HAVANA — They shimmied with dancers on stilts who greeted them in this old city, where book stalls sell comic-book retellings of the Cuban Revolution. Conservatory students welcomed them with flowers and chamber music. And when a band serenaded them at dinner, a few even got up and cha-chaed.

The Minnesota Orchestra arrived here in triumph this week as the first major orchestra from the United States to visit Havana since President Obama moved in December to start normalizing relations with Cuba. In doing so they beat some bigger rivals to the punch and took on the role of cultural ambassadors, much as the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra did in the 1970s with their performances in a newly open China.
The Minnesotans are at the vanguard of what is expected to be a flurry of cultural cross-pollination now that there are signs of a diplomatic thaw. The relationship has been a fraught one for more than a century — from the Spanish-American War and the American occupation that followed it to the revolution, the failed invasion by American-trained exiles at the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and decades of mutual distrust and enmity that now seems to be easing. As the orchestra arrived to play a pair of concerts here on Friday and Saturday, President Raúl Castro of Cuba announced that Cuba was ready to exchange ambassadors with the United States once it was formally removed from Washington’s list of states sponsoring terrorism.

While there has been a surprising amount of cultural exchange in recent decades despite the many diplomatic and practical obstacles (because of an embargo, American credit cards and cellphones still do not work here), much more is expected as hurdles fall. One high-profile event planned for the fall is an internationally televised concert pairing Lang Lang, the star Chinese concert pianist, with Chucho Valdés, the virtuosic Cuban pianist and a dean of Afro-Cuban jazz, backed by the National Symphony Orchestra of Cuba.

The Minnesota Orchestra’s trip was not only about building a bridge to America’s most distant neighbor, although that was very much on the program. It was also meant to proclaim to the world that the ensemble, which resumed playing last year after a 16-month lockout that rattled the classical music world, was, in the words of its music director, Osmo Vanska, “back in business.”

In addition to showing that the orchestra was dreaming big again, the trip demonstrated how an orchestra whose musicians, administration and board had seemed at war two years ago had reinvented itself and found peace — eating together, cheering one another, even dancing together.

The sense of optimism, about affairs both orchestral and international, was on display Thursday morning when the musicians visited music students at the Instituto Superior de Arte. A student trio performed some Max Bruch for the orchestra. Anthony Ross, the orchestra’s principal cellist, played the students a
Mark Summer piece that he said was popular with cello students in America. Then they broke up into small groups.

At a class on conducting, Mr. Vanska told one student, Giudel Gómez González, that his hands were “very natural,” and fielded questions from a recent graduate, Milva Cala Pino, who wanted advice on how to conduct Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring.”

For the Minnesota Orchestra, the Cuba trip was a return engagement of sorts. The orchestra toured there twice before the revolution, in 1929 and 1930, when it was known as the Minneapolis Symphony. When the musicians take the stage at the Teatro Nacional on Friday night, it will play Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony, which was also on the bill at its first concert here in 1929. (The concerts will be broadcast live on the radio in Cuba, and in Minnesota, and will be streamed live at YourClassical.org. And in this case, their diplomatic overture will include a real one: The concert is set to begin with Beethoven’s “Egmont” Overture.)

The last large American orchestra to appear in Cuba was the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, which played here in 1999. The New York Philharmonic considered a tour in 2009 and 2011, but never made it. After President Obama announced the most recent improvement in relations, Riccardo Muti, the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, said that he hoped his orchestra would be the first American ensemble to tour Cuba. But against all odds, the scrappy Minnesotans got there first.

The trip was the idea of Kevin Smith, the orchestra’s new president, who was brought on to heal wounds remaining after the lockout. The day after President Obama’s announcement, Mr. Smith said, he began trying to plan a trip, seeing it as a way to unify the orchestra and excite its fans.

“We’re not out to just re-establish where we were — where we were ended up in a bad place,” Mr. Smith said, explaining his decision to undertake the trip. “The organization had been a little battered and bruised — and not just the musicians but the entire organization, the board, the staff, the donors, the concertgoers, the subscribers, everybody had just felt a little rocked. All of a sudden this trip has galvanized the organization, and given everybody this sense of excitement and adventure and confidence that we can do anything.”

The trip came together in less than five months — a blink of an eye in classical-music time. The musicians, who had been scheduled to be off this week, agreed to work. Marilyn and Glen Nelson, longtime supporters of the orchestra, agreed to pay for the trip. Once the pieces were in place, the orchestra’s tour organizer, Classical Movements, had 110 days to make it happen.

The logistics were daunting. There was red tape to cut in both countries — including the Cuban visas they had to get as well as the need to comply with newly strict American rules about traveling with instruments that contain certain endangered woods or ivories, which led some players in the orchestra to make alterations to their instruments or bows.

And symphony orchestras do not pack light. The cargo that the Minnesotans had to fit into the belly of their chartered plane included eight double basses, two harps, some 30 violins, entire brass and
percussion sections, wardrobes full of concert wear and an acoustical shell made up of eight 250-pound sections that will help give the theater they are playing in more of a concert hall sound. First they tried to charter a Boeing 757, then a 767. In the end they had to charter an even bigger plane from Delta, an Airbus A330. Everything fit together, like a jigsaw puzzle.

As they flew south from Minneapolis on Wednesday, where it had been just 45 degrees that morning, Mr. Smith got on the plane’s public address system to lead the 100 musicians and the orchestra’s administrators, board members and support staff in a toast together — which in itself might have seemed improbable two years ago. “I wanted to welcome you to the Cuba tour,” he told them. “Believe it or not, we actually did it.”

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