



International Festival: Minnesota Orchestra, Usher Hall

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Let's be categorical. With some probable glories still to come, not least Rattle and the Berlin Phil, Mackerras's Beethoven Nine and Llyr Williams's Hammerklavier, I doubt there will be a classier set of Festival performances than those delivered here in a breathtaking display of sophistication by Osmo Vanska's Minnesota Orchestra.

The transformation the Finnish conductor has effected in this American orchestra since I first heard them, around three years ago, is staggering. They were good then, but not this good. The band have Vanska's musical fingerprints all over them, and they characterised a mesmerisingly concentrated account of Samuel Barber's First Essay for Orchestra.

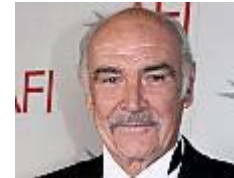
The strings were warm, bass-rich and immaculately co-ordinated, with a wonderful depth that underlined the brooding elements in Barber's much-underrated composition. The woodwind section was meltingly creamy and the brass burnished and not remotely overblown, even if the first trumpet wasn't consistently brilliant in an otherwise compelling performance of Stravinsky's Petrushka in the second half. The dynamic risks taken throughout were pure Vanska, as, above all, was the layering of textures which resulted in a performance of astounding detail.

Then, in the middle of this wonderful demonstration of orchestral unity and cohesion, there was pianist Llyr Williams, with his shining purity of tone, dazzling digital command, economical pedalling and intellectual mastery, giving an account of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto that was to die for, notably in a heartbreaking performance of the slow movement, with compact, discreet accompaniment by Vanska and his Minnesotans.

One more thing. The Cleveland Orchestra are America's most polished outfit. The Minnesota Orchestra, to judge from this display, are hot on their heels.

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