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Salonen's Powerful Farewell

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SAN FRANCISCO—"You have a great orchestra—take good care of it," Esa-Pekka Salonen exhorted the capacity crowd at Davies Symphony Hall on June 14, following a 15-minute wave of jubilant applause and earsplitting cheers.

The moment, at once humble and momentous, marked the end of a chapter—the final performance of Salonen's all-too-brief tenure as music director of the San Francisco Symphony. The program, devoted entirely to Mahler's Second Symphony, signaled not only a dramatic farewell but something closer to an artistic credo—a conviction in music's power to confront impermanence, to offer moments of beauty and clarity in a world increasingly clouded by noise and—distortion.

The opening string tremolos quivered with a taut, burning urgency that evoked the elemental unrest of the storm music from the beginning of *Die Walküre*. With knowing precision, Salonen projected a lucidly etched conception of the score—one that balanced architectural sweep with microscopic detail, panoramic perspective with volatility.



Esa-Pekka Salonen conducts Mahler's Symphony No. 2 with soloists Sasha Cooke and Heidi Stober

A striking paradox emerged, particularly as the dramatic coil of the epic first movement tightened: Salonen is a conductor who can shape exactly the sound he wants without imposing it. Again and again, a sense of collaboration held sway, drawing the musicians into a collective vision so complete that the results felt both inevitable and deeply alive.

I'd never quite noticed the crucial role assigned to the oboe in the Second, but its timbre took on a remarkable presence through principal Eugene Izotov's plaintively quasi-vocal phrasing, as Salonen subtly adjusted the pace of the funeral march underpinning the opening movement. In the "St. Anthony" scherzo, that same sense of collaboration made transitions between sections of the orchestra flow with buoyantly supple momentum, animated by Mahler's klezmer-tinged lyricism—delectably rendered by principal clarinet Carey Bell—and Salonen's feel for its surreal, unsteady charm. The brass chorales, too, glowed with a generous solidity, sonorous across their timbral spectrum rather than merely grandiose.

Salonen's command of contrast was everywhere evident, but not as an indulgence in obvious theatrical effects. He homed in on Mahlerian polarities—grief and consolation, collapse and renewal—with a compelling, expressive logic that felt deeply human. At its initial appearance as a contrasting theme in the first movement, for example, the ascending "resurrection" motif unfolded with a tentative restraint that suggested fragility, an almost hesitant flicker of hope.

Salonen distilled Mahler's famous prescription of a five-minute silence between the first two movements to about two but emphasized the threshold physically by stepping off the podium to sit with the players during the interim. The ensuing Andante moderato felt like a detour into another world where time has not progressed—like a slowed archaic film or AI-generated footage of a vanished era. Each shift in texture registered distinctly, with delicate pizzicato gestures in the final iteration of the dance lingering within a dreamlike veil of sound and glissandos whispering of time dissolving.

Another standout moment was the "solemn and songlike" interlude in the scherzo, which summoned a hallucinatory, woozy glimpse of paradise floated by the trumpet melody. Salonen encouraged a pliant, breath-like pacing that made the entrance of Sasha Cooke's voice in "Urlicht" feel like a natural outgrowth of the sound world. With its centered, amber glow, her singing carried a blend of unaffected simplicity and earnestness that is vital to Mahler's aesthetic in the Second Symphony.

In contrast to the gulf of silence after the first movement, Salonen plunged headfirst into the enormous finale, sharpening the sense of rupture—of the need for a massive rebalancing of what is at stake. The variety of musical scenarios Mahler assembles here brought to mind a vast allegorical fresco teeming with visions of terror, judgment, memory, and utopia. Tremors widened into quakes, with Salonen's architectural skill coming

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to the fore to huge each ascent and plateau. Especially effective was the apocalyptic "great roll-call" pronounced offstage by horns (Salonen's own instrument) and trumpets, answered with transfixing serenity by Yubeen Kim (flute) and Catherine Payne (piccolo).

Heidi Stober's soprano floated above the ensemble like a private prayer coming into increasing focus. Her finely tapered tone blended seamlessly with Cooke's rich-hued mezzo. Under Jenny Wong's direction, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus has become a marvel of balance and cohesion. After the turbulence that marked the season's opening—when the [singers called a strike](#) leading to the cancellation of Verdi's Requiem—their presence in this culminating moment felt all the more significant. With the basses providing a remarkably solid foundation, they achieved

an extraordinary gradation of dynamic shadings that rose from a shimmering murmur to full-bodied brilliance with unerring command.

I can't imagine a finer parting gift from Salonen—nor one that more vividly drives home what San Francisco will be missing.

Photos by Brandon Patoc

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