

The Minnesota Orchestra is one of four American ensembles appearing at this year's Proms. **Petroc Trelawny** talks to its conductor **Osmo Vänskä** and discovers a man with very big ambitions...


# STATE OF PLAY

It may have taken the Minnesota Orchestra just over a century to secure a summer date at the Royal Albert Hall – but the ensemble is no stranger to touring. Its first foreign engagements were to the capitals of countries that now head the US State Department's blacklist. Havana was a regular stopping-off point in the late 1920s, and 30 years later it travelled to Baghdad and Tehran. At home, specially chartered trains would take players and instruments on regular visits to the big cities. Nearly 50 appearances at Carnegie Hall have proved to New Yorkers that they have no monopoly on world-class orchestras.

East Coast Americans cruelly refer to Minnesota as one of 'the fly-over states'. The weather is famously inhospitable, well below freezing for most of the long winter. During my visit, a TV meteorologist proudly boasted that some part of the state had, in one year or another, seen snow every month except July. The climate was no problem for the Finns, Swedes, Norwegians and Germans who were the first settlers. They made their money from lumber and milling, and were soon looking to spend it on cultural institutions. The Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, as it was first known, was founded in 1903. It became one of the first US orchestras to record

and broadcast, and boasted Eugene Ormandy and Dmitri Mitropoulos among its early music directors.

By the start of the new millennium, while still regarded as a premier US ensemble, it had become clear that the orchestra was coasting along, and needed a shot in the arm. Osmo Vänskä had built an international reputation for the once provincial Lahti Symphony Orchestra, and reinvigorated the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He was clearly the right man to bring about change. The timing suited him perfectly; having witnessed his fellow student and friend Esa-Pekka Salonen take the Los Angeles



MINNESOTA'S FINEST: (left) the orchestra takes a stroll in its east coast hometown of Minneapolis; conductor Osmo Vänskä (above) puts in a mighty effort

Fifth Symphony. It's a performance to be repeated that evening in a small town upstate, and then twice more at Orchestra Hall over the following days. The thrilling reading of the score is the result of intense, but relatively brief preparation. In rehearsal Vänskä is friendly, but completely focused; it is immediately clear that not a second is to be wasted. 'There is a tremendous internal pressure within the orchestra now,' says Schrickel. 'You have to be damn well on top of your part at the first rehearsal. What really appeals to us is that the score is his bible. He doesn't put on a façade of humility, he is truly humble and completely at the service of the music.'

Osmo Vänskä's office at Orchestra Hall is vast. His assistant Michael brings water and coffee from the attached kitchenette, a picture of the conductor on his beloved Yamaha 650 motorbike is propped on a bookcase filled with scores. As we talk his much vaunted modesty soon becomes clear. 'I'm high up on that podium but I have to keep my feet on the earth or I am destroyed,' says Vänskä. Everyone is to call him Osmo – 'maestro', a title much loved in America, is completely banned. He explains his plans to take the Minnesota Orchestra

## 'Signs in large writing announce "Orchestra Hall bans guns on these premises"'

into the highest league of music making. 'First we must trust each other completely – it's a slow process and one that is very easy to destroy. Recording is also key to our success.' He explains that his on-going Beethoven symphony cycle has made him realise 'sessions are the best school for the players. And, he concludes, they must tour 'with missionary work to small places in the state where there is only one concert a year, and trips to the Proms, Carnegie Hall, Berlin and Vienna.'

Philharmonic to new heights, he wanted to break into America himself.

When Vänskä took up the music directorship in September 2003 he was an unknown quantity. 'Before, he'd only been with us for a week' recalls William Schrickel, acting associate principal bass, and an orchestra member for 30 years. 'We knew his Sibelius was good but beyond...' Schrickel tails off before continuing: 'Straightaway Osmo said his goal was to make the Minnesota Orchestra the greatest in the country, and we really responded to that. Perhaps we have an inferiority complex – it's always the same five orchestras that get the coverage. We were great under Antal Doráti, and we want to get back there again.'

This cultural optimism is currently reflected throughout Minneapolis, and its near neighbour St Paul, with new landmark arts buildings opening almost monthly. In May the first books were lent from the new

Central Library, designed by the Argentine architect Cesar Pelli. Both the Walker Art Gallery and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts boast flashy new extensions. Meanwhile the Frenchman Jean Nouvel – designer of the Lyon Opera House – is responsible for the bright blue riverside home of the Guthrie Theatre, which gives America's finest regional company three new spaces to work in. There are 64 theatres in the Twin Cities and a higher concentration of actors and active audiences than anywhere in the US outside Manhattan.

### BIBLICAL READINGS

The design of the 1974 concert hall may look dated, but its acoustic is first class. On a Thursday morning half a dozen yellow school buses drop students for the 11am concert. As a result of the state governor's decision to allow anyone to carry firearms, signs in large writing on the doors announce 'Orchestra Hall bans guns on these premises'. The children are soon rapt as Vänskä leads his orchestra in Mahler's

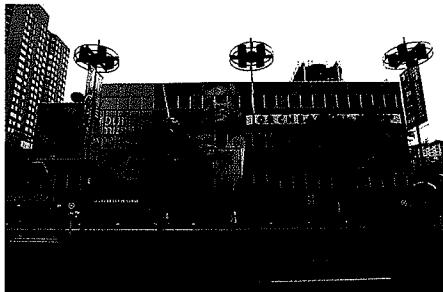
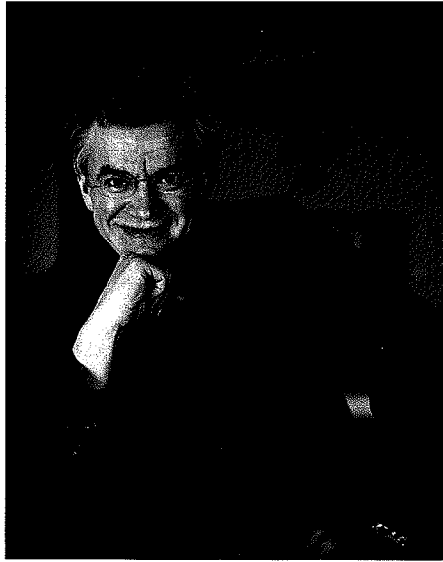
The Orchestra's English president, Tony Woodcock, says he sees Vänskä as the new model for a music director. 'Toscanini, Szell, Reiner, they had the powers of the ancient pharaohs,' he says. 'They achieved amazing results but at a huge expense. There is no compromise about what Osmo wants musically, but he also cares about the players and the backstage staff, and looks at audiences and financial plans. I had lunch with him once to discuss a staff member's pension problem and he was genuinely interested.'

Woodcock wants his conductor to become a figurehead for the arts in the Twin Cities, and it's a role Vänskä is happy to accept – even if he winces at the 60-ft high image of him that is wrapped around Orchestra Hall. Twice this season he has thrown the puck at the start of the Minnesota Wild's ice hockey games, he takes his clarinet to sessions at the local jazz club, and is happy to conduct pops concerts, recently leading the orchestra in a programme of Abba songs. 'No music director had done that before,' says Vänskä. 'But I don't want to block out any of the audience. I introduced myself and said to them: "If I can conduct pop then you can come to a

## Vänskä takes his clarinet to the local jazz club, and is happy to conduct pops concerts

classical concert?'. He also dedicates time to music projects in the community, winning plaudits when it emerged he had turned down an invitation to replace the indisposed Kurt Masur on the London Philharmonic's US tour due to a prior engagement with the (amateur) Bloomington SO. This deep personal commitment seems to be working; concert audiences are up dramatically since he took charge. With minimal state aid, box office is key to funding the orchestra, along with donations and the profits from its endowment fund.

The city's main department store was taken over a few years ago and renamed Marshall Field's. Soon it's to be re-branded again, as Macy's. Yet most Minneapolitans refer to it by its original name, Dayton's. The Dayton family is still a formidable presence in Minnesota as owner of the nationwide Target chain. In the 1950s the five Dayton brothers decided they would support the arts in the Twin Cities; Ken Dayton took



**GREAT EXPECTATIONS:** (top) Vänskä is becoming a figurehead for the Twin Cities; (above) the 60ft image of Vänskä on Minneapolis's Orchestra Hall

on the orchestra. 'He would go around and strong-arm the heads of corporations and pressure them into committing five per cent of their pre-tax profits to the arts,' says Tony Woodcock. 'Ken Dayton alone gave close to \$200m (£107m) to the orchestra, funding this new hall, creating an endowment fund, and ensuring we could afford to become world class.'

### PROGRAMME TURN-ON

Although its players have had to accept a three-year pay freeze, the Minnesota Orchestra is in a better state than most American ensembles, and its music director has plenty of freedom when it comes to planning programmes. Vänskä is beginning to feature works by Sibelius, having previously avoided his compatriot 'so as not to give anyone the chance of saying I could only conduct Finnish music.' And Mahler's symphonies are providing another focal point. 'The relationship between Mahler, this orchestra and me seems to be something very special', he says, 'like the one the Lahti players and I developed with Sibelius.'

Vänskä's home in Minneapolis is a smart new duplex apartment on the banks of the Mississippi river. His decision to install an expensive sauna is viewed locally as clear evidence that he is planning on staying around for the long term. He is determined to build a musical family in the city – one that

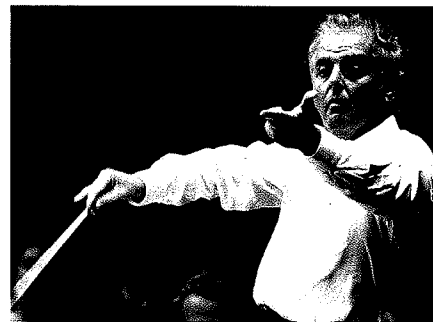
includes sponsors and audience members as well as players. When I tell him what I have heard about his goal to make the Minnesota Orchestra number one, Vänskä quickly corrects me. 'Not *my* goal, *our* goal. And we will do it. It's difficult to measure these things – there is no stock or share value, but we will get to the top.' ■

**PROMS**

Prom 54 Osmo Vänskä conducts the Minnesota Orchestra on

Thursday 24 Aug, 7.30pm: Barber Essay No. 1; Golijov Three Songs; Mahler Symphony No. 5. (On Friday 25 Aug, 8pm Vänskä will perform at the Edinburgh Festival's Usher Hall. The programme includes Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3*)

## US ORCHESTRAS AT THE PROMS American journeys to the RAH



**BARENBOIM:** and the Chicago SO at the 1998 Proms

**TOUGH VISA REGULATIONS** forced the Hallé to cancel its tour of the US; but thankfully the British Home Office takes a more relaxed view with foreign orchestras. Four US ensembles perform at this year's Proms: the players from Minnesota are joined by New York's Orchestra of St Luke's, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Pittsburgh SO. 'US orchestras bring pizzazz to the season,' says Proms director Nicholas Kenyon. 'They are good at striking up relationships with the prommers – a rapport between stage and arena is established.'

The LA Phil was the first Stateside orchestra to appear at the Proms, conducted by Zubin Mehta in 1974. The Chicago SO has made the most number of appearances, in six different seasons. Neither Chicago nor the Boston SO have appeared since 2001 – so are surely due another visit. 'It is a challenging undertaking,' says Kenyon. 'They have to raise a huge amount of money, and build a European tour around Proms appearances.' Dallas, Cleveland and San Francisco are among other cities whose musicians have discovered Prom culture first hand. Notable absentees include Baltimore and St Louis – but as both have new music directors used to Albert Hall etiquette (Alsop and Robertson), it can't be long before they make the journey across the Atlantic.