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## Proms 2006 – Osmo Vänskä

Written by Colin Anderson

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Osmo Vänskä has conducted at the Proms every season since 1995, but his appearance this year brings a first, the debut of the Minnesota Orchestra of which Vänskä is Music Director. "Everything is going very well: the orchestra is playing better and better and we are enjoying the situation; it's a great orchestra for me." Included in the Prom on August 24 is Mahler's ubiquitous Symphony No. 5, its fourth movement Adagietto famous as film music (Death in Venice) and when used for solemn occasions. Some conductors add tweaks to the score based on Mahler's own whims, such as an effete pizzicato to end the first movement and bringing the horn soloist to the front in the third. Not especially convincing and Vänskä agrees. "I try to be as loyal as possible to the score. So the pizzicato will be loud – as written. There is no reason to hide one of Mahler's surprises; it's just like sudden death. I don't have any indication from the score that the horn-player should be at the front of the platform; the solo should come from inside the orchestra and I don't want any traffic between the movements."

Mahler was, after all, also a conductor and thus a pragmatic musician who catered for different halls and circumstances; such changes were not necessarily to be definitive. "He gave so many instructions to the conductor – think about this, don't do that. But, it's great music." Vänskä is coming afresh. "There were many orchestras and conductors playing Mahler, so I concentrated on Sibelius. Now it's time for me to find out what kind of composer Mahler is. I'm very excited about this opportunity; the time is right for me, and the Minnesota Orchestra has a very good Mahler tradition."

Is Mahler a Romantic or a Modern composer (there are two schools of thought on this, at least!)? "There are some similarities between Mahler and Sibelius as to whether each is a modernist or in the older style. I believe both are some kind of bridge. Mahler's orchestration, especially in the Seventh Symphony, is really modern. But let me give you another name: Beethoven. He started in the style of Haydn and Mozart and then really developed his own style." Just issued is the latest of Vänskä's Minnesota Beethoven cycle for BIS, the Eroica and Eighth Symphonies.

Also in the Prom is Three Songs by Osvaldo Golijov, written for Dawn Upshaw. "His music is like Mahler's; it's in the tradition of Jewish music with the colours of Jewish folk-music. It is beautiful music and modern at the same time; a blend, and always sensitive." Cue Samuel Barber, then; his First Essay opens the evening, a composer decried in some quarters when alive. With the 20th century gone "there are less rules right now about what kind of music composers should write; earlier, it was much more like ghettos. Barber's music is very communicative and might surprise people."

Vänskä's Minnesota musicians have been asking about the Proms. He replies they are "unique and great, and the audience is a serious one that can also have fun. It's a great feeling to play our music and in our way, and a great challenge, and



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