

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Last update: August 24, 2006 – 11:13 PM

Minnesota Orchestra scores in Proms debut

The musicians were well-received during their first appearance at London's famous festival.

[Kristin Tillotson](#), Star Tribune

The Minnesota Orchestra got a special kind of standing ovation Thursday night in London -- hundreds in the audience stood for the entire concert.

That's business as usual for the BBC Proms at Royal Albert Hall, the second stop for the orchestra's five-city European Festivals tour. "Prommers" are avid classical-music fans who pay rock-bottom prices (about \$7 U.S.) for the standing-room-only spots up front, and feel entitled to voice their sharp, exceedingly knowledgeable opinions in the bargain.

Many Prommers were disappointed that renowned singer Dawn Upshaw canceled last Friday because of illness.

She was to have soloed in "Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra" by leading composer Osvaldo Golijov.

Despite this setback, the anticipation to hear music director Osmo Vänskä with his new band from middle America was heightened by London critics, who over the last week called Minnesota an orchestra to watch.

London's 106-year-old Royal Albert Hall sits on the southwest end of Kensington Park like a sort of Victorian Metrodome, swathed inside in red velvet and trimmed in gilt. It seats more than 6,000 people, but the diehard crowd is standing up front, having queued for hours to get the bargain tickets. The rest of the hall also has a more convivial feel than usual, because the tiered seats are set in a horseshoe.

A vocal audience

The Proms are peppered with traditions that would be considered far too gauche for a regular concert. There's the water-pond in the middle of the arena, inhabited by inflated plastic dinosaurs, or "promosauruses." When Minnesota Orchestra stage manager Tim Eickholt came out to lift the top of the grand piano for Upshaw's replacement, Welsh pianist Llyr Williams, the crowd shouted "Heave ... HO!" They also delivered a boisterous hand for concertmaster Jorja Fleezanis when she played the "concert A," which the orchestra uses to tune up. During intermission, the arena floor looked like a high school gym during a natural disaster, with prommers reclining on their coats, writing in journals, doing homework or reading books.

And when an enthusiastic Welshman in the arena yawped in his native tongue, "Good evening and good luck!" just before the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3

in C minor was to begin, even Vänskä seemed to smile appreciatively from the podium.

The Prommers themselves are an obsessive bunch.

Mark Jones, a Prommer since 1981, said that during Prom season, "I spend more time with people I meet on queue than my regular friends." He was with a group of six people he's met there through the years; they had provisioned themselves with wine and sandwiches for their wait.

Waiting, of course, is a big part of the experience, but so was the draw of the orchestra. James Argles said he had been in line since 7 a.m. "I go to at least 10 concerts a season, but this is the Minnesota Orchestra's debut, and Vänskä is an exacting conductor, so I wanted to make this one."

Mark Bennett, 17, said that he's queued for five concerts so far this year, "but I've come to hear the Mahler Five," referring to Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

Nearly 50 Minnesotans also came to hear the Proms concert, including orchestra board members.

Playing to a tough audience

In Amsterdam the night before, the storied Concertgebouw hall was filled to near 2,000 capacity, and things were a little tight on stage, too.

"The stage was so small, it was very uncomfortable" trying to extend a bow fully without hitting one's neighbor, said violinist Michael Sutton. But he was happy with the crowd's reaction: "We were doing Mahler on their turf, and they responded really well," he said.

Albert Hall is more spacious, but the orchestra, and Vänskä, still felt pressure to show this highly discerning audience that an orchestra from middle America has the right stuff.

The concert began with Barber's Essay No. 1, which the orchestra played with even more urgency than the piece requires.

Keith Clarke, editor of Classical Music magazine, called it "a great calling card" for the orchestra.

The substitution for Golijov and Upshaw was the Beethoven concerto with Williams.

Clarke said at intermission: "Minnesota has a tremendous orchestra that can hold its head up anywhere in the world."

After the interval, the orchestra performed the much anticipated Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

The crowd stamped their feet in unison until Vänskä came out to lead an encore -- his favorite Finnish polka.

After the concert, Daily Telegraph critic Ivan Hewett called the orchestra "a virtuoso band. Osmo brings something interesting to every single bar, and extraordinary color. While there were illuminating moments in the Mahler, I felt there were almost too many ideas, and it somehow just missed at the end."

One thing is sure: When these Londoners think of Minnesota, it won't be about Prince, the megamall or Mary Tyler Moore. It will be the Minnesota Orchestra.

Kristin Tillotson • 612-673-7046 • ktillotson@startribune.com

©2006 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.