Concert review: The Minnesota Orchestra Shines at Sibelius Hall
Helsingin Sanomat, Culture / August 23, 2016 / Samuli Tiikkaja
http://www.hs.fi/arviot/konsertti/a1471836196273
(Finnish to English translation provided by Kirsi Ritosalmi-kisner)

Top Orchestra’s tour began from conductor Osmo Vänskä’s home field in Lahti

Type: Classical
Composer: Steven Stucky, Sergei Prokofiev, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Ludwig van Beethoven
Performer: The Minnesota Orchestra, Osmo Vänskä, Pekka Kuusisto
Place: Sibelius Hall

The Minnesota Orchestra began its European tour at its Music Director Osmo Vänskä’s home field. When Vänskä was the Chief Conductor of the Lahti Symphony, he became familiar with the Sibelius Hall in Lahti, and that is where he conducted a vigorous concert with his present orchestra.

The Minnesota Orchestra is one of the top ensembles of the United States, and with Vänskä at its podium it has become even more appreciated. Vänskä was also there to lift the orchestra back to its old glory after a bitter lock-out had cut the operations of the orchestra for over a year in 2012-2014.

When the orchestra’s management enforced the lengthened lock-out, many of the musicians were forced to apply for work elsewhere. Sunday’s concert in Lahti was just one proof of how well Vänskä has been able to hold the orchestra’s high level up even after this time.

Here in Finland we’ve been able to follow the laudable cooperation of Vänskä and the Minnesotans through their recordings of Sibelius and Beethoven. In Lahti they performed Beethoven’s symphony Eroica, which received a monumental interpretation. The tone of the big ensemble was streamlined and polished. The slow movement, the funeral march, grew organically from whispering tones to handsome peaks. In the quick turns of the scherzo the mood changes were fluid, and the finale was like a miniature symphony in itself.

Especially the unity of the string section’s playing was enjoyable both in Beethoven and in everything heard before it. Einojuhani Rautavaara’s work Cantus Arcticus’ second movement Melancholy was touching. Vänskä had added that to the program to commemorate Rautavaara.

It is not too long ago either, in February, when the American composer Steven Stucky passed. The Minnesota Orchestra played his piece Rhapsodies as an overture, and the orchestra’s sophisticated tone culture was exposed in the fast contemporary music textures of the work.

Although the piece is rhapsodic according to its name, Vänskä’s and the Minnesota Orchestra’s interpretation had forward-moving action.

On this tour, Pekka Kuusisto is the Minnesota Orchestra’s soloist and in Lahti he performed Sergei Prokofiev’s First Violin Concerto with the orchestra. Kuusisto played with his range of
characteristic interpretation, which is often much wider than the beauty and ideals rooted in the big concertos of the Romantic period.

Kuusisto was very effective in using both vibrato and “vibratolessness”, as well as alternating the pressure of the bow on the strings, moving from light whispers to cracking the sound. Kuusisto’s style of expression fits Prokofiev’s music very well, and his interpretation was enjoyable.

When Kuusisto performs, he lets his personality show. In the beginning of August, his encore at the London Proms became a jolly internet hit. Kuusisto used folk music now as well, but in a noticeably different mood.

He had selected a Swedish folk song Vi sålde våra hemman [We sold our home], which refers to the immigration wave of the 19th century. That is when many people from Sweden and other Nordic countries moved to Northern America. There are many descendants of these immigrants living in Minnesota, as well.

The song referred also to the lock-out of the Minnesota Orchestra, during which the orchestra could not access its home at Orchestra Hall [in Minneapolis]. First the whole orchestra joined Kuusisto’s moving encore by humming the lengthy bourdon tone in the background. Then also Osmo Vänskä appeared with his clarinet and played a duet with Kuusisto.