Osmo Vänskä had a powerful return to Sibelius Hall

Strong rise from the ashes

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

Visiting concert of the Minnesota Orchestra
Osmo Vänskä, conductor
Pekka Kuusisto, violin
Sibelius Hall on August 21

A lot has happened since the Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vänskä last visited Sibelius Hall in 2004. Piloted by its long-term music director, the orchestra has survived a lockout crisis and risen strong from the ashes.

When it began its European tour in Lahti, it was a victorious homecoming for Vänskä. The air of Sibelius Hall was filled with emotion, and the concert concluded with two encores – Brahms’ Hungarian Dances – and a standing ovation.

The Minnesota Orchestra played vigorously, vividly, and disciplined. The quiet nuances resonated richly, but the power discharges in the beginning of the concert felt pressed.

As the last number we heard Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony, which by the way was recently selected as the best symphony in the world in BBC Music Magazine’s conductor survey. In the symphony, the orchestra balanced its playing to match the acoustics of Sibelius Hall.

The piece rolled out joyous, handsomely dancing-like, and relaxed. Vänskä played freely with strong contrasts, and compared to the orchestra’s 2006 recording of the symphony the storytelling was more colorful and forcible.

Pekka Kuusisto is the tour’s soloist with Prokofiev’s First Violin Concerto on his music stand.

Few violinists realize the gnome-like mischief of the piece, which does not ask for clean “soloism”. If anybody, it is Kuusisto who will not bow to the classical beauty playing. He spread out a fabulous spectrum of nuances from the whimper of a mosquito and growling of a troll to a diamond’s sparking and a frail song.

Kuusisto’s dressed-down violin tone may feel mannered, but now it was the perfect key to the speech-like interpretation. Even so, in the finale Kuusisto seemed to grow tired. On the other hand, the orchestra that had been hiding in the background during the first movements lifted intoxicating twists and turns to the end. Vänskä molded the ethereal sound precisely.
Kuusisto rose to an internet hit from the Proms festival. We’ve accustomed to hearing personal encores from him. This time he did not make jolly, but instead took a stand regarding refugees and [historic] immigration to America with a Swedish folk song. One had to hold one’s breath when Osmo Vänskä joined the emotional mood with his clarinet.

The Minnesota Orchestra performs plenty of contemporary music. It started the concert with an American composer Steven Stucky’s piece *Rhapsodies* (2008), in which fragmented solos grew into fan-like thickenings.

Before Beethoven, we heard a surprise number: the second movement of Einojuhani Rautavaara’s *Cantus Arcticus* was played to commemorate the recently passed composer.