Concert review: Pekka Kuusisto made his violin weep with folk music

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(Finnish to English translation provided by Kirsi Ritosalmi-kisner)

Pekka Kuusisto, a personality of the violin world who follows his own path, knows that folk music gets onto the skin and can tell about the basics of life in such a way that everybody understands.

Two weeks ago the violin wizard gathered worldwide attention with his folk music performance at the London Proms. He continued the same theme in Lahti when he was the soloist in the opening concert of Minnesota Orchestra’s European tour.

After Kuusisto had performed his main number Prokofiev’s First Violin Concerto with style, he rewarded an enthusiastic audience with a Swedish folk song Vi sålde våra hemman [We sold our home].

This time Kuusisto did not use the same method as in London with Minun kultani kaunis on [My darling in pretty], where he joked with the audience and made them sing along. On Sunday, he respected Minnesota’s old Nordic immigration traditions in a serious and delicate way.

In this song from the middle of the 19th century, immigration is not a bed of roses. Homes were left behind with heavy hearts, travelling was filled with pain and illness, and nobody really knew what to expect when they reached their destination.

Minnesota Orchestra’s musicians, many of whom have last names that still reflect the Nordic immigration background, joined Kuusisto’s weeping violin by humming the song’s harmonies.

And as if sneaking onto the stage, the American orchestra’s Finnish Music Director Osmo Vänskä joined the melancholy mood with his clarinet.

This way the encore was not the soloist’s solitary bravura, but rather a commonly shared moment for the whole ensemble.

Of course these very exceptional encores are just a piquant extra spice in Pekka Kuusisto’s art of violin playing.

He has reached such a stage in his career that his own vision has found its way strongly also to classical works. Instead of proving his virtuosity he gives space and peace for the music by withdrawing himself more to the background.
A proof of this was above all the fantastic Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto of the recent London concert. He found a new, down-to-earth point of view to the familiar themes and rhythms of the piece in an astonishing way.

The same kind of touch could be heard to some degree in the Prokofiev’s Concerto in D Major, which he played with the Minnesota Orchestra.

At times, Kuusisto almost “underplayed” the piece by highlighting the quiet and lyrically lingering mood of its first and third movements. The orchestra could have been more considerate because Kuusisto’s audibility was at times rather delicate.

The quick middle movement was filled with joyful spark of colors, in which the danceable pulsating rhythm became a more important virtue than the beauty of the violin’s sound.

The Minnesota Orchestra is in good playing shape, which was most evident in the highly energetic interpretation of Beethoven’s Third Symphony.

True to his habit, Vänskä perceived the enormous symphonic arc with sovereignty. The groomed sound was a combination of brisk classical ideal of that time period, and a dawning romanticism.

What about a deeper meaning of the performance? The melancholy touch of the slow movement and finale’s victorious message about freedom and brotherhood? Hmmm.

The orchestra showed the effect of gradually intensifying tenseness of its tone in American composer Steven Stucky’s Rhapsodies.

In addition to the actual programming the orchestra remembered the late Einojuhani Rautavaara with a beautiful gesture as they moved from Cantus Arcticus’ Melancholy directly to Beethoven’s symphony. The contrast was exciting.

The Couple of encores were selected somewhat strangely. I did not understand why Beethoven’s finest symphony had to be followed by two of Brahms’ scabby Hungarian Dances.

The Minnesota Orchestra.
Conductor: Osmo Vänskä
Soloist: Pekka Kuusisto, violin.