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By [Anne Midgette](#) February 12



The Capitol building in Havana, Cuba, where the Minnesota Orchestra has just announced that it will perform two concerts in May — the first American orchestra to do so since the relaxing of travel restrictions between the two countries was announced in January. (Photo by Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

The Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vänskä, its music director, announced today that it will travel to Cuba for two performances in Havana this spring. Playing on May 15 and 16 as part of the [CubaDisco Festival](#), the country's biggest music festival, the orchestra will be the first major American classical music ensemble to perform there since President Obama announced the start of more normalized relations with the country in January.

The trip marks a striking return to the limelight for an orchestra that only a year ago was [emerging from the longest lockout in American orchestral history](#), with serious questions about its future. It is all the more fitting since the Minnesota Orchestra's first-ever international performances were in Cuba in 1929 and 1930. The program will include Beethoven's Third, which the orchestra played in Havana on its first trip there. The orchestra will also perform Beethoven's Choral Fantasy with the Cuban National Choir.



Osmo Vanska, the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra, rehearses with the group last year. The orchestra has just announced that it will perform in Cuba in May. (Photo by Jenn Ackerman for The Washington Post)

The tour is being arranged by [Classical Movements](#), the Alexandria-based concert tour agency and presenter which has made something of a specialty of Cuban travel over the last 18 years, bringing ensembles to and from the country despite the travel restrictions that necessitated special permission through the U.S. Treasury Department. (Classical Movements is presenting

the Cuban chorus [Camerata Vocale Sine Nomine in Washington, DC](#) on February 21st.)

Obama's announcement in January triggered a veritable horse race among orchestras eager to be the first to take advantage of the newly relaxed travel regulations. In January, while announcing the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's 2015-16 season, Riccardo Muti, the orchestra's music director, made it clear that [he wanted Chicago to be the first orchestra to play in Cuba](#) during this new era.

Neither orchestra would be the first professional American orchestra to play under the Castro regime: [the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra made a two-day trip to Cuba](#) in 1999. The New York Philharmonic went quite far into the planning stages of two separate Cuba trips, in [2009](#) and [2011](#), neither of which was able to be realized.

Minnesota brought the whole trip together at lightning speed. Neeta Helms, the president of Classical Movements, says that they were initially approached about the idea only 24 days before the announcement.

The orchestra's President and CEO, Kevin Smith, said in a press statement, "We are honored to have received this invitation from the Cuban Ministry of Culture. In the orchestral world, the logistics of scheduling frequently make it challenging to move quickly, but our musicians have embraced the possibility of giving these performances with great flexibility on a short time scale and offered to postpone a vacation week in order to take advantage of an incredible opportunity."