A few years ago, Osmo Vanska and his Minnesota Orchestra experienced a bitter inversion of the old maxim. How do you *not* get to Carnegie Hall? Lockout, lockout, lockout.

A standoff between the ensemble’s musicians and its management caused the cancellation of its 2012-13 season and much of 2013-14. That latter season was to have been the occasion for a rare Carnegie showcase for an American orchestra: four concerts devoted to Sibelius, Mr. Vanska’s specialty. Including all seven of the composer’s symphonies, this series was one of the lockout’s most crushing losses; indeed, when the first of the planned programs was officially called off, Mr. Vanska resigned.

With the signing of a new contract, the music finally returned in 2014, and soon after Mr. Vanska did, too. On Thursday, orchestra and maestro made it to Carnegie — just two and a half years late — with their beloved Sibelius. It was a symbolic victory, and also an artistic one: The concert was urgent, authoritative.

Mr. Vanska’s way with this composer has what Rimbaud once called “burning patience.” The final movement of the Third Symphony charts the journey of a C-major chord as it builds, swirling, in intensity and grandeur. But the Minnesotans didn’t just get bigger and bigger. With them, the music ebbed and flowed, coming on disconcertingly strong at the start, then receding; increasing, then dissolving, as momentum grew. The coppery burr of muted brasses emerged from the back of the orchestra, as if from a great distance, before a frightening descent into Expressionist madness.
The hymn that arrives in the wake of that explosion was less forceful here than humble, aware of its own fragility. Emphasizing the low strings, darkness was always visible as the fanfares of the ending tried, and tried again, to constitute themselves. Mr. Vanska never forgot the unsteadiness Sibelius puts at the heart of these scores, sometimes rhythmic (a melody seeming to drag behind at the start of the Third Symphony, resisting an onward pull) and sometimes textural (as in the first movement of the First Symphony, when a timpani rumble, threatening a quiet clarinet melody, makes the transition to a soft string tremble).

In the Violin Concerto, Hilary Hahn’s lean, focused sound was a perfect fit for this orchestra and this repertory, poised between rawness and refinement. In the third movement, Mr. Vanska — specific in his gestures but never rigid — led a dance by turns rustic and ghostly. The ensemble played throughout in a white heat — with richness but without fat.

Offering no fewer than three encores — heartfelt, elegant Sibelius pieces — the musicians seemed reluctant to leave the stage, perhaps because they didn’t know when they would return. A Carnegie spokeswoman had written earlier in the day to say that there were no plans to complete the originally scheduled cycle. But for the sake of New York’s music lovers — and the sake of Sibelius — the hall should invite this orchestra back, and soon.

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