

Rinaldo Handel

ESTONIAN NATIONAL OPERA
TALLINN

Music ★★★★★

Staging ★★★★★

Review by Della Couling
Photography by Harri Rospu


Adapted from Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata*, this was the first opera premiered in London by the young Handel in 1711. As was the convention of the time, the work had to be yanked round, however improbably, to provide a Happy End. This was addressed with directorial flare and wit in Tallinn.

In a work dealing with the Crusades, an upbeat conclusion to the story could present a problem. The British team of director William Relton, set designer Cordelia Chisholm and lighting designer Johanna Town, confronted this by injecting a good dose of British humour into the proceedings. The Crusaders were in the tropical uniforms of the British Empire, complete with pith helmets, downing whisky in a crisis, and tea when things turned out well. At the Happy End, the Saracen King Argante and the sorceress Armida (his lover), having seen reason and become Christian, also join their erstwhile enemies in a cup of tea.

Relton entered very dangerous waters by having a large contingent of children as servants, prop providers and then, at the end, silently acting out the battle, resulting in the deaths of all on both sides, while their leaders drink their celebratory cuppa. Point taken.

There was a lot of business with ladders: a backdrop of a game board dotted with ladders – no snakes! – conveyed the idea of chance (belied somewhat by the inevitability of the Christian triumph). The children were impressively well drilled and totally professional.

Monika-Evelin Liiv in the title role is now a world-class mezzo offering scrupulous

musicality and a fine technique, though she needs to loosen up her acting. Mata Turi as Goffredo, the Christian leader, and Mart Madiste as his brother Eustazio, sang and acted with gusto, skirting dangerously close to a Laurel and Hardy routine, helped by their contrasting physique. Helen Lapalaan, in the gratifying role of the sorceress Armida, sang and acted with aplomb. Rauno Elp thoroughly enjoyed himself as the Saracen king Argante (yet another meaty part for a baddie). Conductor Andres Mustonen threw his usual energetic weight into leading the orchestra, while never drowning the singers. 

The Empire strikes back:
a very British *Rinaldo* in Tallinn



KEN HOWARD