“The significance of side-by-side playing should not be underestimated”

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

Young Finnish musicians tested their skills at the stands of an American orchestra – “The significance of side-by-side playing should not be underestimated”

The world-famous Minnesota Orchestra and its Music Director Osmo Vänskä began their week-long European tour in Finland. In addition to the concert there was enough time to train the next generation.

Photo caption: Osmo Vänskä conducted the Minnesota Orchestra at Lahti’s Sibelius Hall on Sunday. On Monday, the stands were replenished with Finnish student players.
Photo: Berislav Jurišić / Yle

There is an unreasonable number of musicians on the stage. In a big symphony orchestra there are about one hundred musicians, but now circa 160-180 musicians are preparing to rehearse Antonín Dvořák’s Ninth Symphony.

The giant ensemble consists of the world-famous Minnesota Orchestra and Finnish youth orchestra Vivo, which is the only national training orchestra for youth in Finland. The conductor is Minnesota’s Osmo Vänskä, who has previously lifted Lahti Symphony and its recordings to world fame.

“At home, the Minnesota Orchestra has done side-by-side rehearsals like this with youth and university orchestras for years.”

In the spring [no year mentioned], Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra were involved in improving the US foreign relations. The ensemble visited Cuba as the first US orchestra this century.

“We played with the National Youth Orchestra of Cuba. It brings new energy when a student and a professional sit with each other on stage. This is important work and I am very pleased to do it.“

The mood in Sibelius Hall was cordial as the young musicians and seasoned professionals were learning to know each other. The popular symphony “From the New World” sounded even more pompous than usual. One can tell from Vivo’s violinist Lauri Suni that the event was unforgettable.

“I realized that although they are so awfully great players, they are still just people. When you play in an orchestra it gives you a better sense of what it really means to be a musician. Only very few of us become soloists, so this is fundamental work for musicians”, summarizes Suni.
The orchestra helps in all fields
The cooperation of the Minnesota Orchestra and Vivo is a rare delicacy in Finland. It makes the event extra special that the musicians of Vivo are not required to be vocational musician students. Rather, the musicians are students from conservatories and public music schools from all around Finland.

Last year, an Orchestra Academy was founded for professional music students. All the main operators of [Helsinki] Music Hall, Helsinki Symphony Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and Sibelius Academy cooperate in the Orchestra Academy.

Side note / Quote: “It always pays to invest in the youth.” Osmo Vänskä

Vänskä thinks that side-by-side teaching is meaningful even before the students have made their career choices and set their professional goals.

“The value is not only in the instrument and music, but rather everybody learns a lot that will be beneficial regardless their profession later in life”, says Vänskä.

Such values are persistency and the ability to cooperate, among others.

“It is not me, myself, and I, but instead me with others. In addition, learning any instrument requires patience: it is not ‘everything to me right now’. Rather, if you practice enough and have enough talent, you may make it to the top. And even if you don’t reach top results, you have learned that you have to work in order to make your dreams come true”, Vänskä contemplates.

Taxation in the way of the American model

Vänskä speaks tirelessly for music. Even if the [Finnish] system works at the moment, input into this important export product needs to be on-going.

“If something is good, it won’t be that forever unless you take care of it every day. Music has been Finland’s special strength for a hundred years: the export should be supported by investing in education. It is shortsighted to cut it.”

The Minnesota Orchestra functions in the American way, with private money. A wealthy couple who favor education fund the side-by-side rehearsals with youth orchestras around the world. After difficult times and the lock-out that lasted over one year the funding faucets have reopened. Same kind of patron operation would require systemic changes in Finland.

“Some politicians now have this idea that music needs to be funded with private money also in Finland. Sure, but then taxation needs to be lowered like in America. The politicians are missing calculation skills if they try to chase private people to donate money with the present high level of taxation.”

Greetings to bankers
Vivo is the only national training orchestra for youth. The Jean Sibelius youth orchestra had to freeze its functions last year after Nordea [bank] withdrew its funding.

Vänskä thinks it is fortunate that at least Vivo is still standing. The conductor wishes that someday the Sibelius orchestra could continue its function, as well.

“It always pays to invest in the youth. Bankers should remember that funding the youth will benefit the whole country.”