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Prom 54:
Minnesota Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä; Barber,
Beethoven and Mahler
@ Royal Albert Hall, London, 24 August 2006
★★★★★



Osmo Vänskä (credit: Eric Moore)

The Prommers were out in force on Thursday evening to watch Osmo Vänskä conduct the Minnesota Orchestra.

We had the usual antiphony of shouting between arena and gallery and even a little Welsh being hurled at the pianist, **Llyr Williams**, by one man standing down below.

In this convivial atmosphere the orchestra began by delivering an excellent rendition of **Barber's First Essay for Orchestra**.

The piece was composed in 1937 and premiered by none other than **Arturo Toscanini** with the **NBC Symphony Orchestra**. That such an auspicious conductor first performed the work by the then only 27-year-old composer surely shows its merits, and these were made clear under the baton of *Osmo Vänskä*. The divided lower strings surged and agonised with the soaring melody line, while the double bass pizzicato was crisp and the high violins pinpoint in their accuracy Judging by my nearly blank notepad at the end of the performance, this was not far from being perfect.

Sadly, the same could not be said of *Llyr Williams*, playing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. Of course, we must give him credit for agreeing to perform, with **Dawn Upshaw** ill and unable to premiere Golijov's Three Songs. He is reportedly an outstanding pianist but, on the evidence here, that claim seems wishful.

His opening piano runs were over-pedalled and smudged, as were his unevenly played trills. Timing was an issue, with Williams coming in early on more than one occasion. The main concern, however, was his apparent lack of imagination. He played with a monotone throughout, rarely attempting to shade or burnish his sound, and only occasionally creating an optimum balance between hands. Drama was lost in this tepid attempt at introspection. Scalic runs led nowhere, coexisting but never meaning. The dynamics were similarly uninteresting, while the rhythm of the second movement cadenza was woefully irregular. The alert playing of the orchestra made Williams' inadequacies all the more evident.

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At least we had Mahler's great Fifth Symphony to follow. Vänskä's choice of tempo at the opening was fast, while the huge climactic rushes were vibrant and energetic. The conductor soon settled down though, and proceeded to meander through a surprisingly unmoving interpretation of the piece. In the first movement, the solo horn struggled with the opening statement, while some pizzicato violins strayed out of time. In the second, the violin glissandi were not precise enough in the *Ländler* section.

The famous *Adagio* was the most successful of the movements, with a solid, thankfully unsentimental tempo and some robust low violins in the central section. The spacious tempo of the *Rondo* rightfully wallowed in the excellent opening woodwind solos, though later on the bassoons and oboes sounded a little pinched. The final whirling of strings after the brass *chorale* was also taken at a bizarrely plodding speed.

For all my reservations, this was a great opportunity then to hear a much-admired American orchestra, and the near-full Albert Hall was pleasing to see. Roll on **Mahler Two** with **Bernard Haitink!**

- *Dave Paxton*

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