

MUSICIANS FACE THE CHALLENGE OF THE 20th CENTURY

Continued from page 1

If it was hard for singers to adapt to what, loosely speaking, is a modern opera, then how much more difficult it is going to be for Estonia's audiences. Fifty years of isolation from the experimentation that has been taking place on the free side of the iron curtain have taken a toll and, as Neeme Kuningas says, "our traditions are thin". The singers and orchestra had such trouble in mastering Britten's teasing rhythms and melodies that the production of this glorious com-

edy had to be delayed from the planned opening in May to the autumn start.

Setting the opera repertoire used to be a simple business. Moscow dictated the priorities and the Estonians chose the works, rather as one might colour in a picture after the lines have been drawn: "First, an Estonian contemporary opera, then a Russian classic, then an opera from a brotherly nation, then a Soviet opera; and finally, a Western opera. Then the

cycle began again." Although the ideology behind the choices has changed, something of the old methods of creating a repertoire still clings, and this holds back Estonia Opera from the flexible development that Neeme Kuningas, one of its younger directors, would like to see.

The opera house currently carries a repertoire of over 30 works, which is too large. "Our singers are not made of rubber," comments Mr Kuningas.

Also, the method is double, and even triplicate, forces singers into a situation which they are not necessarily the best interpreters. Casting creates other problems, such as the tensions involved in being cast with whom gets the first night. The poor security net: the time when all five Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* were cast at the same time, when the singers don't seem to find they are not understood. *Albert Herring*.

"I want to see a situation where there are fewer parts, fewer mances in blocks with the same cast," says Kuningas. The repertoire to be more democratic, to include more of the 19th century opera, more contemporary. First, we have to establish a company. Mozart, Verdi are a walkover. Shostakovitch is a challenge. Twentieth century opera is a wonderful school for the conductor.

Peeter Lilje, one of the conductors of *Albert Herring*, is also relieved to move into the 19th century. "I find it where I can discover something. In Verdi, there's no need for the conductor to pose, as Berlioz, however, leaves the conductor to impose his result, something Verdi does."

But what about the 20th century? There were a lot of seats for the Benjamin Britten and amongst those who were there, two nonplussed from the American side. "We were raised on Verdi," said one. As a non-Estonian speaker



Neeme Kuningas (right) and Peeter Lilje meditate over how to reconcile their ambition of staging 20th century opera with their audiences' love of the 19th

ESTONIANS FACE THE CHALLENGE OF THE 20th CENTURY

edy had to be delayed from the planned opening in May to the autumn start.

Setting the opera repertoire used to be a simple business. Moscow dictated the priorities and the Estonians chose the works, rather as one might colour in a picture after the lines have been drawn: "First, an Estonian contemporary opera, then a Russian classic, then an opera from a brotherly nation, then a Soviet opera; and finally, a Western opera. Then the

cycle began again." Although the ideology behind the choices has changed, something of the old methods of creating a repertoire still clings, and this holds back Estonia Opera from the flexible development that Neeme Kuningas, one of its younger directors, would like to see.

The opera house currently carries a repertoire of over 30 works, which is too large. "Our singers are not made of rubber," comments Mr Kuningas.

Also, the method of running double, and even triple casting, forces singers into roles for which they are not necessarily the best interpreters. Multiple casting creates other problems, such as the tensions as to who is cast with whom, and who gets the first night. It is also a poor security net: there was a time when all five Tatanas for *Eugene Onegin* were off sick at the same time, whereas singers don't seem to fall ill when they are not understudied, as in *Albert Herring*.

"I want to see a smaller repertoire, fewer parts, and performances in blocks with a single cast," says Kuningas. "I want the repertoire to be elastic and democratic, to include the best of 19th century opera and far more contemporary works. First, we have to educate our company. Mozart, Rossini and Verdi are a walkover after music by Shostakovitch or Stravinsky. Twentieth century opera is a wonderful school for singers."

Peeter Lilje, one of the two conductors of *Albert Herring*, is also relieved to move out of the 19th century. "I like scores where I can discover something. In Verdi, there's nothing much for the conductor to do. A composer such as Benjamin Britten, however, leaves room for the conductor to influence the result, something Verdi never does."

But what about the audiences? There were a lot of empty seats for the Benjamin Britten, and amongst those who were there, two nonplussed tourists from the American Mid West may not have been untypical. "We were raised on *Oklahoma*," said one. As they were non-Estonian speakers as well,

they were unable to pick up on either the humour in the production or in Britten's score.

Britten is a master at creating atmosphere but it takes experience for the ear to hear the richness of the music, the festive, nervy scenic painting, and the vocal lines that allow the singers to develop unique characters. "Estonia Theatre has done so few operas written in this century that the audiences are not used to it," admits Kuningas. "As theatre professionals, we want to do more interesting music. But we also want all people to come to the theatre, and audiences want melodic music."

The coming season will appeal to all because it offers the golden oldies of the 19th century, *Bohème*, *Barber of Seville* and *Don Carlos*, together with the Waltz King's *Wiener Blut* and two great American twentieth century works aimed at the mass audience and written in the tradition of musical comedy, Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* and Cole Porter's *Can Can*.

At what point Peeter Lilje, Neeme Kuningas and their colleagues embark on the contemporary works pouring out of England and America, remains to be seen. Today's operas tend to have the advantages that drove both to pick the Benjamin Britten: "a small cast, a small orchestra, and no chorus" - economic reality has begun to bite. Producers now have to pay royalties, which wasn't always the case before. "It's one of our biggest problems, how to get onto the train of European culture, when we have to pay royalties" says Mr Kuningas.



Peeter Lilje meditate over how to reconcile their ambition of staging audiences' love of the 19th