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Minnesota Orchestra plays Europe

BY PAMELA HILL NETTLETON

For the next two weeks, the Minnesota Orchestra plays major European music festivals in Amsterdam, London, Edinburgh, Helsinki and Lucarno, Italy. I am along for the ride ... I am embedded in the orchestra.

There are about 125 of us making the tour: 99 musicians, plus spouses, a few babies, some friends, a tour doctor, a chiropractor and administrative staff.

We have numbers attached to our baggage and our IDs.

My husband, who is acting associate principal bass and has been in the orchestra for 30 seasons, is number 91. I am 91.1; I sound like a radio station.

Aug. 18: Restrictions, restrictions, restrictions

On Aug 13, we received a blue memo of severe luggage restrictions for all our flights. There are five all together: to Amsterdam, to London, to Edinburgh, to Helsinki and to Lugano, Switzerland. No carry-ons, no handbags, only Ziplocs, no glasses cases, nothing in our pockets. We stare at our luggage in despair and try to figure out how to pack. Three days later, we received a pink memo of updated restrictions that varied widely from country to country. From MSP to Amsterdam, we can't carry liquids but we can have a carry-on. But once we get inside the UK and fly out of London and later out of Edinburgh, nothing larger than a laptop, essentially, can be brought onto the plane.

This is a big deal to an orchestra because most musicians who play instruments smaller than a cello like to carry their instruments with them — violinists, particularly, and there's a good reason for that. A violin costs about as much as a typical house, so violinists are somewhat reluctant to allow a baggage handler to toss the case up onto a conveyor belt.

On the last orchestra tour, I saw a flight attendant who didn't recognize the telltale shape of a violin case try to separate soloist Josh Bell from his Stradivarius. It wasn't pretty.

No point in worrying. All the rules will probably change again before we leave on the 20th.

Aug. 20, 9 P.M.: OSmo is red hot

Our luggage had a strict weight limit, and my bag now bears the band of shame.

I paid \$25 extra for the "heavy" sticker on it, and we're not sure if it will be allowed on the intra-European flights.

At the airport bar, a few orchestra staff, including personnel manager Julie Haight-Curran and vice president and general manager Bob Neu, one of the best-dressed men in the Twin Cities, are at a table, talking. Neu is wearing violently red leather shoes.

We stop to examine them more closely. Hooting is involved. Osmo (Vanska, the music director of the orchestra) and his wife, Pirkko, join us. Osmo wears a striped shirt over a Mozart T-shirt, jeans and white socks with brown sandals. Osmo thinks perhaps Pirkko should have brought orange shoes for Amsterdam, where wearing orange is a patriotic thing to do.

The orchestra is filling up the plane.

There are civilians scattered among us, and pockets of orchestra members are sitting together and the mood is pretty happy. It doesn't hurt that the London Times recently published an article saying everything marvelous about Osmo short of he walks on water. His star is clearly in its ascendancy. His talent and skill have now become internationally recognized. Osmo is, in a word, hot. Perhaps the socks and sandals thing will catch on and trump red shoes.

Aug. 21: WHO CAN FILL HER SHOES?

Yesterday, there was a rumor moving up and down the plane rows that soloist Dawn Upshaw, of the ethereal soprano voice, who was scheduled to sing with the Minnesota Orchestra in Amsterdam and in London, and whose fame certainly helped attract audiences, had cancelled. Today we learned that is, sadly, true.

Upshaw is not a concert-canceling diva and has a reputation for being reliable and pleasant to work with. She was suddenly taken ill and cancelled Friday.

Victoria Mullova, who will perform the Sibelius Violin Concerto with the orchestra in Helsinki and Lugano, fills one of the slots by taking on Amsterdam. Mullova lives in London, which is a short flight away. But there was another glitch—flight restrictions out of the UK are so stringent she would not be able to carry her violin with her and would be forced to check and risk damaging it. Exposing your instrument to cracks, bumps and crushing blows is something that feels, to a musician, like sending your child out onto the freeway without a bike helmet. The solution for Mullova is to bypass the plane and take the train through the Chunnel.

Llyr Williams, who will perform the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 with the orchestra in Edinburgh, will now perform it for the Proms concert in London.

Osvaldo Golijov's songs are in Yiddish, Catalan and English (a set of Emily Dickinson poems), and have not been previously performed in Europe, so it is not easy to find a singer who knows the work and who could step in to Upshaw's considerably talented shoes.

Golijov, who lives in Massachusetts, and who was reportedly spending his time on Francis Ford Coppola's ranch composing a film score.

In a statement, Upshaw said, "I am sorry and disappointed not to be able to introduce these audiences to Osvaldo Golijov's amazing 'Three Songs for Soprano & Orchestra.' This music has touched me and my Minnesota colleagues deeply and I look forward to returning soon in a performance his work."