

Het Parool

Erik Voermans (tr. Ray Wakefield)

August 24, 2006

CONDUCTOR OSMO VÄNSKÄ HAS THE KNOW-HOW A SOLID MAHLER FIFTH SYMPHONY BY THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Just as all the other Finnish conductors who are currently active, Osmo Vänskä (53) is a student of Jorma Panula, and he is considered a Sibelius specialist. And, as with his Finnish colleagues, he doesn't like the label because, of course, he has so many more notes in his song. At the Minnesota Orchestra, where he has been music director since 2003 (the tenth director since 1903), they are spinning yarn with all these threads, as is evidenced by the program for the new season in which he is conducting works from Adams, Barber, Bartók, and Beethoven, to Górecky, Mahler, Stravinsky, and Wagner. In the Netherlands, the recognizable names among those who will perform in the coming season in Minnesota are the former director Edo de Waart, James Conlon, Yakov Kreizberg, and Mark Wigglesworth.

As an offshoot of their European tour, Vänskä and the orchestra had wanted to present the Netherlands' premiere of Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra by the Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov last evening at the Concertgebouw, a piece that was written especially for Dawn Upshaw. But, unfortunately, Upshaw had to cancel due to illness, which required a quick decision to change the program.

And thus it resulted in Vänskä having yet again a piece by Sibelius on the podium: the Violin Concerto performed by Viktoria Mullova. For the concert at the Proms in London (which is planned for this evening), the Minnesotans selected as a replacement for Upshaw Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, which will be played by the Welsh soloist Llyr Williams, who is not familiar to Amsterdam audiences.

Vänskä, who walks in the footsteps of such greats as Ormandy, Mitropoulos, Dorati, and De Waart, effortlessly laid bare the Finnish soul in the Sibelius Violin Concerto. The orchestra clearly also had to get used to the acoustics in the Great Hall. It was admirable, however, the degree to which Vänskä had a grasp of the dynamics. He highlighted the sound of the orchestra following the mysterious *pianissimo* – with favorable results for the transparency of the performance.

Mullova, who had flown over on a moment's notice, had a beautiful, full violin tone, though tending at times toward the overly emotional side, but she also had too many intonation problems to have the performance be a moving experience. The most beautiful part was doubtless the slow movement, *Adagio di Molto*, in which Mullova showed how beautifully she can let her instrument sing and in which Vänskä demonstrated how a conductor totally serves the needs of a soloist.

After the intermission came the acid test in the form of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Here Vänskä chose the Austrian arrangement of the orchestra – with the first and second violins left and right, but also with the brass section where the string basses are normally situated. In this hall, that seemed to be an incomprehensible arrangement. All too often the brass section, playing from its elevated position, drowned out the strings below, which led to a distorted sound in the second movement and the finale.

All in all, it was a solid performance of the Mahler, to which Vänskä brought his own personal energy – though at times he was too restless in his excitement.

The high point was a magnificently played *Adagietto*, tending toward the slow side at a good 10 minutes, but, nevertheless, completely convincing – and moving.