

MUSIC

After Cuba and South Africa, next stop for Minnesota Orchestra is Vietnam

It was invited to perform in Hanoi for the 25th anniversary of restored diplomatic relations. It also will play South Korea for the first time.

By Jenna Ross (<http://www.startribune.com/jenna-ross/10645826/>) Star Tribune |

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After high-profile [trips to Cuba](http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-orchestra-goes-to-cuba/303602531/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-orchestra-goes-to-cuba/303602531/>) and [South Africa](http://www.startribune.com/follow-minnesota-orchestra-s-first-of-its-kind-tour-to-south-africa/488534621/) (<http://www.startribune.com/follow-minnesota-orchestra-s-first-of-its-kind-tour-to-south-africa/488534621/>), the Minnesota Orchestra announced Thursday its next destinations: Vietnam and South Korea.

The June 2020 tour is inspired by two events — one political and one personal: the 25th anniversary of restored diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, and maestro [Osmo Vänskä's new post](http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-orchestra-maestro-osmo-vanska-to-also-lead-seoul-philharmonic/509373812/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-orchestra-maestro-osmo-vanska-to-also-lead-seoul-philharmonic/509373812/>) as music director of the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra.

The orchestra will play at least four times in Vietnam, including performances in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and once in Seoul.

"This idea of really engaging in each of the cities where we perform has become a hallmark of this orchestra," said orchestra president Michelle Miller Burns.

Its work with young musicians and community members, especially in Cuba and South Africa, is part of what inspired the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam to invite the orchestra for the anniversary celebration, she said. "We have become known for our engagement work as part of our touring."

The Minnesota Orchestra has never been to Vietnam or South Korea. "It's uncharted territory for us," Burns said. "It's exciting."

But other major orchestras have. In 2009, the New York Philharmonic performed in Hanoi, then a rare stop for U.S. orchestras, as part of an Asian tour. The London Symphony Orchestra has played in Hanoi in each of the last three years. Its 2019 tour also included concerts in Hong Kong and China.

"No orchestra has done the amount of collaborations and exchanges we're planning," said Neeta Helms, president of Classical Movements, the touring company that worked with the Minnesota Orchestra on its 2015 tour of Cuba and 2018 trip to South Africa. The Virginia-based company, which will act as creative adviser for Vietnam, is whittling the list of possible cities in which the orchestra might perform.

"A major challenge will be to choose finally which cities to go to," Helms said via e-mail from Vietnam. "In some cases they will be the first American orchestra to visit those cities."

A tour to Vietnam must be sensitive to the "tortured history" between the two counties, she said. "While we never dwell on the past, we are careful to remember and navigate properly on behalf of our clients and always insist on looking forward together."

How the trip came about

Burns said the orchestra had considered Vietnam and South Korea as potential tour targets for some time.



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Osmo Vänskä led the Minnesota Orchestra in Soweto in 2018. The orchestra performed in Regina Mundi Church as part of tour of South

"Vietnam has always felt like a natural fit to us," she said, because of Minnesota's large population of Southeast Asian immigrants. After Vänskä's appointment to the Seoul post in May, "the idea of bringing those two opportunities together in a single tour seemed really attractive."

The U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Daniel Kritenbrink, extended a formal invitation to the orchestra to perform in Hanoi as part of a celebration that includes a conference and a gala. "The progress our countries have made in the last 25 years has been nothing short of astounding," he wrote, "and we wish to use this anniversary to highlight the progress in all aspects of our relationship — political, military, economic, and cultural."

"Importantly, the orchestra can bring American musical excellence not only to grand performance halls, but also to smaller communities throughout Vietnam."

The tour will be a crowning event of Vänskä's final years as music director. His final season in Minnesota will be 2021-22.

"Music has the extraordinary capacity to bring cultures together and to create understanding between people," he said in a statement Thursday. "Our tours to Cuba and South Africa have been a very meaningful part of my tenure with the Minnesota Orchestra. ... It will be an honor to represent the U.S. and perform in Vietnam, and I'm personally so gratified I'll have the opportunity to introduce the Minnesota Orchestra to South Korean audiences."

Classical Movements is planning to commission a new work for the tour by a Vietnamese composer, Burns said. The concert at Lotte Concert Hall in Seoul, which kicks off the tour June 24, will include Finnish composer Jean Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 and Edvard Grieg's popular Piano Concerto, performed at the orchestra's season opener this fall.

Two days later, the orchestra will perform at the 600-seat Hanoi Opera House, which was completed in 1911 during French colonial rule and modeled after the Paris Opera.

As they have in Cuba and South Africa, the orchestra's musicians will work with students in side-by-side rehearsals and intimate sectionals. More details will be announced this winter.

The cost of the tour is still being totaled, Burns said. The 11-day, five-concert tour to South Africa cost about \$2.5 million, most of it covered by a donation from an anonymous donor.

For next year's tour, board member Kathy Cunningham and her husband Charlie have given a "lead gift." The nonprofit is committed to covering the cost of the tour through such gifts, Burns said.

Just before starting as CEO, Burns trekked with the orchestra to South Africa last year alongside her predecessor, Kevin Smith, who was wrapping up his time in that role. She saw how that tour energized people within the organization and the broader community.

"It is a way to serve our artistic mission and really bring out the best in our organization."

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