharon Roffman] were graciously crafted. Mägi, Estonian music's "first lady", died two months ago, aged ninety-nine.)

Erkki-Sven Tüür occupied the Tonhalle-Orchester's Creative Chair during Järvi's 2019/20 Zürich season. His *L'ombra della croce* (The Shadow of the Cross, 2014), dedicated to Manfred Eicher, founder of ECM Records, provided a sonorous if brief showcase for the Riga strings, running the gamut from Aeolian dawning to dusky E-minor water-meadows. Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, like the First, is a familiar 'short' of Järvi's. In his eagerness to get on, this reading was particularly bracing. And quick, at just over 22 minutes (with repeats). 6.5.4.4.3 strings (antiphonal violins), hard-sticked timpani. Some boiling-point, the exciting detail, the dramatisation of entries, the segued middle movements, was edge of the seat stuff, the players, watchful and droll, at one with the theatre. Moments came out of nowhere: the unexpected viola/cello/bass *diminuendo* retreat in bar 202 of the first Allegro; the lighthouse-beamed *sfzazando* accents and gruff unisons of the Finale (those D-flats/C-sharps, bars 372ff, futuristic in their hellfire audacity). A thrilling ride.

The first of the EFO appearances (14<sup>th</sup>) featured Lars Vogt in Mozart, the second (15<sup>th</sup>) Joshua Bell in Dvořák. Vogt's Mozart is not of the crinolines and curtsy variety. Tablet resting on the Steinway, his C-minor Concerto (*own cadenza*), was increasingly weighty, the balance and discourse, solo and orchestral, of the Larghetto setting an expressive yardstick. He and Järvi have done this before. They have a natural rapport, agreeing on aesthetics and tempo, foreseeing Beethoven, somehow, in a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century way, purged of hindsight. Brahms's A-major Intermezzo Opus 118/2 proved a wood-smoke encore, harmonically voiced, bass aware, lingeringly looking back, bygone drawing rooms, velvet plush and fading light tapestried into the hour.

Bell, black-shirted, music also before him, has been reviving the Dvořák Concerto in recent seasons. Perhaps taking a cue from the composer's episodic tone poems, he brings a distinctive, intensely personal brand of Slavic story-telling to the music (that his maternal grandmother was Minsk Jewish counts for something), making the most of its emotional contrasts, letting the melodies soar. Uninhibited time bending, nuanced risk-taking *rubato*, an almost improvisational abandon in the Finale, seducing, tussling and conquering, playing the hall's spacious acoustic, he let fly the grandest of panoramas, richly toned and grained, his conception backed by Järvi's flexibility, the orchestra gilding the occasion, their appreciation evident. X-factor glory.

Both programmes closed with the same second half featuring Tubin (1905-82), a composer whose output Järvi (following his father) has long advocated. In 2001, during his early Cincinnati days, he recorded the Fifth of Tubin's ten completed Symphonies. Tubin is an Estonian icon, a landmark hero in the country's cultural legacy. But that wasn't always the case. Escaping the Soviet occupation in 1944, he settled west in Stockholm, becoming a Swedish citizen in 1961 – an exile that for the rest of his life occluded wider identity or recognition. The three-movement Music for Strings (1962-63, midway between the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies: Moderato-Allegro-Adagio) is weighty and serious, emotionally charged, not an unnecessary gesture or pedantry in sight, ensembles, solos and regional regions beautifully dramatised and balanced. Led by Florian Doderer, concertmaster of Järvi's Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, the EFO strings excelled, producing the richest of pedigree Nordic/European sound – honed, suave and attacking, digging deep into the bass fundamentals, full-throated in the mid-range, silk sheened up top.

"The story of *Kratt* is one of refusals, rewriting, lost scores and resurrection; my father polished the music for 20 years. The starting has developed from rural storytelling to a timeless visual knockout, inspired not least by the cinema classics my parents loved" (Eino Tubin). Based on Estonian lore and folk-tunes to a scenario by the dancer Elfriede Saarik, later the composer's wife, Tubin's four-act ballet *Kratt* (*The Goblin*) was premiered in Tartu in March 1943. It transferred to the Estonia Theatre in Tallinn the following February. Two weeks later, during a performance on the evening of 9 March 1944, the place was destroyed by Soviet bombing, "the dancers fleeing to the bomb shelter in their fantastic costumes, truly terrifying the people of [the city]". On YouTube there are extracts from a 2015 two-act Estonian National Ballet version (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4xg3owfE2s>; Estonia Record Productions DVD ERP10117). Choreographed, strikingly, by Marina Kesler, they give a brief musical/visual idea of a score we ignore at our cost. *Kratt* is brilliant music and brilliant theatre, a stunning display of dance, song and orchestral virtuosity. The orchestral suite, commissioned by Swedish Radio in 1961, divides into three sections. I Introduction; Farmer's Dance; Dance of the Kratt. II Long Dance; Peasant Waltz; Buck Dance. III Interlude; Dance of the Exorcists; The Goat; The Cock; Dance of the Northern Lights. Be prepared for anything: not Jansžek or Bartók folklorism, less still Khachaturian, but wisps and tails of Russian Romanticism, Glazunov, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Sibelius, passing Gallicisms, even a foretaste of plainsman-open-sky *Appalachian Springs*, not yet written, all melded with a poet's imagination and sculptor's touch. With the multi-national EFO (Lucerne Festival Orchestra style) in Formula One gear and Järvi rejuvenated to be back to 'live' music-making, a masterwork before him, a full house behind, this was a no-holds-barred adrenalin encounter. Rhythmic tension at a premium; emphasised thrusting downbeats; 'painted' paragraphs (the solo fiddle of the Peasant Waltz, anticipating the *polska* world of Alfvén's *Prodigal Son*, the desolate cor anglais, horn and violin of the Night Herdsmen Interlude, the savage drums and raw palette of the Exorcist standing out). A showpiece winner in any venue... yet who programmes it? The omission is indefensible.

The final concert (18th) opened with the premiere of a new six-and-a-half minute work, *The Bow*, by Ülo Krigul, recipient beforehand of this year's Lepo Sumera Composition Prize. Born in 1978, Krigul, cutting a stubbled, moodily Romantic persona, is something of a crossover force in the Estonian scene. Since his mid-teens he's been a keyboard player and arranger for various rock and jazz ensembles, currently playing keyboards in two local groups, Compromise Blue and Contus Firmus. The underlying parameters of the latest piece remain to be discovered. One of his pre-occupations, though, is "to treat chords and the relationship between them as geometric figures or graphic projections". Kerri Kotta, chairman of the International Eduard Tubin Society, notes "darkness" in his music" while singling out its "sonic and stylistic homogeneity" however varied the means of organisation and synthesis. Järvi steered a safe course, a predictably clear beat, vigilant entries and precision balancing taking priority. Brass and percussion had their say, yet the journey wasn't only theirs. Krigul writes ambitiously for big forces, but he can be economical and selective too. The ending, disappearing into the bowels of the earth, came at just the right moment, structurally and spiritually – he's a time master who knows when to stop the pendulum.

Celebrity of the evening was Emmanuel Pahud. His Mozart G-major was a remarkably delicate affair – so refined, so intimate, so demanding of himself and the group of hand-picked players about him, that the faintest glimmer of a scratch or irregularity became magnified at the expense of ongoing spontaneity. But then so memorably beautiful in the aria and ornament of the slow movement. And so utterly unexpected for the interpolation before the rondo of Pärt's *Estimändler* (2006) – a magical suspension of belief that, needing no introduction, ought to have been left to speak for itself, a tonal handshake across the centuries, mysterious and ethereal. Commissioned by James Galway, Lennox Berkeley's artful 1976 orchestration of Poulenc's Flute Sonata – *echt französisch* – flatters and irons out the corners pianists find tricky. This was a graceful reading, sparking into life in the "cubist" Presto. A generous musician faced with a clamorous public, Pahud encored with Debussy's *Syrinx* – as preciously exquisite and tenderly adored as I've ever heard, glinting gold. Tüür's working on a new concerto for him. What fruit will it bear?

Berwald's 1,189 bar Fourth Symphony (1845, but not published until 1911), with its trademark quirks, abrupt cadences and hymnal Adagio a semitone down (drawing on a tone poem for organ duet, *A Rustic Wedding*) officially closed the Festival. I've long had affection for the Berwald canon, the Fourth coming my way through Igor Markevitch's 1956 Berlin Philharmonic account, then Sixten Ehrling's 1968 Kingsway Hall recording with the LSO, sleeve notes courtesy of the late Robert Layton, a future colleague. In his manuscript Berwald indicated an expected playing time in the region of thirty-two minutes – slow movement *attacca* Scherzo, Scherzo *da capo senza ripetizione*. Most performances these days hover around the twenty-seven mark, though Ehrling's Malmö's remake, released in 1996, broadened this to over twenty-nine. In the quicker tradition of Neeme in Gothenburg (1985), Paavo settled at twenty-five/twenty-six. He found space to let the Adagio blossom in all its splendence and beauty of sound (the EFO lush with double bass gravity), but, fundamentally, this was a brisk, architecturally focused, clarity cleansing view, free of invasive indulgence, gutsy in attack and unanimity. E-flat splendour and song somewhere between Danube, Rhineland and Sibelian climes.

"Creativity," Max Ernst famously remarked, "is that marvellous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and draw a spark from their juxtaposition." Being the Festival it stands for, in the place where it is, the Järvi dynasty at its core, enquiring and liberated, Pärnu is about the unexpected. Tuesday July 13th, 8pm. *Lock Me In Your Light*. The Lithuanian minimalist Gediminas Gelgotas with his New Ideas Chamber Orchestra (NICO – three violins, two cellos, double bass, piano) in a programme centring around compositions of his written since 2011. This admired, energised, motivated, freewheeling, assured young man, born in Vilnius in 1986, has this past decade whipped up quite a storm in the Baltic region and beyond. Unsurprisingly – being a Renaissance man who comparably "lives and breathes music, using its power to create spaces in which anything is possible" – Kristjan Järvi has played a big part in this: Gelgotas speaks of the "artistic tandem" they enjoy. It was at Kristjan's visceral 2015 Paris concert with his then Baltic Sea Youth Philharmonic and the "Sheherazade" violinist Dalia Simaška that I first came across Gelgotas – his *Never Ignore The Cosmic Ocean* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PKb37>). He says that his "musical language is based on a refined aesthetic that is flavoured with sometimes sharp, sometimes gentle hints of (post)minimalism involving the frequent appearance of broken melodic segments, short, angular sections, occasional rigid 'roboticisms' in rhythm, melody and musical temperament. Though aggressive, unconventional string techniques are often employed [percussive effects too], a sensuous nucleus remains intact. Universally important ideas are expressed in [my] titles". A St Petersburg critic in February 2020, Nadezhda Rogozhina, lyricised her reaction. "He does not set boundaries between man and nature, past and future, life and death. In his music, everything lives simultaneously, interpenetrating. This is like the pulse of life, like time, which in human perception sometimes flies, then freezes, but never stops".

Music-theatre springs to mind. Loose-limbed, easy on the patter, casual suit and open-neck shirt, late night Rat Pack languor is his lounging manner. Hands mark time, chiselled fingers mime rhythmic patterns. During some numbers, chant-like, he'll half sing, half speak, monotonal urgency tenses delivery. Emotions are raw, his body possessed. In an instant he'll be at the Steinway, gently at first then progressively untamed, pulverising the aether. Everyone plays or vocalises from memory. Moves and angles are choreographed. The charisma and engaged personality of his instrumentalists, one senses, matter, costuming is everything, transient hints of Nordic Goth in the messaging. Lighting picks out posture, stretched torsos, muscled anatomy, drawing profiles out of the shadows ... In Gelgotas creator, musician and actor meet. A romancer in love with beauty while yet wracked somewhere between Middageard and Asgard, in "this happening" – glowing reds and blues, achromatic mosaics dappling a darkened hall – *Sanctification* (2014), *Never Ignore The Cosmic Ocean* (2011) – the latter with Augusta Jusionyte in aristocratically brilliant solo form – Max Richter's long-breathed *On the Nature of Daylight* (2004) and Kristjan Järvi's subtle *Nebula* (2014) left a particular mark. Mysterically, *Transitory* (2009/2014) fused elements redolent of paganism, ritualistic frame-drums, tribal song ... Gelgotas's voice torn from the womb. A show compelling in its split-second chemistry of ensemble, execution and audio-visual production values.

Witness the launching of the Paavo Järvi Music Foundation in 2019, investment in the future, nurturing young musicians and conductors "of all nationalities", "the right education", lies close to Järvi's heart. A manifestation of this was a late afternoon presentation and concert (13th) under the aegis of the Estonian Foundation of Musical Instruments, established in 2015, which makes available historic European string examples and bows to students and professionals, as well as encouraging local luthiers to develop their skills internationally. In its original sextet version, Schoenberg's *Verklarte Nacht*, eloquent and voiced, detail and timbre uppermost, provided a period flavoured showcase for Mari Poll-Novakovic (concertmaster, Estonian National Opera), Robert Traksmann (Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin), Johanna Vahermägi (Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), Mart Kuusma (Hochschule für Musik Detmold), Theodor Sinka (principle cello, Estonian National Symphony Orchestra), and Leho Karin (cello concertmaster, Tallinn Chamber Orchestra).

In a recent Karajan Institute *Conducting the Future* video Paavo maintains that "every orchestral musician who has once gone through a course where they need to learn a piece and conduct it in front of a good orchestra and an audience, and to rehearse it, will never look at the conductor in the same way ... I think it should be almost mandatory for every musician who studies in school, or wants to go into conducting in a more serious way, not superficially, to take instruction", they will have a different appreciation of [respect for] the profession". His Conductors Academy with the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich a few months ago was a mesmeric affirmation of what he believes in – watchful, advising, illustrating, raising pragmatic awareness.

Attaching a cross-section of participants and abilities, the Järvi Academy, advanced string and woodwind courses in parallel, is a key Pärnu fixture. Running from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>, Paavo, Kristjan and Leonid Grin captained eight masterclasses. A formidable triumvirate. Humoured, informal, guiding, Teaching basics if need be, contributing life experience to the exercise, "producing". Pacing about, sitting within the orchestra, butting in. Not afraid to be out-spoken, personal and hands on in releasing inhibitions, freely taking over the baton. A constructive environment.

Sound bites. Paavo, avuncular: "all music is horizontal"; "think of the tempo before you start"; "nostalgic music from far away, from your orchestra, your grandparents' youth" (Dvořák *New World* Largo); "visibly connect to the soloist, it's always a good idea ... if the audience sees you interacting, they'll interact with you" (look more involved, be interested); "be awake"; "invite your players, always lead"; "it's a [free-bowed] *ferrata*, so what are you beating, why?"; Kristjan, condescendingly Neeme-like in physique: "you're too involved in the score, conduct the music"; "a good conductor is a simple conductor"; "you're a story teller, tell a story"; "improvise"; "you can do anything you want but make it clear"; "start trusting yourself"; "don't wait for each other"; "conduct in bigger phrases"; "do it as though you're writing the dynamics on the spot ... it could be light, dark, green [amused smile], it doesn't have to be the same twice"; "finesse, loosen up, [let] air into your gestures". Leonid Grin, the bespectacled veteran from Kondrashin/Bernstein days: "relax, loosen up, make free music, music makes you drunk, Charlie Chaplin on the streets of New York" (Ibert *Divertissement*); "for Mozart forte is energetic not bombastic" (Symphony 33); "you're conducting God's orchestra [looking to the heavens] ... but we're sitting here, we're not God's orchestra".

This year's course included two public concerts in Tallinn (10<sup>th</sup>), Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre) and Pärnu (12<sup>th</sup>). Both with the same small group of players (Järvi Academy Sinfonietta) and programme. Everyone (several from choral backgrounds) added to the mix – some looser, fussier or less stylish than others, less caring for their fellows, some heavy-handed, straight-laced or self-conscious, one or two erring towards the dogmatist. Negotiating the Mozart Finale, Martin Dendievel, assistant conductor of the Flanders Symphony Orchestra and a Donatella Flick finalist (*glant, urbane*), and Alexey Mikhaylenko from Moscow, a member of Kristjan's Baltic initiatives since 2011 (restive, quicker), showed interestingly different sides of the coin. Magdalen Klein, Berlin trained, brought a shape, punctuation and sensitivity to Pärt's *Trisagion* (1992/94) I'd happily have taken into a recording studio.

A third concert (17<sup>th</sup> Pärnu), with enlarged forces and familiar faces among the shuffe ranks (Järvi Academy Young SO), saw her back for the slow movement of Artur Lemba's First Piano Concerto (1905/10) with Mikhail Poll, more relaxed here than in the relatively eye-contactless flanking movements (he's recorded the piece with Neeme Järvi for Chandos). The Frenchman Victor Jacob, who studied at the Royal Academy of Music and Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris, opened with Johann Strauss II's *Kaiseralzer*. Though he gauged the introduction (measured) and pictorial coda naturally enough, he arguably needs to love Viennese dance more, to seduce the listener. As she demonstrated in class, Isabel Rubio from Spain does, besides willing to acknowledge the artistry of her musicians, principal cello in diversity. So. Like Klein, Nele Erastus, from Pärnu (currently at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), was another "quiet light" who caught my eye. She brought unassuming musicality to Mägi's six-minute Vespers (1990/98). Subsequently the Latvian Izabele Jankauskaite (Zürich-dvořák) also impressed with this piece if, when needed, a touch lacking in rhythmic accent. Going through the motions, Dvořák's *New World*, in the hands of aspirants oddly reluctant to let events flow or cadence with time to breathe, found the orchestra tiring after a full-on week of concentration. Getting to the next page, catching the last train, isn't everything. Last on the podium was the cellist Valle-Rasmus Roots (Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), a thoughtful, experienced performer who directed Sibelius's late *Andante Festivo* articulately, getting the strings to play off each other, alert to textural layering and dynamics, placing composer and music first. A sense of gravitas.

Paavo, Pärnu, and a special aroma of encore go hand in hand. Alfvén's slippery slope *Shepherd-Girl's Dance* (1923), Youmans-Shostakovich's *Tahiti Trot* (twice each, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>), Sibelius's obligatory *Valse triste* (15<sup>th</sup>). To conclude (18<sup>th</sup>). Alfvén again, then the Bizet-Guiraud Toréador Prélude from *Karmen*. Finally, woken dulcetly by Matthew Hunt's clarinet, Lepo Sumera's Waltz from the 1986 animation *Spring Fly* (*Kevadine Kärbes*, after A. H. Tammsaare's 1917 parable *The Fly, the Cockroach and the Spider*). In strokes of master narrative, lingering a long seven minutes (others hasten between four and five), Paavo, barely stirring, loath to leave, draws the curtain back, night kissing dawn. Like a pianist lost in reverie, he plays the notes through the keyboard of the orchestra, the harmonics of the room his sustaining pedal. Alone. Listening. Time without end.

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