

CARTE BLANCHE

In the third of a free-ranging new series, **James Jolly** meets the conductor **Paavo Järvi** and violinist **Florian Donderer** to find out how you create a great orchestra



Let's make an orchestra!

An hour and a half's drive down the coast from Estonia's capital, Tallinn, brings you to Pärnu, a resort city with a long musical tradition: both Dmitri Shostakovich and David Oistrakh had dachas in the area, and the great violinist would often gather young players around him to make music, and eventually gave his name to a music festival there. Since 2011 Pärnu has been the summer centre of operations of the country's 'musical royal family', the Järvis – father Neeme, and sons, conductors Paavo and Kristjan, and daughter, flautist Maarika – with Paavo the Artistic Director of the Pärnu Music Festival. (It was, incidentally, in Pärnu that as an 11-year-old, Paavo first met Shostakovich.) For him it's a busman's holiday: mornings find him rehearsing his hand-picked Estonian Festival Orchestra (EFO), in the afternoons it's overseeing conducting masterclasses (where he's a focused and charismatic teacher) and in the evenings he's often back on the podium conducting a concert. It's a tribute not just to his energy, but also to his genuinely altruistic devotion to nurturing a new generation of young Estonian musicians.

'Orchestral playing is sometimes looked down on as a job,' Paavo explains, 'something you cannot earn money doing. And I wanted to show that the orchestra at its best is an unbelievably fantastic way to spend your life. If you play once in an orchestra that really is exceptional, then you will change your mind about spending your life in one. In many, many places, orchestral playing is always secondary to the solo career, and I wanted to change that perception.' Ensembles brought together during the summer months for intensive periods of music-making are nothing new – think of the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, the Lucerne Festival Orchestra and any number of groups gathered to perform operas in gorgeous settings. But the EFO has a slightly different philosophy. 'When we started the Pärnu Festival, I thought that it would be great to have an orchestra



Paavo Järvi and Estonian Festival Orchestra Concertmaster Florian Donderer

that not only helps younger Estonians, but also creates a new level of orchestral playing in the country. In Estonia, we have very good orchestras, but the type of orchestra that I was aiming for would be something that the locals could only dream about. And so we thought, "Well, we can't just invite the great players, because that's too easy" and it would not really serve the purpose because this is an educational situation, as well. We wanted to make sure that our kids get something that inspires them to really try harder and go further.'

'The best musicians are all very smart. I've never met a great musician who is dumb' – Paavo Järvi

Spend just a few minutes listening to the EFO's brand-new Alpha Classics album, 'Estonian Premieres', and especially the exquisitely beautiful opening piece *To the Moonlight* (2020) by Tõnu Kõrvits – written for Paavo and the EFO – and you will be immediately struck by the quality of ensemble and individual musicianship on display. This is seriously classy playing. But then a quick scan through the list of players of the EFO partly explains why: among its ranks are musicians from some of the

world's great orchestras, with Florian Donderer, former Concertmaster of the Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, leading. And some amazing young players have filled out the ranks: the cellist Marcel Johannes Kits recently took third prize at the Queen Elizabeth Competition, the violinist Hans Christian Aavik won the Carl Nielsen Competition just a few months ago, and another violinist Triin Ruubel is Concertmaster of the Estonian National SO.

'Whenever I'm conducting around the world I always keep an eye open for potential players.

There are some people who are very good, but they wouldn't be right for us, and others who just fit in because they are full of communication and they always have unbelievable positive energy. These are exactly the players that I approach, and say, "Look, we have this really nice festival orchestra, come and join." And once they join, they always want to return. I have never yet encountered one person yet who hasn't wanted to come back. And that inspires the local Estonian musicians. Now that it's the 12th year, we have enough of a track record to see how it has influenced musical life of Estonia. Most of the kids who played in the Festival Orchestra were students. Now, they're concertmasters or section leaders. They're basically the new-generation leaders of Estonian musical life.'

Conducting an orchestra that changes every year, albeit with a certain fixed 'core', must be a very different experience from working with his own ensemble, Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra or, say, the Berliner Philharmoniker where Paavo's a regular guest. 'The great, established orchestras have a certain way of doing things,' Paavo elaborates, 'which they can rely on, and an experience that they can draw on. Here, they individually can be incredibly strong. But as a group, there is no collective experience to fall back on. So yes, you have to teach that first of all. And second, you have not only *teach* it, but you need to *create*



Paavo Järvi with some of his young players at the concert hall in Pärnu

it. But I don't think it only applies to music, it applies to any field. You don't only look for somebody who is technically very, very strong and talented. You look for somebody who has a brain, somebody who thinks quickly, adapts quickly. The best musicians are all very smart. I've never met a great musician who is dumb. There are some people who are very strong technicians but not musically able to grasp things and they don't get anywhere. They don't even get in orchestras. So the common denominator is that they're all very intelligent people, but you need to say the right things and you need to start out with a clear plan, "Okay, this is how we do things. This is how we play. This is the standard." And very quickly they catch on. Of course, it helps that we have very experienced pros coming from big orchestras. They understand immediately: you don't have to tell them. And they are the good guides to their stand partners. Take [double bass-player] Esko Laine, from the Berlin Phil: if somebody's rushing, he just looks at them and it's all said, they understand it – no words necessary.' And that kind of fusion of deep professionalism, accumulated experience and intense musicality happens throughout the orchestra.

Florian Donderer, who has been Concertmaster from the start, has watched Paavo at close hand for many years from his first desk in the Kammerphilharmonie Bremen. 'I think what Paavo was always looking for is some blend, or mixture, so that everyone influences each other. He has Russians, he has people from his traditional orchestras, and he has the people from the

Kammerphilharmonie. He wanted it all to mix in a way, and I think why he asked me was because, like him, I have a collaborative approach to making music. I think he wanted the musicians to feel like worthwhile musicians. We have a certain sound that has evolved over the time, but it's not something that you plan in advance. You have a musical idea and then you go for it. And depending on who is playing, and what repertoire you do, bit by bit you acquire your own sound. But it's not something you can really plan.'

Some years both Paavo and Florian agree are simply 'vintage' (2022 could well be just that – Joshua Bell's simple 'Wow!' as he gestured at the orchestra after an astounding Bruch No 1 said it all), others start out needing a little work. 'I think it depends a lot on the right combinations of people. We have come to guess who would fit better with this person or who would fit better with that person. Because, somehow, there is a level of subconscious comfort with somebody on the same stand and it makes all the difference. Sometimes you can look and you see, "Okay, this third stand, for some reason, doesn't work. I don't know why." Everybody else is moving, everybody else is working. And somehow you feel like there's a wall.' So you swap players around? "Yes. Not in front of everybody, but I suggest, "Why don't you sit here and can you two switch so you have different partners?" And miraculously, the problem is solved. And it can be like that in established orchestras too. Very often when you audition for a professional orchestra, you don't have that luxury of matching your stand partner

because you just auditioned for this one position, and you're stuck maybe with somebody for your whole life. It's nobody's fault, it just doesn't work. We can have an unbelievable player who is playing a principal woodwind. And you put someone else next to that person and the chords are not in tune. Then you put another second next to that same principal, and everything is just perfection. Why? I don't know. But these two just fit and they can play together. The other two, they try hard, I mean *really* try, but it doesn't work. The whole inner workings of an orchestra, it's a very interesting thing.'

For Paavo, a musician surprisingly free of ego and with a genuine and palpable sense of wanting music-making to be a collaborative endeavour, his work in Pärnu provides its own personal challenges. 'Some things you have to really explain to a standard orchestra – a lot of pedantic details about dynamics and so on. But here a lot of those things, because of the innate talent and youthful adaptability, work surprisingly well – and better sometimes than in a very sophisticated orchestra. So you learn a lot of what not to do, how important you are in certain places, and how unimportant you are in some other situations. So it's kind of educational for me too. The other thing is that all the rehearsals are witnessed by my conducting students. And that's a major thing because, if you are telling somebody how to conduct and showing them what to do, you'd better do it yourself too! I can theoretically say, "Okay, this could be better or this could be worse" to a young conductor, but if I conduct and I don't do any of those things, my word doesn't count! So it cleans up my own conducting a little bit as well, which is very healthy.'

Florian Donderer, who in rehearsals and performance is a clearly inspirational figure among the orchestra's strings, has nothing but praise for Paavo's initiative. 'Apart from his incredible capability as a conductor and as a musician, he's a very human person. He wants to do good for his country and his musicians here. The level of playing has skyrocketed in the last years. He knows what he wants. And he's also relentless in a way that he will not let go. But he knows that he can get most out of the orchestra when he gets the people to like him and to go for it.' And proof of that came in the two concerts I attended, each concluding with Tchaikovsky's Fifth in performances of colossal energy, passion and astounding orchestral playing. Paavo has created an ensemble to make Estonia proud. **G** *The EFO's 'Estonian Premieres' (Alpha Classics) is reviewed on page 45*