Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra launch a Mahler cycle with Symphony No. 5

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With the conclusion of their outstanding series of Sibelius symphonies last year, I was eager to find out what Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra would tackle next, and now the answer has come: next week sees the first instalment in a cycle of Mahler symphonies, with the release of Symphony No. 5.

It's an auspicious start: with an opening trumpet fanfare of great depth and fearsome might, you know you're in for a performance full of drama and character. As a brass player myself, what pleased me was just how present the low brass are: there's a richness to the sound of the trombones and tuba, especially in the last movement, where they contribute so thrillingly to driving the piece to its joyous conclusion.

While in a few places this recording is arguably not quite as searingly white-hot in its intensity as some others, Vänskä’s more controlled approach pays enormous dividends at the climaxes, again helped hugely by fantastic brass: their chorales in the second and fifth movements blaze powerfully.

The Minnesota strings also excel themselves: in contrast to the radiant brass, there are some exquisite passages at the other extreme of volume, whether it be the mournful cello lament a third of the way through the second movement, or the almost impossibly quiet strings and harp at the end of the same movement.

The best-known movement of the symphony must surely be the fourth, the Adagietto. It has been subject to a huge number of interpretations, varying wildly in performance time (usually anywhere between nine and eleven minutes). While not the slowest on disc (in that respect he's beaten by Bernard Haitink and the Berlin Philharmonic, who clock in at a whopping fourteen minutes), at twelve and a half minutes Vänskä is certainly one of the most spacious, and yet the striking thing is that it never for one second seemed slow or plodding. He always gives the music a sense of purpose and direction, and the strings play with such conviction that it never felt as if it were about to grind to a halt.

For me, though, the real triumph is the central Scherzo, with a satisfying robustness to the sound of the horns. Of the six horn parts that this symphony requires, for this movement only Mahler numbers them not as One to Six, but as One to Five plus a corno obbligato, treated soloistically. Indeed, the player is sometimes asked to step out of the orchestra and stand at the front, concerto-like. I've no idea if horn player Michael Gast was actually asked to do so here, but even if not, Vänskä and the recording engineers between them have done a marvellous job of differentiating between him and the rest of the section. In their many back-and-forth phrases, he really does sound like a separate entity rather than just another voice among the section. There’s one particularly magical moment where the obbligato horn (played open and with the bell of the horn pointed up in the air) is immediately repeated by third horn, playing the same phrase, but hand-stopped. Not only does the difference in sonority create a spellbinding effect, on this recording there’s the most wonderful feeling of the phrase echoing back and forth across a great chasm.

I think this movement perfectly encapsulates Vänskä's approach in general: this is no delicate Viennese waltz but something more earthy. Of course there are also countless moments of refinement and beauty, but Vänskä doesn't shy away from the rougher, grittier passages. I’m told that Symphonies 6 and 2 are next in line to be released; after this opening instalment, I can hardly wait to hear them!