

# Conductor-composer Esa-Pekka Salonen leaves the San Francisco Symphony: The profit system once again proves incompatible with serious art

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16 July 2024

In mid-June, Finnish-born conductor-composer Esa-Pekka Salonen led the San Francisco Symphony and Chorus in Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in his final program as music director, after five years with the orchestra. Salonen, 66, announced his plans to resign in March. In a statement, he explained, "I do not share the same goals for the future of the institution as the board of governors does." He has not made any further comments.

It is widely understood that Salonen came into conflict with the board over budget cuts and other cost-cutting measures, which the music director perceived as dangerous to the artistic health and well-being of the orchestra.

Citing an anticipated \$12.5 million budget deficit for the next fiscal year, the symphony's board has insisted on curtailing Salonen's plans and projects. The *New York Times* reports the orchestra management began imposing cuts earlier this year. "They canceled a planned Europe tour," the *Times* writes, "limited commissions of new music to no more than five a year and moved to scale back semi-staged productions, like the Ravel and Schoenberg program Salonen recently conducted. They also discussed shifting programming to attract more audiences."

Along the same lines, the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes the board's measures included "canceling the 2025 European Festival Tour, pausing its 'Concerts for Kids' series and reducing the number of SoundBox [the symphony's alternative music space] concerts." In addition, according to a recent protest letter from the orchestra's chorus members, management has proposed slashing their budget by up to 80 percent.

The symphony's musicians issued an open letter March 18, as *OperaWire* explained, "urging the Board of Governors to take steps to retain Salonen as Music Director and to reverse planned cuts to programming, touring, and education, which threaten the Symphony's status as a world-class institution."

In their public letter, the musicians explained they were

"deeply saddened by the news" that Salonen would not be returning "as a result of the Board of Governors' lack of investment in the future of the Symphony." The decision to cut innovative programming and cancel touring, they continued, "as well as the failure to competitively invest in the Symphony's musicians, has led to the departure of a world-class Maestro and raises serious questions about the future of the Symphony."

The musicians pointed out they had joined the San Francisco Symphony "because of this orchestra's cutting edge reputation and its commitment to musical excellence. Esa-Pekka is a visionary artist and a force for the kind of innovation and experimentation our orchestra needs going forward." The players argued that "Esa-Pekka's decision not to renew his contract is a great loss not only for the musicians and the organization, but for our city and our community."

It was critical, the musicians added, "that the Board and the public understand that this requires financial investment in our artistic product." They further noted that it was difficult to "reconcile these draconian cuts with the reality that the Symphony has one of the largest endowments of its kind in the country [\$325 million] and attendance now exceeds pre-pandemic levels." Moreover, "We remain the only Symphony among our peer orchestras that has not had our compensation restored to pre-COVID levels. While other world-class orchestras have resumed touring, our tours have been canceled for the foreseeable future. These misguided cuts threaten the future of our orchestra and will make it more difficult to attract and retain top talent, grow our audiences, and ensure we remain a world-class orchestra."

Needless to say, the Board of Governors turned a deaf ear to this appeal, and to a series of protest organized by musicians and concertgoers. In addition to their March 18 protest letter, symphony players staged a demonstration prior to their June 13 concert, handing out leaflets and expressing their disagreement. A petition launched in March calling on the symphony to

extend Salonen's tenure collected more than 8,000 signatures.

Various protest signs have been held up in Davies Symphony Hall, including simply "Stay." At a June 21 performance, according to the *Chronicle*, "audience member Laura Leibowitz displayed a sign during the June 21 performance that read 'F—the board' in Salonen's native language [Finnish]. An image of her with the sign went viral on social media, increasing scrutiny of the organization's direction and finances, prompting the organization to threaten a ban of Leibowitz in Davies Symphony Hall."

Salonen is a world-class conductor and composer. According to his website's biography, in addition to his stint with the San Francisco Symphony, he is "the Conductor Laureate for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he was Music Director from 1992 until 2009, the Philharmonia Orchestra, where he was Principal Conductor & Artistic Advisor from 2008 until 2021, and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. He is part of the faculty of LA's Colburn School, where he develops, leads, and directs the pre-professional Negaunee Conducting Program."

Salonen's list of honors and awards, career highlights, compositions, world premiere performances and recordings extends for dozens of pages. He is known for his commitment to advancing the efforts of contemporary composers. In addition, he has recorded works by Beethoven, Bartók, Mussorgsky, Shostakovich, Debussy, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel, Wagner and many others.

In its coverage of the Salonen resignation, of course, the *New York Times* acts essentially as the mouthpiece for the symphony management. "Even before the pandemic," the newspaper observes, "many orchestras around the country were struggling. Audiences were aging and shrinking. Costs were rising. Old business models were withering. And philanthropy, which has replaced ticket sales as the main source of income for most orchestras, was becoming increasingly hard to come by."

The "pandemic struck" before Salonen began his tenure in San Francisco, "derailing hopes for a splashy rollout. His debut as music director in the fall of 2020 was a muted affair." Then a new team took over "and became concerned about finances." The orchestra "had struggled for years with deficits, a shrinking donor base that executives said had decreased by about 20 percent over the last decade and the decline of the old subscription model in which patrons buy a season's worth of tickets each year. Less than a third of the orchestra's expenses are covered by ticket sales. 'We've been living beyond our means, frankly, since well before the pandemic,' Matthew Spivey, the San Francisco Symphony's new chief executive officer, said in a recent interview."

Again, one has to rub one's eyes. The coverage by the *Times* and the US media generally of the activities and operations of the super-rich has a deeply sycophantic, degrading character. The *Times*, for example, can celebrate the "\$238 Million Penthouse, and the Hedge Fund Billionaire Who May Rarely Live There," opine that "Billionaire-Built Cities

Would Be Better Than Nothing," report on "America's Most Expensive House," note that "For the Billionaire Who Has Everything, Consider an Island in the San Francisco Bay" and explain that "A \$75 Million Sale at 220 Central Park South Is One of the Year's Biggest (The full-floor apartment was sold to a buyer who already owns a condo in the building. Another property went for \$66 million, and still others for \$50 million or more)." The *Times* swims along happily in this flood of ill-gotten gains.

However, when it comes to education, healthcare, public transit or arts and culture, in fact, any aspect of life that involves the physical or intellectual well-being of wide layers of the population, the US media draws back in horror at the prospect of spending what is to the super-rich mere pennies.

The Bay Area, according to a recent *Bloomberg* piece, "has more billionaires than any metro area in the world and ranks second only to New York for residents with at least \$100 million in 'investable wealth,' according to Henley & Partners. Even for the merely affluent, soaring stocks have helped to bolster prosperity in the world's technology hub." The San Francisco metropolitan area, indicates another report, "is home to more than 530,000 millionaires. One in 10 is a very high net worth (VHNW) individual with a fortune of between \$5m and \$30m." (Altrata)

The symphony's \$12.5 million deficit could be paid off by many of these people without causing so much as a financial ripple. In 2022, the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), one of the country's oldest art schools, disappeared without anyone lifting a finger.

The American ruling elite is stupid, shortsighted and greedy. It objects strenuously to and considers valueless (and potentially criminal) any activity that does not generate immediate profits and contribute to the accumulation of personal wealth. Once again, the facts speak for themselves: the profit system and the rule of the billionaires are incompatible with serious artistic life.



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