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music

Minnesota Orchestra will tour Cuba in May

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The orchestra hasn't been to the country since 1930.



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Osmo Vanska conducts the Minnesota Orchestra, which will be the first U.S. orchestra to perform in Cuba.

Photo: **BRIAN PETERSON**, Star Tribune

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The Minnesota Orchestra will be the first U.S. orchestra to perform in Cuba, beating out several major rivals for the honor, following President Obama's bid to normalize relations.

CEO and President Kevin Smith told musicians shortly before a Thursday morning concert that the ensemble would play two concerts at the Cubadisco Festival in mid-May.

"The musicians were giddy with excitement," Smith said. "It's an exciting morale-builder for the organization."

The tour continues a string of positive news for the orchestra, which is in its first full season back after a 16-month lockout and a few years of severe budget deficits.

“If this doesn’t show the world that we’re roaring back on the world stage, nothing does,” said Doug Wright, principal trombone and labor bargainer. “We’re breaking new ground.”

Musicians agreed to push back a scheduled week of vacation in May to play the festival.

“We’re looking at ways of breaking the mold,” Smith said of the musicians’ flexibility. “We want to be dynamic, faster than other orchestras, because as you know concerts are scheduled years in advance.”

Several U.S. orchestras had expressed interest in going to Cuba, now that relations are easing. Riccardo Muti, music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, has said publicly on several occasions that he wanted his orchestra to be the first in Cuba.

“To my knowledge, no one other than the Minnesota Orchestra has received a formal invitation,” said Smith. “We just kind of got there first in terms of making the contact and receiving the invitation.”

That, and Minnesota has some history with Cuba. The [Minneapolis](#) Symphony Orchestra played there in 1929 and 1930 on tours to Havana.

“That resonated with us and the Cuban representatives — that we’re going back to Cuba,” Smith said. He believes that the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra was the last major U.S. orchestra to visit Cuba, in the 1990s.

The orchestra will play Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, the “Eroica,” which was played in the 1929 tour. Also on the program is Beethoven’s Choral Fantasy with the Cuban National Choir and Cuban pianist Frank Fernández.

The itinerary calls for the orchestra to travel on May 13, have a day to rehearse, perform on the 15th and 16th and return to Minnesota the following day. Also planned are community engagement projects in Havana.

Nelson gift a key

“This is a real coup,” said Dick Cisek, a former Minnesota Orchestra executive who is a long-standing board member of the League of American Orchestras.

Marilyn Carlson Nelson and her husband, Glen, are funding the tour. Nelson, chairwoman of Carlson Cos., is a lifetime director on the orchestra board.

“Nothing succeeds like success and this will help the whole community recognize that this orchestra has so much to offer,” she said. “We feel that to accept this invitation does wonderful things for our state.”

She said the donation was personal, not a part of Carlson’s corporate giving. The company operates the Radisson Hotels chain, among other properties. Several hotel companies, including Marriott and Hilton, have expressed interest in doing business in Cuba.

The gift, said Glen Nelson, lets the orchestra avoid paying for the tour out of operating funds. “We need to focus on returning the orchestra to fiscal balance,” he said.

Classical Movements, a Virginia-based company, handled discussions with Cuba on behalf of the orchestra. The company has arranged musical tours to the nation for more than 18 years.

Paula DeCosse, co-founder of the citizens group Orchestrate Excellence, said some supporters have inquired about joining the trip. But DeCosse noted there are many questions regarding travel to Cuba.

The International Cubadisco Festival is preparing for its 19th year.

Music Director Osmo Vänskä noted that much in the world has changed since the orchestra first performed in Havana 86 years ago.

“What has remained constant is the power of this music to affect and build bonds between audiences and performers,” he said in a statement.

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