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The process of Osmo-sis

Richard Morrison discovers how Osmo Vänskä breathed new life into the Minnesota Orchestra



If I had ten quid for every time an alleged “dream marriage” of conductor and orchestra collapsed in disillusion and acrimony, I would be even richer than the maestros concerned. So one hesitates before identifying another of these mythical musical paradises.

Nevertheless, this must be said. I haven’t heard an orchestra playing more sweetly or with more unified purpose this year than when I went to Minneapolis and caught the Minnesota Orchestra performing under its Finnish music director, Osmo Vänskä.

Nor am I the only person to sit up and pay attention. In the three years that Vänskä has been in Minnesota, he has embarked on a recorded cycle of Beethoven symphonies (on the Swedish label Bis) that has won hugely complimentary reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. Out of nowhere, it seems, the world has acquired a new superstar band with a maestro to match. No wonder there is such anticipation of their debuts at the Proms and Edinburgh Festival. (And yes, this American orchestra is definitely coming — even if the players have to queue all day to get their fiddles through security.) The “out of nowhere” tag isn’t entirely true. The Minnesota Orchestra (or Minneapolis Symphony, as it was known) is one of America’s oldest ensembles. Founded in 1903, and supported passionately by Minnesota’s Nordic-rooted community, it has always been ranked in the top ten US orchestras. Indeed, its conductors have included such luminaries as Eugene Ormandy, Antal Dorati and Neville Marriner.

But by the start of this century it was languishing artistically and imperilled financially. Its music director, Eiji Oue, looked good on posters but was regarded as flashy and superficial. Players knew they could do better. And audiences were in apparently terminal decline: down to an average 55 per cent of capacity by 2002. As a result the orchestra had run up a \$4.5 million deficit on an annual \$30 million budget.

It’s not a unique story in America. But in Minnesota they decided to do something about it. The appointment of Vänskä was an incredibly bold step. Unlike the two high-flying Finns who had been his fellow conducting students at Helsinki’s Sibelius Academy in the 1970s — Esa-Pekka Salonen and Jukka-Pekka Saraste — Vänskä’s progress through the profession had been comparatively slow. He had started,



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in fact, as a clarinetist, turning professional at just 18 with the Turku Philharmonic, then becoming co-principal clarinet of the Helsinki Philharmonic.

But conducting had been his dream since boyhood. “My parents had a recording of Brahms Two, and I used to conduct it with my pencil,” he recalls. “The performance always went very well.”

He got his chance with baton rather than pencil in 1988 when a little-known orchestra in a small Finnish town asked him to be its music director. That was the Lahti Symphony Orchestra. Within a few years he had turned it into a top-class ensemble, with a series of fine recordings. He also became principal conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

Yet he admits to harbouring a bitterness when he saw how fast the careers of his fellow Finns were progressing. In part his own loyalty to the Lahti community and his family was the reason for his slow progress. “My wife and I made a decision that while our three children were at school we would not move town. I was conscious that a conductor’s life is not good for families. Minnesota approached me at exactly the moment when the youngest had left school.”

Just turned 50, Vänskä was determined to hit America like a whirlwind, and his effect was immediate and electrifying. His trademarks have always been his attention to detail and his insatiable appetite for rehearsal. In Minnesota he had found an orchestra that positively revelled in tough love. “I have always worked orchestras hard,” he says. “Some of them don’t like it, but this one does. When I started here people were hungry to show what they could do. They weren’t rehearsed much during the previous few years. They knew they could do much better.”

And the purpose of all this painstaking rehearsal? “I try to read the score as carefully as possible, and then make the orchestra play exactly what is written,” Vänskä says. “No extra, sentimental things. Just trust the composer’s instructions. I don’t add anything. I don’t even like to talk about ‘my’ interpretation.”

You can certainly sense this Toscanini-like fidelity to the written notes in Vänskä’s performances. But there’s something else as well. He has turned Minnesota into a wonderfully lean-sounding and precise ensemble, capable of playing lyrically, lushly and with passion, but never indulgently. “It is the duty of every conductor not to allow the loud instruments to cover everything else!” he says. “I aim for transparency. In orchestral music so many interesting things are going on at once that it is a crime to cover them up with a thick sound.”

In three years Vänskä has acquired almost a cult status in Minnesota — helped, it has to be said, by an endearing eccentricity. When the orchestra gave a concert of Abba hits, he conducted it in the sort of jacket that even Liberace would have rejected on grounds of bad taste. (“Of course I wouldn’t conduct Bruckner in it,” he says hastily.) He has bought a loft in the old Mills area of Minneapolis, next to the Mississippi, and belts around town on a Yamaha 650 like an ageing Hell’s Angel.

The most important thing, however, is that the “Vänskä effect” — or “Osmo-sis”, as one American magazine called it — has transformed the orchestra’s fortunes. Tony Woodcock, the Englishman who took over the administrative reins soon after Vänskä was appointed, says that the deficit has been cut by half and audiences increased by 40 per cent. It’s true that the reduced deficit is due largely to draconian cuts in the budget. But as Woodcock points out, the fact that these were negotiated with the musicians without the bitterness and strike action that hit so many other American orchestras is wholly attributable to Vänskä’s arrival. “The instant chemistry he achieved with the musicians is vital to everything else.”

Now Woodcock has launched a \$50 million campaign to secure the orchestra’s long-term survival. The future looks bright in Minnesota. And Vänskä loves the place. “They have winters here like we have in Finland,” he says approvingly. “In fact it might even be colder!”

Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra appear on Thursday at the Albert Hall, London SW7 (020-7589 8212) and Friday at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh (0131-473 2000)

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