

## Minnesota Orchestra has Proms date

[Kristin Tillotson](#), Star Tribune

To the uninitiated, "the BBC Proms" might sound like a reality show about British teens at a succession of spring dances. It's actually a marathon of a different sort -- the world's largest festival of classical music, and probably the most enthusiastically received.

For the first time in the Proms' 111-year history, the Minnesota Orchestra has been asked to play a concert as part of another "first" for the group -- a five-city tour of European festivals, beginning Wednesday in Amsterdam and ending Aug. 31 in Helsinki. The Proms program will include Mahler's Fifth Symphony and Golijov's "Three Songs" with soprano Dawn Upshaw.

While the orchestra will make its debut, artistic director Osmo Vänskä is an old hand and a popular presence with many Proms-goers. He has conducted at least one Proms concert, and sometimes three or four, every summer since 1995, often with the BBC Scottish Symphony.

"Vänskä has a following," said Nicholas Kenyon, longtime director of the Proms. "Audiences relate to him. And, of course, Dawn Upshaw has an international following. But that's not the only reason we asked Minnesota. The orchestra is in an extremely strong artistic position right now. Every year, some American orchestras will contact us, say they are putting together a festivals tour and ask whether we're interested. When it is of the standard of Minnesota, we say, 'Of course.' "

The Proms gets its name from the word "promenade" because strolling around midconcert was the traditional habit of audience members in the more casual atmosphere. Today, about 1,000 standing spots in Royal Albert Hall are still reserved for "Prommers" for a bargain \$7 each. The Proms culminates in Last Night, a frenzy of flag-waving to the tempo of patriotic golden oldies by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, flashed onto giant screens in outdoor parks in England's major cities, to be enjoyed by the masses.

This year, Minnesota will be the first of three U.S. orchestras playing the 70-concert festival. The other two are Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, both of which have played there previously. Because the Proms cannot pay enough money to cover travel costs, U.S. orchestras come only as part of tours for which they have secured independent sponsorship. A plus for guest orchestras is that, through the BBC, their concerts get wide exposure on radio and television throughout Britain. Here at home, the concert will be broadcast live on Minnesota Public Radio at 1:30 p.m. Thursday.

**An orchestral arena**

Most of the concerts are performed in the vast, round 6,500-seat Royal Albert Hall. (Remember the midconcert attempted-assassination scene in Hitchcock's "The Man Who Knew Too Much"? This is the place.)

Vänskä's usually measured speaking tone rose with excitement when he recently was asked to describe what puts the Proms experience in a class of its own.

"It's like playing in the middle of a huge arena," he said. "And the audience is so very committed. The people who are standing, who have the cheapest tickets, are the real core Proms audience. *They* decide if the performance was good enough. If they want an encore, they start stamping the floor with their feet, slowly, in unison, and then it builds and the whole audience is doing it."

The most top-notch U.S. festivals, such as Tanglewood and the Bowl, might compare in terms of quality. But the Proms stands alone in atmosphere, the antithesis of the serious subscription-series winter concert.

"Right up front, where the most expensive seats are supposed to be, you have the people who have queued up outside for hours to get in for very little money," Kenyon said.

"There's nothing here like it," said Minnesota Orchestra horn player Dave Kamminga, who played the Proms in 1988 as an extra with the New York Philharmonic. "The hall is round, not like a regular concert hall. A group of people stood right behind conductor Zubin Mehta, occasionally making cheeky British remarks. They're enthusiastic, but dignified. If symphony orchestras had a cheering section, these guys would be it. They know every batter."

The Proms drew fire last month in the British press for the few female composers and conductors represented this year. While this imbalance accurately reflects the classical-music scene on the whole, "I try not to use that line because it's no excuse," Kenyon said. "We've commissioned three women composers for next year, and we do have women conductors, as well, but not as often as they deserve. But when you look at the performers in the Proms, the orchestras and choirs and soloists, it's much more balanced."

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