

Fasten your seatbelts

BY HILLARY HAUSER

Esa-Pekka Salonen, the young superstar conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, was 20 minutes from going on stage at the L.A. Music Center. He was talking to me from his dressing room.

I'd heard plenty about Salonen not particularly liking interviews, how he had often said that he would rather make music than talk about it, how music speaks for itself, goes beyond language and how questions tire him.

Not such a good sign for me, I thought. But Salonen is coming to Santa Barbara with the L.A. Philharmonic to play a

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ESA-PEKKA SALONEN,
On his connection to young people.



Esa-Pekka Salonen, the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra.

and not a shred of self-important airs. Like a neighbor down the street. The first question, an obvious one: What was Salonen thinking as he prepared to go on stage? What was going through his head?

"I'm not sure whether I brought my suspenders or not," Salonen quipped. "It's not a pleasant thought. I haven't changed yet, it's yet to be discovered."

This was pretty fun and jokey and casual. I'd heard all the stories about how cool Salonen is, how after a performance he can't wait to change into his jeans and have a beer. How he substituted in five days for an ailing Michael-Tilson Thomas in a performance of Mahler's epic third symphony — even though he had never seen the score. (The Los Angeles Times reviewer Martin Bernheimer likened this to Siegfried, who never knew the meaning, or feeling, of fear.) Salonen was 25 years old at the time. The performance turned out to be a smash hit and his career took off like a rocket.

So, missing suspenders is no big deal to a person who can do stuff like this, and I appreciated his humor. On this night at the L.A. Music Center, Salonen's program was not Mahler's Third to be done after a study of only five days. It was a special concert for high-school students — tickets were only \$5. (His program included two pieces he will also perform in Santa Barbara — Stravinsky's "Petrouchka" and "Lemminkainen's Return," from "Four Legends of the Kalevala" by Sibelius. He will also do Haydn's Symphony No. 53.)

What did Salonen especially want to communicate to his listeners in L.A.?

As usual, that music is full of life and excitement, that it is one of the most valuable things in our culture," Salonen said. "It is one of the greatest things that this race — I mean *homo sapiens* — has ever produced. It is very important that young people find that the music of 25 years ago is very much alive!"

Salonen constantly stresses the necessity of getting classical music heard — out into the community, into the schools, churches, parks, through neighborhood concerts, lectures and informal talks. One envisions him showing up at a football rally to introduce sport fans to Bruckner, or putting earphones on teenagers to have them listen to the opening chords of Wagner's "Das Rheingold" as a way of convincing them this music is more far out than anything Red Hot Chili Peppers ever did. Whatever, Salonen's basic desire is to blast apart the notion that classical music is stuffy or for old, rich people.

I asked him what he thought the key

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connection was to young people, how did he plan to turn them on?

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To raise the interest levels in young people, Salonen finds it important to present plenty of music from modern, living composers.

He is himself an accomplished composer. (One of his compositions, entitled "Floof," premiered in England in May 1990 and was chosen in May of this year as "Best Work" at an international composers' symposium in Paris.)

Salonen continued: "And we have to take care of (music) in such a way that it can be proven, that there's life in it, not just repeating things for the sake of repeating, but find new angles."

His new angles are often wild, often controversial, and there are plenty of juicy stories about heated arguments that break out after a Salonen concert no matter where they're played.

He is no stranger to controversy. At the prestigious summer music festival in Salzburg, Austria, in August 1992, Salonen opened his L.A. Philharmonic performance with a Strauss Waltz and was immediately booed. The ensuing reviews were just as merciless: "Music from U.S. Drug Stores," "A waltz for asthmatics," "A prankish brat," they said.

Salonen knows how to handle such negative notes: He has called a powerful critic in Finland a fathead twice in print.

Salonen was born in Helsinki in 1958, and after studying at the Sibelius Academy in Finland and with private teachers in Italy, made his conductorial debut with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1979. Since then he has conducted all over the world and now records exclusively for Sony Classical.

His working on the side as a composer must account for his extreme interest in the works of contemporary composers, but he apparently knows or has met personally. He encountered Witold Lutoslawski, a modern Polish composer of renown, on a street in Stockholm, with the result that Lutoslawski offered him the world premiere of his fourth symphony. (Salonen's recording with the L.A. Philharmonic of Lutoslawski's third symphony won a number of awards, including a Grammy.)

Salonen's family (wife, Jane Price, a former London Philharmonia violinist, and their 1-year-old daughter, Ella Aneira) have apparently settled happily into life in Los Angeles (Brentwood, actually). Does the maestro like this sprawled-out metropolis?

"Yeah! — Actually, I like it more now that I've discovered a few things — like, how to find my way around," he laughed.

In a more serious vein, he indicated that Los Angeles has a freer creative atmosphere than Europe: "This environment offers all that you want to do. I think it's quite an inspiring environment in many ways. There are many brains around here, quite a lot of creative people live here, have moved here over the years. The atmosphere is different from a traditional consensus of culture. There is not so much prejudice and a heavy load of tradition."

Salonen's creative endeavors are taking many avenues: He is collaborating on future plans for opera productions with the L.A. Music Center Opera company, and he is pressing for more experimental music programs. One outlet is the New Music Group, a Philharmonic subsidiary that performs at the Japan America Theatre in Los Angeles. He is also involved in the design of Disney Hall, where the "L.A. Phil" plans to move in 1996.

So, Salonen the young revolutionist is reaching, stretching, trying new ways in music. His supporters seem the more open-minded listeners, those who don't mind their usual Beethoven or Brahms thrown up in the air and reassembled. Those who don't mind big, furious doses of chaos and new music. Santa Barbarans should note that one of the pieces Salonen will play here, by the Finnish composer Sibelius, is "The Swan of Tuonela" (from "Four Legends of the Kalevala") — and Tuonela, as nobody knows, is, in Finnish mythology, Hell. So, get ready.

A quick, final question to the maestro (he had still not located his suspenders): How much does he really

hate interviews?

"I accept all aspects of this job," Salonen said. "The purpose is to make the environment better for music. If I can do anything, by giving interviews, whatever, I'm willing. But to be completely frank, I feel that when I go on stage, finally, I'm a fish back in the water."

A bell rang in the background. "They're calling the orchestra!" Salonen said.

We both hung up. I looked at the clock — five minutes to 8 — and I could picture the maestro searching frantically for his suspenders.

Then again, I pictured him going on without them, not caring. Something like suspenders would be trivial in Salonen's world, and besides, a fish back in the water does not have the slightest concern about his pants staying up.

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