How Minnesota Orchestra took lead as Americas recording powerhouse

With most U.S. orchestras all but abandoning recording projects, the Minnesota Orchestra has become an unrivaled leader.

By Terry Blain Special to the Star Tribune

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A classical music legend walked into Orchestra Hall in downtown Minneapolis this summer, situating himself in a white-walled room near the main stage.

He brought an assortment of high-tech instruments including headphones, a laptop computer and a split-screen television, plus a modest pencil for note taking. And he wore an expression of intense focus while presiding over an event that has become virtually extinct in the United States: a full-scale studio recording session with a major orchestra.

The legend’s name is Robert Suff, artist and repertoire director at Sweden’s BIS Records. Suff has served as producer on more than 300 BIS recordings, working with a wide range of conductors and orchestras worldwide. He has worked with Minnesota Orchestra music director Osmo Vänskä on 60 recordings including the orchestra’s complete cycles of Beethoven and Sibelius symphonies. Now he’s doing the same with all 10 Mahler symphonies.

“I’ve been coming here so often, it feels like a second home,” Suff said at Orchestra Hall in June, in between recording sessions for Mahler’s Fourth Symphony. Five of the 10 symphonies have been recorded, with the Second up next for release in January 2019.
Suff first came to Minneapolis in 2004 to record Beethoven’s Fourth and Fifth symphonies with Vänskä and the orchestra. “Nobody was recording in America,” he remembered.

High recording costs were a factor. So, too, was the advent of online streaming services and their decimating effect on the classical recording industry.

Then something surprising happened. Suff’s recording with the Minnesota Orchestra earned rave reviews, becoming an international bestseller. It was followed by four more albums of the remaining symphonies, completing a cycle hailed by Gramophone magazine as “a Beethoven reforged for today’s world.”

After that came a complete recording of Sibelius’ symphonies — a Vänskä specialty — with one disc earning a 2014 Grammy for best orchestral performance.

No other American orchestra comes close to equaling the Minnesota Orchestra’s achievement as a recording powerhouse over the past quarter-century. Most orchestras in the U.S. are not recording at all or release only occasional live recordings, usually on in-house labels with zero support from major record companies.

‘An amazing recording orchestra’

How did the Minnesota-BIS team buck the trends? And how does it keep making successful recordings when other orchestras seem to find that impossible?

One answer is found in the BIS financial model. Back in the heyday of the classical recording industry — Suff places it in the late 1980s/early ‘90s — multinational companies including Deutsche Grammophon and Decca typically paid orchestras for recording, with the label earning back money via sales.

Then the age of Spotify and YouTube brought plummeting album sales. The Minnesota Orchestra still wanted to make a play for recording relevance. So it forged an innovative financial partnership with BIS, with the orchestra shouldering the upfront cost of paying musicians for hours worked on recording sessions (with a generous assist from donors).

Finances are just the beginning, though. For Suff, the Minnesota Orchestra’s ability to stay cool under pressure is crucial to the high artistic quality of the finished product. “It’s an amazing recording orchestra,” he said. “They have pride in their work, which translates into a positive attitude and friendly demeanor.”

That made a big difference over the 17 hours it took to complete a final version of Mahler’s hourlong Fourth Symphony last June.

“It makes my life much easier,” Suff remarked during those sessions. “It’s a relaxed atmosphere, which means nobody is feeling tense and pressurized. That pays in the quality of the music-making.”

Suff’s collaborations with Vänskä stretch back over 25 years, to when the Finnish maestro was chief conductor of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra. The landmark 68-CD Sibelius collection Vänskä recorded
with BIS in Lahti established the orchestra’s international reputation and cemented Suff’s high opinion of Vänskä’s ability.

Here in Minnesota, Suff has observed improvements under Vänskä’s direction. “When Osmo took over it was a great orchestra, but playing with slightly less focus on detail and precision.”

Vänskä has a way of coaxing better performances, Suff continued. “He also instilled in the players the stamina and concentration you need to make a good recording.”

‘No drama queens’

The admiration is mutual with these collaborators.

“Rob Suff is the best producer in the world,” Vänskä said this month in an interview at Orchestra Hall. “If you have a producer who is really hearing everything, it’s like a master class for the orchestra.”

That discerning ear was repeatedly called upon while recording the Mahler symphonies, which are longer and more instrumentally complex than those of Beethoven or Sibelius.

They’re also dramatic pieces, crammed with passionate content by a composer who once said that “a symphony must be like the world; it must embrace everything.” The temptation for a conductor is to go for broke emotionally, milking every last drop from the music.

But Vänskä’s way with Mahler is more nuanced and musically satisfying, Suff said. “Osmo holds all the elements in the right balance, I think. There’s no lack of emotion, but it’s much more subtle emotion, with fine gradations and shadings.”

Minnesota audiences can hear for themselves Friday and Saturday when the Minnesota Orchestra performs Mahler’s Seventh Symphony. Suff will again unpack his score and laptop the following Monday to record the orchestra’s rendition.

That leaves just four more Mahler symphonies for future seasons.

And then? Are there more BIS-Minnesota recording projects in the pipeline?

Neither Suff nor Vänskä knows for sure. All they know is that the Minnesota Orchestra has forged a special alchemy with BIS. Despite industry challenges, both are optimistic that their partnership will stretch into the future.

When the day comes, Vänskä is confident the Minnesota players will be ready. Recording sessions are “very intensive work,” he said.

“But I love the attitude of this orchestra. There are no drama queens. They are ready to do whatever is needed.”