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Musicians invent ingenious ways to dress

AUG. 25 EDINBURGH, USHER HALL

Edinburgh is a zoo.

The book/writing/music/fringe festival has clogged the streets, shops and cafes of the very Scottish town — everything everywhere looks like Hogwarts, with lorries, cars and people, people, people. This makes it almost impossible for the orchestra-bearing buses to get from the airport to the hotel and from the hotel to Usher Hall. But they inch along and finally make it through the crowds.

Rehearsals are typically held the day of the concert, on stage, an hour or so before the performance. The orchestra wears jeans and T-shirts and changes after rehearsal into tails and black gowns which hang in wooden wardrobe trunks that travel with the instruments ahead of the orchestra in trucks or planes from venue to venue. Sometimes there are changing rooms and sometimes there are not, and it's not uncommon to come upon a musician hopping on one pantless leg right out in the hallway, trying to shield himself behind a bass or cello trunk.

In rehearsal, operations manager Beth Kellar-Long makes announcements about luggage restrictions and departure times. Flying out of the UK tomorrow, it's going to be sticky. All luggage must be packed and handed off before bedtime, and only a small carry on, about the size of a large handbag, is allowed. No instruments can be carried on, and, of course, no liquids. It is surprisingly difficult to work out a couture ensemble that will carry one through a concert and dinner, function as pajamas, and then look crisp on the plane the next morning. And every lotion, gel, paste and fluid that might be used in the next 12-hour period must be squeezed out, stored or applied the night before.

Musicians and staff are inventing ingenious methods for doing this, and trade results of their various experiments on the bus. Put toothpaste on your toothbrush the night before. Squeeze shaving foam into a hotel glass, but cover it with a damp washcloth or it will dry out. Don't glob face cream onto a Kleenex — it hardens into shellac overnight.

In rehearsal, Osmo tries to conduct for a few minutes with the grand piano set up behind him for the next piece, but eventually tells stage manager Tim Eickholt, "I don't feel very good about this," apologizes for the inconvenience, and asks him to move the instrument. When Eickholt lifts the lid of the piano, the orchestra yells "HEAVE!" and "HO!" like the Prommers did the night before in London.

Soon, the orchestra leaves the stage and the Scottish festival crowd trickles in, accompanied by conversational sounds of "ooooouts" and "abooooouts." The accent is so charming, it's difficult to listen to even a serious statement without grinning.

Usher is a 1,900-seat hall, in the European tradition: white and gilt walls, a massive pipe organ backing the stage, red plush seats. What is different about European halls from American ones is that here, the community before and after concerts and during interval is of prime importance. Lobbies are well designed to hold and entertain crowds, food and drink are easily procured, and people dress up because they expect to see one another. Although this is August, there is a wee nip in the air, and many ladies are in woolen suits, the gentlemen in tweed jackets.

Tonight's program features Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, which includes some hefty sawing away in the lower strings which is fun to watch and lets the orchestra show off in calliope sounds from the woods, blats and bleeps of the bassoons, and general merry-making throughout. It's a fun, colorful, lively piece that is warmly received. In fact, the whole concert is warmly received, by the critics, too.

The Scotsman's Susan Nickalls writes that it was "an exhilarating performance" and "a fairly definitive reading of this work with sparkle and wit in spades." Michael Tumelty of the Glasgow Herald writes, "I doubt there will be a classier set of Festival performances than those delivered last night in a breathtaking display of sophistication by Osmo Vanska's Minnesota Orchestra ... the woodwind section is meltingly creamy, and the brass burnished and not remotely overblown ... the Cleveland Orchestra are American's most polished outfit. The Minnesota Orchestra, to judge from this display, is hot on its heels."

On to Helsinki.

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