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The roof is raised

AUG. 27 FINLANDIA HALL, HELSINKI

The Finns have built themselves a modern city and a very modern hall, with white pipes on the organ and black leather seats with legroom any airline would be proud to offer. Osmo is famous stuff here, and the rehearsal is attended by television cameras and reporters swirling about while Viktoria Mullova rehearses the Sibelius violin concerto. Of course, Sibelius is also beloved stuff here, too, and for both those reasons, the concert is absolutely packed.

Just before the concert, Mullova reveals that she couldn't bear to check her violin for the flight, so she took it out of its case, wrapped it in a towel, and carried it on board unprotected by fiberglass. The violinists roll their eyes in horror at what might have happened to it, but nod in understanding over her unwillingness to let it from her sight. She changes in her dressing room to a dramatic sleeveless gown of long purple ribbons woven together. She's so tall and thin, she can wear anything. Tim Eickholt knocks on Osmo's door: It's time to go onstage. He bursts out with energy crackling around him like an aura. Maybe that's what makes a conductor's hair stand on end.

He leaves in his wake an unmistakable backstage buzz.

Osmo is bringing his orchestra to his native Finland; last tour, they played little Lahti with its gorgeous Sibelius Hall. Tonight, they are in the bright lights of the big city and there are things to be proven.

Osmo intends to prove them. The orchestra staff, gathered around monitors in the backstage lounge while they work on computers and airport arrangements and publicity and media relations, conjectures that this evening perhaps the roof might be lifted off of Finlandia Hall by an inch or so during the Mahler.

It's more than an inch. And when the encore, Osmo's arrangement of the famous Finnish polka, is played, the crowd goes wild — in their Finnish way. That means not necessarily rowdy but long, long applause accompanied by raves in the lobby.

Osmo comes backstage again, sweaty and grinning, and has his dressing room to himself for only a moment before the audience starts trickling backstage and they start lining up outside his door: Minnesota Orchestra board members, classical music royalty, visiting conductors, agents, well-wishers. The orchestra staff smiles and moves out of the way.

Later, the news arrives that Dawn Upshaw, who canceled her plans to sing on this tour, has been diagnosed with breast cancer, which has been caught early and for which there are high hopes for thorough recovery.

Orchestra members dash off e-mails to her and a card is passed around on the bus for all to sign.

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