

Billionaire patrons bring Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra to Finland

Million-dollar support finances tour

By Vesa Sirén

Sometimes all the pieces of the puzzle slot together just like that.

When **Osmo Vänskä** got the job of Music Director with the Minnesota Orchestra a couple of years back, he was immediately offered the chance to make a high-profile European tour with the band.

All the costs were picked up by a local benefactor, and the 2004 tour was extended up as far as Lahti and its Sibelius Hall (*see linked article*).

Now the Minnesotans are appearing at the Helsinki Festival. And this time another pair of benefactors is funding the tour, which has already taken the American orchestra to the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, to the Proms in London, and to the Edinburgh Festival.

"I was present when the anonymous donors, a couple, decided on their gift", says a satisfied Vänskä over the telephone.

"The sum involved was between one million and one and a half million dollars." (EUR 800,000-1.2 million)

And that is not all. Vänskä and the Lahti Symphony Orchestra (where he has also been Music Director since 1988) have enjoyed a long-running connection with the Swedish record label Bis.

And when Vänskä went to the States, the record company decided to record the complete Beethoven symphonies with his new orchestra.

The timing was little short of perfection. Just over a decade ago, Beethoven cycles were something of a drug on the market, but a suitable pause, the advent of new recording technology, and Vänskä's quality work had the critics clapping their hands.

"The recordings series has been very important. Right now we are apparently the only orchestra in the States making studio recordings, as the others record in connection with live concert performances. We have private funding, ear-marked specifically for recordings."

Audiences on Monday will get a sample of the Minnesota Orchestra's Beethoven sound, as the programme includes the *Third Symphony*, "Eroica", the new CD recording of which has received rave reviews.

Vänskä says he is not the one to answer questions about how the orchestra has developed since the 2004 Lahti visit.

"Everybody seems to be saying that the orchestra is playing better and better and that a new golden age has dawned", he admits.

"The enthusiasm level in Minneapolis is certainly extremely high nowadays. When I started, the average for concert ticket sales was 59% of capacity, and now we are up to 74% attendances. It has been a healthy and steady increase, and we are looking to reach at least 85%."



There have been problems with balancing the books, and over a wage-freeze for the musicians.

"The restructuring plan made with our President and CEO **Tony Woodcock** has gone ahead as planned, and we have managed to balance the budget", enthuses Vänskä.

It is probably no surprise therefore that the Finn has promised to remain in the Music Director's chair at least until 2011.

As Osmo Vänskä's reputation gathers international ground, he is in demand for constant guest conducting appearances with top U.S. orchestras such as the Cleveland, the Philadelphia, and the Chicago Symphony.

This all means less and less time with the Lahti Symphony. He will be leaving the helm of the Finnish orchestra in 2008.

"That will be after I've spent more than 20 years with them. I've probably delivered what can reasonably be expected", he says modestly.

In fact Vänskä's time with the Lahti ensemble has been a massive international success.

"I don't spend that many weeks conducting in Lahti anymore, but we do still do important things together: there's a Sibelius festival, a third tour of Japan, touring concerts at the Vienna Musikverein and at the Philharmonie in Berlin, and so on."

Vänskä is something of a rare sight on the platform in Helsinki. He does not have any regular collaboration with the two symphony orchestras in the capital.

"But it is nice to arrive in town with one's own orchestra and with **Viktorija Mullova**. I was playing clarinet with the Helsinki Philharmonic 26 years ago when Viktoria came and won the Sibelius Violin Competition here", says Vänskä.

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The Minnesota Orchestra under Osmo Vänskä performed in Finlandia Hall as part of this year's Helsinki Festival on August 27th and 28th. At Sunday's sold-out concert, the soloist was Viktoria Mullova, and the programme featured Mahler's *5th Symphony* and the Sibelius *Violin Concerto*. Monday's programme included works by Barber, Stravinsky, and Beethoven.

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