

# BLOOMINGTON STUDENTS CELEBRATE THEIR “OSMO CONCERT”

by Greg Granum

Annually, the Bloomington School District hosts the Bloomington Orchestra Festival, where student musicians from the fifth grade, through middle school and high school perform short programs for their parents and friends. The Bloomington Symphony Orchestra contributes to the Festival by performing a short “spectacular,” and the evening concludes with a Festival Orchestra finale. The Festival Orchestra is composed of the strings from the two Bloomington High Schools, playing “side-by-side” with the BSO strings, and the BSO brass/woodwinds — about 150 musicians.



The “twist” to this story is that Osmo Vänskä, Music Director of the Minnesota Orchestra (MO) and Musical America’s 2005 Conductor of the Year, participated in the 2006 Bloomington Orchestra Festival and conducted both the BSO (Shostakovich *Symphony No. 9*) and the Festival Orchestra (Beethoven *Egmont Overture*).

But I am getting ahead of the story.

In July of 2005, the BSO found itself without a Music Director, as Akira Mori left the University of Minnesota, and the BSO, for a new academic post at the University of Evansville (Indiana). The BSO formed a Music Director Search Committee, appointed Dr. Richard Sieber, formerly president of the American String Teachers Association (ASTA) as BSO Artistic Advisor and brought in an “all-star” line-up of guest conductors for the interim 2005–06 season. The guest conductors included: Dr. Steven Amundson (St. Olaf College & former BSO Music Director), Henry Charles Smith (former Associate Conductor — MO), William Schrickel (Assistant Conductor — MO), Mischa Santora (Associate Conductor — MO.) and Osmo Vänskä (Music Director — MO).

Maestro Vänskä’s busy schedule only afforded us an afternoon, day-of-concert

rehearsal, so a team approach was employed to prepare the BSO and the Festival Orchestra for the “Osmo Concert” as it came to be known. Mark Gitch, (BSO violinist and MNSOTA member), was assigned the task of keeping the BSO sharp on Shostakovich

9, (prepared for a mid-February concert with William Schrickel), and preparing the Festival Orchestra for our date with Osmo. Dr. Sieber contributed by conducting string sectionals during regular classroom hours with Andrew Bast’s Kennedy HS Orchestra

and Jeffrey Levine’s Jefferson HS Chamber Orchestra.

Days before the March 12<sup>th</sup> Festival Concert, I received a call from the MO that started with, “I have some good news and some bad news.” The “good news” was that Kurt Mazur had become ill and was unable to follow the London Philharmonic Orchestra on their American tour, and Osmo Vänskä had been selected as their substitute conductor. The “bad news” was.... (*I’m holding my breath, knowing what is sure to follow*).... Osmo would be leaving the London Philharmonic Orchestra in California on Sunday morning and should arrive in time for our late afternoon rehearsal and evening concert. (*exhale deeply!*)

Three points are worth noting:

- Provincial California papers reported, with obvious disdain, Maestro Vänskä was leaving the touring London Philharmonic Orchestra in California, for an Orchestra Festival in fly-over country. ...like, Where is that?? (They obviously don’t know that Bloomington is the home of an International Airport and the Mall of America, ... which annually draws more visitors than Disneyland!!)
- Local interests (esp. BSO membership) got quite a “kick” out of seeing Kurt

Mazur, Osmo Vänskä, The London Philharmonic, The Minnesota Orchestra, and the Bloomington Orchestra Festival mentioned in the same news story.

- Osmo Vänskä’s decision to return to Minnesota for this previous commitment says much about his character and the value he places on the educational outreach initiatives of the Minnesota Orchestra.

A personable Osmo arrived on schedule and lead a very educational rehearsal in preparation for a wonderful performance that evening.

Alice Seagren, State Commissioner of Education, introduced Maestro Vänskä to an appreciative audience and made the following comments:

- The State of Minnesota places emphasis on a well-rounded education by specifying that all graduating students complete at least one unit in an arts program (dance, music, theater, or visual arts). The Bloomington School District, as a relatively affluent and progressive community, offers all four artistic disciplines to their students.
- The MO reaches 80,000 young music lovers annually through its education and outreach activities across the State of Minnesota. These activities involve Young People’s Concerts, side-by-side rehearsals, the Adopt-a-School program, residencies throughout the state and numerous other programs.
- The MO has offered Young People’s Concerts since 1911, reaching generations of young people across the state. In the last decade alone, these concerts have reached half a million students, who have visited Orchestra Hall to hear a full concert by the Minnesota Orchestra.
- Osmo Vänskä has made education a priority during his tenure as Music Director. The MO devotes 11% of its annual operating budget to educational activities, and over

50% of MO musicians participate in Education/Outreach programs.

In closing, I'd like to share a few comments about the BSO and our educational out-reach efforts.

- Founded in 1963, the BSO performs about six concerts annually in the Bloomington and south metropolitan area. The BSO provides educational outreach activities in collaboration with the Bloomington School District's music programs and the orchestral programs of area colleges and universities. The BSO also provides community outreach activities through free public concerts, collaborations with other regional arts

organizations, senior citizen groups and with area youth groups.

- We partner with the state-wide Minnesota String and Orchestra Teacher Association (MNSOTA). The winner of the MNSOTA concerto competition is an annual featured soloist with the BSO, (usually at our February concert). In 2006, eleven-year-old Chad Hoopes from Lakeville performed the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with the BSO.
- At our April 2006 Season Finale' concert, the award-winning, 49-voice, women's choir VIVA VOCE (from Bloomington JFK HS) collaborated with the BSO on the mysterious (and wordless) *Song of the Sirens* in Debussy's Nocturnes. Other youth

choirs have collaborated with the BSO in prior seasons.

- Artistically, the BSO benefits from the State of Minnesota's commitment to the arts. The BSO is "the orchestra of choice" for many Twin Cities music educators to join and perform high quality music with their peers. At least a third of the BSO membership are current or former music educators.

"The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards."  
Anatole France

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