

ESA-PEKKA SALONEN
KAIJA SAARIAHO

Works for Solo Cello

WILHELMINA SMITH



WORKS FOR SOLO CELLO

ESA-PEKKA SALONEN (b. 1958)

- | | | |
|---|---|--------------|
| 1 | YTA III (1986) | 7:46 |
| | knock, breathe, shine (2010) | 15:00 |
| 2 | I. knock | 2:58 |
| 3 | II. breathe | 5:38 |
| 4 | III. shine | 6:24 |
| 5 | Sarabande per un coyote (2010) | 3:04 |
| 6 | GIUSEPPE COLOMBI (1635–1694): Chiacona | 2:46 |

KAIJA SAARIAHO (b. 1952)

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| 7 | Dreaming Chaconne (2010) | 3:22 |
| 8 | Petals (1988) | 8:46 |
| | Sept papillons (2000) | 12:15 |
| 9 | Papillon I: <i>Dolce, leggiere, libero</i> | 1:51 |
| 10 | Papillon II: <i>Leggiero, molto espressivo</i> | 1:28 |
| 11 | Papillon III: <i>Calmo, con tristezza</i> | 1:44 |
| 12 | Papillon IV: <i>Dolce, tranquillo</i> | 2:48 |
| 13 | Papillon V: <i>Lento, misterioso</i> | 1:33 |
| 14 | Papillon VI: <i>Sempre poco nervoso, senza tempo</i> | 1:45 |
| 15 | Papillon VII: <i>Molto espressivo, energico</i> | 1:05 |
| 16 | Spins and Spells (1997) | 6:03 |

WILHELMINA SMITH, cello

ESA-PEKKA SALONEN



Esa-Pekka Salonen & Kaija Saariaho: Works for solo cello

Esa-Pekka Salonen and Kaija Saariaho belong to a generation of modernist Finnish composers (including Magnus Lindberg, among others) whose work has gained broad acceptance in musical culture throughout the world. While each composer has a clear individual artistic persona, as a group they are known for pushing sonic boundaries, for testing the limits of what is possible for individuals and groups of performers as well as for exploring the relationship between music and other media. In writing for strings and, in particular on this recording, the cello, Salonen and Saariaho exploit the outer reaches of the technical possibilities for both the instrument and the performer. Salonen often explores the maximal boundary for endurance and dexterity in order to create a performance that is virtually a ritualistic sacrifice of the musician's spirit. While Saariaho tends to employ evolving combinations of sounds: bowings that move gradually from delicate to abrasive; trills that fade into nothingness or grow into cascades of harmonics; tremolandi that shiver with coldness and explode with lightning. In both, however, the techniques are one with a deep probing of conceptual and artistic aims, conjoining sounds to ideas and ideas to an examination of the soul.

Esa-Pekka Salonen is known throughout the world as one of the pre-eminent conductors of our time. His tenure at the Los Angeles Philharmonic set an example of innovation for the rest of the world to follow, blending a healthy measure of modern music with the traditions of the past. Salonen as a composer writes music that avails itself of the duality of a performer's virtuosity. On the one hand, he reveals performance as a kind of spectacular circus act whose jaw-dropping display separates the performer from the rest

KAIJA SAARIAHO



of humanity. Yet, it is precisely this supreme ability that connects the performer to the ordinary individual, by communicating emotion and meaning to the audience. In Salonen's own words: "I happen to like the concept of a virtuoso operating at the very limits of what is physically (and sometimes mentally) possible. In Nietzsche's words, 'You have made danger your vocation; there is nothing contemptible in that.'" Like the caprices of Paganini and the suites and partitas of Bach, these are demanding works for soloists, except that Salonen unites the flashy virtuosity of the one within the spiritual depth of the other.

The original impulse for Salonen to write his series of works for solo instruments entitled *Yta* (Swedish for "surface") is perhaps not as elevated as one might expect.

"The works in the series called *Yta* really began as a sort of protest. In the late seventies and early eighties the hyper-complex postserialist school kept churning out solo pieces said to operate at, say, sixteen or twenty-four independent levels of expression. My heretical reaction, practical man that I am, was to say that if you really need all those independent planes, then why not write for twenty-four instruments? ... I wanted the form (which in these pieces is equivalent to the process) to be constantly audible, in other words on the surface, and no hidden structure. Everything is transparent, and the listener has no difficulties following the process because there is only one musical plane."

The work for cello (1987) is the third in this series and is structured around a process of interacting musical elements such as the note C (in any of five octaves), which surfaces and resurfaces, as do trills, scales and arpeggios, all

battling their way to the forefront and then being infiltrated and then drowned once again by the other elements. Salonen tells us the piece is a vision of the death of an organism as the musical gestures arise in spasms before dying away, music that is “violent and ugly.” The final sound is a combination of a rough cellistic stinger combined with a primordial expostulation from the player.

Knock, breathe, shine is written in an even more brazen and extroverted style. The first movement is a showpiece for pizzicato playing of the plucked, strummed and left-hand variety, eventually working in the bow to create an acrobatic, manic, crowd-pleasing stunt of mind-bending coordination. The second movement’s pleading melody provides the soul of the work. Revealingly, this music later formed the basis of a work for unaccompanied children’s chorus, a setting of *Dona nobis pacem* (grant us peace—an excerpt from the *Agnus Dei* of the Latin Mass). The final movement begins with a series of powerful chords that open an intensely striving, varied, expansive declaration. While the work is immensely satisfying as pure music, it is enlightening to note that the title comes from a passionately religious poem, one of the Holy Sonnets by John Donne, that pleads with God to consume the supplicant, to overwhelm, command and even ravish. Even though the title was chosen after the music was completed, it is a fitting metaphor for what a performer must be prepared to achieve—to surrender oneself to the inspiration of the composer.

Mystery Variations is a set of new pieces that were commissioned on behalf of cellist Anssi Karttunen, the unifying principle of which was that each composer would take as their foundation the *Chiacona* for solo basso by the Italian Baroque composer of Modena, Giuseppe Colombi (1635–94). Among

the thirty-one composers who created individual variations were Salonen and Kaija Saariaho, whose contributions are recorded here along with the original (actually a transcription transposed a step higher by Karttunen). Colombi's piece, which may legitimately claim to be the earliest work for solo cello in existence, first presents a simple four-bar phrase in three-quarter time. The successive elaborations pass through a catalogue of Baroque gestures from stately dotted rhythms to energetic sixteenth-note configurations to alternatively playful and affecting double-stops.

Salonen's contribution to the *Mystery Variations* project is *Sarabande per un coyote*. (The title pays homage to Karttunen's long-standing, boundary-pushing collaborative ensemble with Magnus Lindberg and later with John Paul Jones, former bassist of Led Zeppelin, "Tres Coyotes." They proclaim, in a kind of manifesto, an artistic identification with the adaptability and roving nature of the coyote.) The strummed chords of the beginning honor the stately primary gestalt of the Colombi *Chiacona*, but the ensuing intensifying complexities lead the coyote into rough terrain, up rugged peaks of harmony and over precarious ridges of dissonance. Saariaho's *Dreaming Chaconne* maintains the fundamental pitch structure of the Colombi, which is, however in disguise behind the veil of sonic shades traversed by the instrument and the performer. The otherworldly morphing of the cello's basic sound through carefully planned technical manipulations creates an eerie atmosphere, as though presenting a view back in time through the insubstantial haze of memory and layers of the music's molecular decay over the centuries. The cellist oscillates rapidly between harmonics, the dynamics swell and recede while the pressure of the bow heightens overtones and brings to the foreground the gritty rub of rosined hair against tense metallic strings.

About *Petals* from 1989, Saariaho writes:

“*Petals* for solo cello was written abruptly in a few days, but evidently after a long unconscious preparation. The opposite elements here are fragile coloristic passages, which give birth to more energetic events with clear rhythmic and melodic character. These more sharply focused figures pass through different transformations and finally merge back to less dynamic but not the less intensive filiguration. In bringing together these very opposite modes of expressions, I aimed to force the interpreter to stretch his sensibility.”

Sept papillons was partly written by Saariaho during the rehearsals of her opera *L'Amour de loin* in Salzburg and finished thereafter in the year 2000. The opera confronts the weighty theme of a noble, ideal love from afar and a doom-laden journey. Central to the denouement of the story is the fleeting nature of the encounter between the beloved pair. The contrast in scale between this complex large-scale opera and these seven miniatures for a soloist is matched by the thematic idea as the composer turns to the lighter-than-air fragility of butterflies. What the two works have in common is the fleeting nature of time and the tragic beauty and impermanence of all life. The light flutterings, the painted colors, the zig-zag pathways of flight, the mysterious chrysalis from the cocoon, and the symbiotic relationship to flora are all represented in clever aural metaphors, each one carefully crafted from the technical arsenal of the composer's imagination.

Saariaho's *Spins and Spells* (1996), presents itself with greater outward virtuosity pushing to the surface many of the sonic disturbances that have a

reflective quality in the other music by her on this disc. About this work, the composer has written:

“The title evokes the two gestures which are at the origin of the work: on the one hand the pattern which I call “spinning tops” turning around on the one spot or undergoing changes, and on the other, timeless moments, centred on the sound colour and texture. The entire piece unfolds either around or between these two gestures. I chose to re-tune the instrument in order to personalise the harmonic writing: the fifths are replaced by structures favouring major sixths and minor thirds. Challenged by this *scodatura*, the sonority of Spins and Spells reminds me of the music and the instrumental colours of another age, far older than those of the cello that we know, although seen and transformed again through my own universe.”

Note by **Mark Mandarano**

Wilhelmina Smith is an artist of intense commitment, poetic insight and dazzling versatility. She is a cellist whose artistic mission embraces a conversation through music, one that enthusiastically encompasses the music of the present placed within the context of a living past. As a soloist and recitalist as well as a collaborative musician and festival director, Mina has consistently advocated for composers with whom she has developed vital relationships, to have their music creatively positioned within an intellectually engaging context and performed with the utmost passion and technical assurance.

Ms. Smith was awarded a 2015–2016 McKnight Artist Fellowship for Performing Musicians, one of the largest and most established fellowships of its kind in the U.S. She made her solo debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra while a student at the Curtis Institute of Music and in 1997 was a prizewinner in the Leonard Rose International Cello Competition. She has been soloist with orchestras nationally and internationally including the Orquesta Millenium of Guatemala and the Ural Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia and has performed recitals across the US and Japan.

She has been a guest artist with the Philadelphia and Boston Chamber Music Societies, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and is a founding member of Music from Copland House. She has performed regularly in festivals such as the Marlboro Music Festival and Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. In 2005, she formed the Variation String Trio with violinist Jennifer Koh and violist Hsin-Yun Huang, a group that has performed across the US and Europe, and in 2012 formed a piano trio with pianist Lydia Artymiw and violinist Erin Keefe. She is founder and Artistic Director of Salt Bay Chamberfest, on the

coast of Maine; a festival that has been home to performers and composers of international renown for over two decades.

Ms. Smith's solo CD of sonatas by Britten and Schnittke with pianist Thomas Sauer was released on the Arabesque label in 2006. Her recordings of chamber music include the complete chamber works of Aaron Copland (Arabesque), and works by Sebastian Currier (Koch), Osvaldo Golijov (Kleos), Pierre Jalbert (CHB), Jennifer Higdon (Naxos), Aaron Jay Kernis (Koch). Tamar Muskal, John Musto (Koch), Kaija Saariaho (Cedille), and Michael Torke (AMR).

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