

Proms

Minnesota Orchestra/Vänskä

HILARY FINCH AT THE ALBERT HALL/RADIO 3



First time at the Proms! The Minnesota Orchestra has for too long been an orchestra in waiting. Now with Osmo Vänskä, their new music director, at the helm, the players are enjoying what is probably their first golden age since their previous incarnation as the Minneapolis Orchestra, when their name was synonymous with luminaries such as Eugene Ormandy and Dmitri Mitropoulos.

So — how do they sound? Well, they were brave enough to reveal themselves in nothing less than Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Though before this Samuel Barber's *First Essay for Orchestra*, their sole transatlantic calling-card, had artfully separated out their newly fine-honed string ensemble, and the shining concentration of the brass.

Those same brass were just ever so slightly shaky at the start of Mahler's great Funeral March. But, under the hard-working baton of Vänskä, nerves soon steadied. He was like a tiger pouncing, then leaping to release the snarl in the strings at the start of the stormy second movement of the symphony. Incisive rhythms and sheer energy were the strength of their playing here and in the central scherzo, rather than any particularly subtle linguistic inflection of the music: this still comes more naturally, perhaps, to Central European orchestras.

And the great Adagietto? Vänskä is not a conductor who believes it should all be over in eight minutes. But neither does he wallow in the wake of the gondola — the *Death in Venice* images are at last beginning to fade into the mists of musical memory, thank goodness. So this was a warm, tenderly shaped love song, with Vänskä moulding the string ensemble like wet clay.

The Minnesota musicians should have shared their concert with the soprano Dawn Upshaw for the UK premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's *Three Songs*. The silver lining in the cloud of her illness was the sudden substitutionary appearance of the pianist Llyr Williams, who gave a thrillingly life-enhancing performance of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. With the orchestra halfway through recording all the Beethoven symphonies, they were in fine fettle to respond to Williams's characteristically beautifully shaped and articulated playing.