

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with Osmo Vänskä

by Jarrett Hoffman



August is when the end of summer comes into sight, a blues for which Mendelssohn's Fourth Symphony might be the antidote. The composer himself called it "the jolliest work I have so far written" — and the first movement really is bottled joy.

That symphony, known as the "Italian," will sit side by side with Samuel Barber's lesser-known *Symphony in One Movement* this Friday, August 16 at 7:00 pm, when guest conductor Osmo Vänskä pays a visit to Severance Hall to close out The Cleveland Orchestra's Summers@Severance Series.

"I have to say that I am so happy about the Barber," Vänskä said during a telephone interview.

"Even three years ago, let's say, I didn't know anything about this first symphony of his. Now I have done it twice during the last season. I really love the piece, and I think that it might be a good surprise for many people to hear it."

Vänskä became Music Director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 2003, and since then has been heralded for his role in the ensemble's growth. The last five years have brought a Grammy Award, a tour of Cuba (the first by an American orchestra), and a trip to South Africa as part of Nelson Mandela's centenary. It hasn't all been rosy: there was the strife of a 16-month lockout from 2012 to 2014. One year into that impasse, the conductor resigned, though he returned to his position when the lockout ended.

Having steered the Orchestra through an impressive recovery in the years since, Vänskä announced in December that he will step down in 2022. “This process of finding a new music director always takes a longer time rather than a shorter time, so I wanted to make it smooth for the orchestra,” he told me. “But I’m so happy to say that [my tenure] is not over yet. We have many things planned these next seasons.”

No, Vänskä is not yet ready to look back on his time in Minnesota — there’s still too much to come. But he did say this: “It has been a very good place for me. I’m really grateful for these years. When it comes to an end, it will have been nineteen years since I started. I think that’s a little bit unusual.”

I pointed out another long post in his career: twenty years (1988-2008) as Chief Conductor of the Lahti Symphony, where he is now Conductor Laureate. “I was lucky that things worked so well in Lahti, and that they have been working very well in Minnesota too,” he said.

When Vänskä announced his plans to step down in Minnesota, he [told](#) *The New York Times*, “All doors are open.” He chose one of those doors this past April: beginning in 2020, he’ll be the next Music Director of the Seoul Philharmonic.

“I have been to Seoul now four times as a guest conductor, and I have enjoyed the orchestra very much,” he told me. “They can play really, really well, and when I got the question, ‘Are you willing to give your name for the very short list [for Music Director], I said quickly, ‘Yes, absolutely.’ And then it happened. They called me publicly the ‘orchestra builder,’ and I hope that I can respond to that challenge.”

Vänskä will bring stability and vision — the ensemble has been without a music director since 2015. “I hope I can help the institution as a whole work together as well as possible,” he said. “That for me is the key to the orchestra being in good shape and being able to do great things in the future. It’s already a very good orchestra, and if I can do the things I have in mind, I know that it’s really going to sound great.”



Asked what exactly he has in mind, he pointed to “those sometimes boring old” aspects of playing: things like color, ensemble, rhythm, and dynamics. “When you go back to the instrument, you need to do those basic things again and again,” he said. “There are no secrets — it’s just hard work. And if people are ready to be involved in that hard work, it usually starts to sound better. In a way it’s very simple.”

Aside from an orchestra builder, Vänskä has also been described as both meticulously prepared and absolutely passionate in his conducting, a combination that’s often elusive. How does he achieve that?

“Well, I love music — I very much love music — and I think that’s the key,” he said. “If I’m working with a score, I try to be part of it — I think there is always some sort of musical story or picture about emotions, about life. And if I can start to breathe that story, then I can [convey to] the orchestra how we can tell it together. If we put all our passion toward that job, then usually it works, but you need everybody to be involved.”

In addition to conducting, Vänskä plays the clarinet — which was actually his first career in music — and composes. Recently, he’s been playing quite a bit at summer festivals, which he enjoys. “That’s another way to be involved with music, and it’s very different from conducting,” he said. “I’m happy that I’m still able to play the clarinet.”

His most recent composition is a duo for violin and clarinet — “for very obvious reasons,” he said, laughing. (His wife, Erin Keefe, is concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra.) “I’m really lucky that if I feel I have to write something, then I know I can do it, and I also don’t need to feel any pressure about it because it’s not my job. Both things, clarinet and composing, I’m really happy to be able to do when needed.”

First photo by Lisa-Marie Mazzucco, second by Joel Larson

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