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MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA PLAYS EUROPE

From sunflowers to the Sissy Boy store

AUG. 22 ORCHESTRA'S FREE DAY

BY PAMELA HILL NETTLETON

Today is the orchestra's free day, a chance to shift gears and adjust to the time change before the performance in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw tomorrow night. Performing at the Concertgebouw is like playing the Palace — a lifelong dream for musicians. This will be the first time the Minnesota Orchestra has played there. Visually, it's just a gorgeous place to sit in.

Acoustically, it is a wonderful hall for musicians to hear each other and for the audience to hear them hearing each other. It's one of the five great halls of the world, counting Carnegie, the Berlin Philharmonie, Symphony Hall in Boston and Vienna's Musikverein. So the excitement is palpable and building. There is envious talk in the bass section of young Colin Corner, newest member of the orchestra, who started last week and will play his first concert with the orchestra playing Mahler (Mahler!). More about the long Mahler-Concertgebouw history tomorrow.

But for today, the orchestra scattered to the Van Gogh Museum to contemplate sunflowers (the airport here sports a "field" of potted sunflowers outside its entrance); to the Rijksmuseum of Dutch masters, undergoing renovations but still spectacular; or to shopping at the Sissy Boy store, which is both way hot and silly-sounding. And then, most of the orchestra boarded two water taxis that cruised through the canal system to the Eastern Harbour District, where flutist Wendy Williams' sister, Jennifer Maher, lives in an uber-cool loft. Having the entire orchestra show up for hors d'oeuvres could be daunting to a lesser soul, but Maher is a special events planner and fashion creative, and made the musicians feel warmly welcomed.

On the way back to the hotel, we all talked about how everyone rides bikes here, but they are 20-year-old looking bikes. A waiter told us this is because "no matter how big your lock—a 10 Euro bike with a 100 Euro lock—your bicycle will get stolen." Women in dresses are on bikes, men in suits, people old enough to break a hip if they tipped over, babies stuffed into bicycle baskets—all in upright bicycles, none in helmets. The men are very tall here. Very tall. I first noticed this while trying to see through them at the Van Gogh Museum, but now I see them, like trees, everywhere. Some of them on bikes.

Pamela Hill Nettleton is traveling with the Minnesota Orchestra on its European music festival tour. Her husband is acting associate principal bass and has been with the orchestra for 30 seasons.