

Classical review: It's good to be back **Osmo Vänskä and his Minnesotans return to Edinburgh revived**

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This year's Edinburgh festival has its usual share of visits from the world's great symphony orchestras. Antonio Pappano's Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia opened proceedings last night in the Usher Hall and returns there tonight. But much interest will focus on the return to international prominence of the Minnesota Orchestra under their Finnish music director, Osmo Vänskä.

Their last European tour, taking in both Edinburgh and the Proms, was in 2010, since when the musicians and their conductor have been on a rollercoaster ride of financial problems and internecine disagreements that resulted in the musicians threatening to strike for better pay and conditions and the management imposing a lockout from Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. Vänskä resigned in 2013, when New York's Carnegie Hall cancelled a projected Sibelius cycle. The future looked bleak.

In June, when I went to meet Vänskä and some of his musicians at their home base, you would scarcely credit that the band had come so close to collapse. With Vänskä back at the helm, the orchestra delivered a thrilling account of Mahler's Fifth, which they took into the studio days later (the start of a Mahler symphony cycle, to add to their Beethoven and Sibelius ones for BIS). It was as if the lockout had never happened. At the Usher Hall, they will play Sibelius's Pohjola's Daughter, one of the greatest and most beloved of his symphonic poems; his Violin Concerto, with the Finnish virtuoso Pekka Kuusisto as soloist; and Beethoven's ever popular Fifth as their main work.

When I meet the soft-spoken conductor, I remark that the lockout must have been a traumatic experience for both him and the musicians.

"It was. This was my orchestra, and my work here wasn't completed. There were projects we had together — the Sibelius symphony cycle, for example, was interrupted — and I felt the whole business was unfairly handled. I couldn't leave."

Vänskä gained international attention with his first recorded cycle of Sibelius's orchestral works — including early versions of the Violin Concerto and Fifth Symphony — with Finland's Lahti SO. It put Lahti on the musical map; and his legacy, like Simon Rattle's in Birmingham, is one of that small country's great halls.

Vänskä now makes his principal home in Minneapolis, with his second wife, the violinist Erin Keefe, who also happens to be the Minnesota Orchestra's concertmaster (since 2011), so he has much more than the usual "love affair" conductors always claim to have with their musicians. As a great Sibelian, Vänskä is attuned to the Finnish expanses of forests and lakes that the country's greatest composer depicts in his work. And the natural environment of Minnesota is, he says, very much like home.

“It’s the seasons. We have a very definite spring, summer, autumn and winter here — very much like Finland. You can ski in the winter — I love the snow — and there are a lot of lakes and forests. It looks very much like the north of Finland. There are lots of Finnish immigrants here, too. They found Minnesota before me,” he chuckles.

For the musicians, Vänskä’s persistence and determination were crucial in securing the orchestra’s future. He agreed to conduct one of their concerts during the lockout — a Sibelius symphony programme, to which he appended the poignant, and symbolic, Valse Triste and asked the audience not to applaud — and it was clear that, despite his resignation, he was prepared to return when the dispute was resolved (which it was, in 2014).

The clarinetist Timothy Zavadil, says: “The great thing Osmo did was to urge more musician involvement in the management, and to their great credit the board and staff welcomed this. Musicians now go to marketing and artistic planning meetings, and that’s a different model, in the US at least. We really learnt, when we self-promoted our concerts, just how hard our staff work.”

Both Zavadil and the principal trombonist, Douglas Wright, were part of the negotiating committee that eventually, with the new CEO, Kevin Smith, resolved the dispute. They say it was “philosophical” rather than financial (a polite euphemism for an ideological power struggle). They have lost some board members, but have retained some big donors and gained new ones. The MO has evolved into something new for the US: not a self-governing orchestra, but one in which musicians are involved at every level. Zavadil calls it “musician ownership”, and it means they are keener than ever to do outreach work throughout the state, in addition to their work at Orchestra Hall and their touring.

Vänskä is no stranger to the UK. He was chief conductor of the BBC Scottish SO from 1996 to 2002, and is a regular guest with the London Philharmonic, with whom he repeats his Sibelius cycle at the RFH in October. Half of his Edinburgh programme features the composer. Does he sometimes feel he is in danger of being labelled a Sibelius specialist?

“It is such great music that you can never tire of it, but I have to take care not to specialise too much. For example, with the Sibelius cycle finished, we will record a Mahler cycle. I didn’t do a lot of Mahler in Lahti because it’s a small orchestra. But now I think it’s the right time to engage with Mahler, starting with the Fifth.”

For Vänskä, the Edinburgh concert is a big opportunity. “This is a major festival and the climax of our first European tour since the lockout. That was a close-to-death experience, but sometimes you need something really terrible to happen and you can start afresh with new ideas.” They are telling the world the Minnesota Orchestra is back.

Minnesota Orchestra, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, Aug 23, 8pm