

Music Academy Festival Orchestra and Chorus

Conductor Osmo Vänskä –

From Here to Eternity

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

A NICOLA TESLA OF THE PODIUM, conducting energy instead of notes, allowing musical phrases to soar by not controlling them, Grammy winning Finnish conductor Osmo Vänskä led the Music Academy Festival Orchestra and Festival Chorus in an eclectic program last Saturday night at the Granada Theatre, in a performance that also electrified for its successful destruction of the bar line. Sometimes hard to follow, Vänskä's gestures and cues were more about endorphins than textbook technique. The conductor successfully convinced his colleagues in the orchestra to trust intuition and impulse, his and theirs, go out on more than a few musical limbs with him, and by taking such risks discover the magic and freedom of unbridled expression.

Music by Leonard Bernstein, the *Overture* to his 1956 operetta *Candide*; American composer Jessie Montgomery, the West Coast premiere of her *Hymn for Everyone*, which enjoyed its first performance by the Chicago Symphony this past April; and Gustav Holst's enduring masterpiece from 1914-1917, *The Planets*, Op. 32, found Vänskä's presence on stage – a roiling Delphic oracle – inspired and purposeful.

Conductor Laureate of the Minnesota Orchestra and now guest conductor to the world, Vänskä's is a technique that while often nearly incomprehensible to the eye, achieves stunning artistic result. This follower of Music Academy concerts since the early 1960s was reminded of the legendary conducting machinations of Maurice Abravanel. Vänskä like Abravanel, is all over the place between bar lines, often crashing into guardrails of structural order in the name of elastic phrasing. But when push comes to shove, those moments when an orchestra needs a traffic cop to keep it all together, Vänskä is crystal clear in his movements and focus, as was Abravanel.

From the opening fanfare of the *Overture to Candide* it was clear something different, even revelatory was afoot in Vänskä's interpretation of this popular concert opener. Fluid, textured, easy going in its various raptures and feints, the maestro's coaxing and shaping of the musical narrative was a symphony of intuitive movement liberated from strict stick technique. The orchestra in turn plunged into the deep end of nuance with their chief, and together they gave the full house at the Granada Theatre a truly rapturous and joyful performance.

American composer Jessie Montgomery is finishing her third and final year as the Mead Composer-in-Residence of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Her

Hymn for Everyone, premiered by the Chicago Symphony in April 2023 and receiving its West Coast premiere last Saturday, is the last of three commissions during her residency. A meditation on memory and loss, *Hymn for Everyone* is in the composer's own words, "a bit of a catharsis," created during the isolation of COVID and speaking to its aftershocks, while also reflecting on the death of Montgomery's mother in 2021.

Conducting this new work

with precise

due-diligence, Vänskä embraced and nurtured the low unison dirge that opens and sets the mood for all that follows. Montgomery's orchestrations invoke ecstasy as easily as atonement, particularly a few minutes into the piece, when the dark opening dirge becomes briefly ecstatic – fabulous messaging. Montgomery's subtle color constructs, including some fascinating unison instrumental pairings like high strings and tuba, reveals a keen understanding of musical color as psychological epiphany. *Hymn for Everyone* reaches a final breaking point – relentless dirge rhythms from a massive percussion battery, then softens to a clarinet meditation with other solo winds and strings, and softly out.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) began work on his seven-movement exploration of the inner and outer planets of our solar system, *The Planets*, Op. 32, in 1914 and somehow managed to complete the suite by 1917 while World War One raged around him. It should be no surprise *The Planets* is far more than its astronomical nomenclature. Maestro

Vänskä became, not to take this metaphor much further, a Tesla Coil of conducting energy and leadership from the first ominous drumbeats of *Mars*, straight through the gloriously achieved sirens (thanks, William Long, Festival Chorus chorumaster) of the final movement, *Neptune*.

Highlights: sonic thrills as only the Music Academy Festival Orchestra can muster, in an edge-of-seat performance of *Mars*, Vänskä winding up the tension and drama of *the Bringer of War* to near hysterical levels. We all loved it. A shimmering performance of the surreal second movement, *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*; a superbly conducted and masterfully executed performance of the lively third movement, *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*; a lovingly conducted fourth movement, *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity* with its always moving anthem, now Britain's national hymn, *I Vow to Thee, My Country*; the stunning power of Vänskä's body movements, oozing rhythm and energy even in stasis, during *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*; the fabulous musical storytelling of *Uranus, the Magician*; and as mentioned earlier, the mystical allure of eternity as beautifully realized by the backstage chorus in *Neptune, the Mystic*.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews or Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.



Conductor Osmo Vänskä



American composer Jessie Montgomery



The Academy Festival Orchestra under the baton of Conductor Osmo Vänskä

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