

Estonia 'Herring' goes east

Tallinn

A great deal has happened in Estonia since Arthur Jacobs reported on his visit to Tallinn in March 1990 (see OPERA, June 1990, pp. 665–8). At that time, Estonia was still part of the USSR. Since then, it has declared independence and the USSR has ceased to exist. Estonia today is once again a democracy, making an at times uncomfortably rapid transition to the market economy.

How has opera in Tallinn been affected by these events? To the casual eye, little may seem to have changed. The ESTONIA THEATRE continues to give nightly performances (and some matinees) of a wide repertory of opera, operetta, musicals, and ballet. Programmes now include synopses and brief notes in English. The theatre itself remains unchanged: a dignified building with a plain but comfortable auditorium seating 700. Ticket prices have risen from the heavily subsidised levels of Soviet times, but still seem ludicrously low to the visitor. Opera is given two or three times a week, usually in Estonian, either in the main house or in more intimate fashion amidst the greenery and café tables of the Winter Gardens that form part of the same complex. During a visit in April this year I saw *Albert Herring* and Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in the main house, and Paisiello's version of *Il barbiere*, in a chamber version with minimal staging and accompanied only by string quartet and harpsichord, in the Winter Gardens. With a permanent company there is the pleasure of seeing the same singers in different (sometimes very different!) roles on different evenings. Mati Kõrts, who took the title role in *Albert Herring*, appeared later in the week as Almaviva in the Rossini, while the Miss Wordsworth, Kai Parmas, appeared the very next evening as Rosina in the Paisiello version.

At the level of organization, there have been great changes, the most important of which has been the ending of the Moscow-imposed quota system which was such a brake on innovative repertory planning. Now that the theatre has a free hand, the overall mood is one of new repertory to be explored, ground to be made up, and links with the West to be developed and consolidated. Predictably, shortage of money is hampering these moves toward innovation. Estonia has emerged into independence as a nation with severe financial problems, a weak currency and high inflation. There are very many urgent calls on public funds, and the Estonia Theatre receives only a small amount of state support. At the individual level, most people are worse off, and this combined with increased ticket prices has had an adverse effect on attendances. Finally, in a scenario which can be paralleled elsewhere in Estonian life and throughout the countries of the former USSR and Soviet bloc, the weakness of the currency makes it expensive to engage foreign artists and difficult to keep local ones (particularly orchestral players) from moving to more lucrative positions abroad.

Despite these difficulties, policy in this busy and hard-working company is determinedly innovative and outward-looking, in a manner very characteristic of Estonian attitudes generally. Plans for next season include *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, and the presence of *Albert Herring* in this season's programme is further evidence of a particular interest in British repertory. Largely because of the strength of the local choral tradition, Britten is the best known British 20th-century composer in Estonia, but (apart from a production of *Let's Make an Opera* in 1977), *Herring* is the only one of his operas to have been performed there. It was a good choice for the company. Despite its intense Englishness, much of its humour seems (as far as I was able to tell) to survive translation, and I am told that a good deal of amusement is to be had from comparisons between some of its characters and some prominent figures in Estonian public life. A few bizarre touches apart, this was an intelligent and effective production, sensitive to the changes of tone and the frequent use of parody in Britten's score. The style of the sets and costumes avoided slavish realism in favour of exaggeration and caricature, and the performance I attended was strongly sung and acted throughout, with a particularly pleasing contribution from Mati Kõrts's Albert.

PHILIP OLLESON

Estonia Herring läheb itta

Sellest ajast saadik kui Arthur Jacobs kirjutás oma külaskäigust Tallinna märtsis 1990 (Opera, juuni 1990, lk. 665-8), on Eestis juhtunud palju. Sel ajal oli Eesti veel osa NL-st. Nüüdseks on Eesti saanud iseseisvaks ja NL on lakanud eksisteerimast. Eesti on taas demokraatlik maa, elades läbi kohati ebamugavalt kiiret üleminekuaega turumajandusele.

Kuidas on need sündmused mõjutanud ooperit Tallinnas? Esmapilgul näib üsna vähe muutunud olevat. Estonia teater jätkab igaõhtuste etenduste andmist(lisaks mõned päevased etendused) oma laiast ooperi, opereti, muusikali ja balletti repertuaarist. Kavalehtedes on nüüd ka lühikesed sisuseletused ja kommentaarid inglise keeles. Teater ise on jäänud muutumatuks: väärkas maja lihtsa kuid mugava saaliga, mis mahutab 700 vaatajat. Pileti hinnad on nõukogude aegsete madalate hindadega võrreldes tõusnud, siiski naeruväärselt madalad külastajale. Ooperit mängitakse 2-3 korda nädalas, enamasti eesti keeles, kas suurel laval või intiimsemal moel roheluse ja kohvikulaudade keskel Talveaias, mis asub samas majas. Minu külaskäigul Tallinna selle aasta aprillis nägin ma teatri suurel laval "Albert Herringut" ja Rossini "Sevilla habemeajaja" etendust ning Talveaias Paisiello "Sevilla" kammerlikku versiooni, minimaalse dekoratsiooniga keelpillikvarteti ja klavessiini saatel.

Püsiva trupi olemasolu andis meeldiva võimaluse näha samu lauljaid erinevates (mõnikord väga erinevates!) rollides erinevatel öhtutel. Mati Kõrts "Albert Herringu" nimiosas esines samal nädalal Almavivana Rossini ooperis, Miss Wordsworth, Kai Parmas, laulis aga juba järgmisel

Organisatsiooni tasemel on teatris toimumud suured muudatused, kõige tähtsam vast Moskva-diktaadi ISEPP ja uus, kaasaegne repertuaari planeerimise süsteem. Nüüd, kus teatril on vabad käed, püütakse luua baasi olemuselt täiesti uuele repertuaarile, samuti luua ja süvendada sidemeid läänega. Mõistagi on rahapuudus see, mis takistab liikumist uuenduste suunas. Eesti saavutatud iseseisvus on kaasa toonud tõsised finantsprobleemid, nõrga valuuta ja kõrge inflatsiooni. Tihti tuleb pöörduda abi saamiseks fondide poole, riigilt saab Estonia Teater ainult väga väikest toetust. Indiviidi tasandil elab enamus inimesi väga halvasti ning see asjaolu koos kallite piletihindadega on mõjutanud ebasoodsalt teatri külastatavust.

Lõpetuseks, stsenaarium, mis on vñrreldav kñgil elualadel nii Eestis kui kñgis endistes NSV Liidu ja Nñoukogude bloki riikides ja nõrk valuuta teevad raskeks ka välisartistide palkamise ning oma muusikute hoidmisse (eriti orkestrantide) minemast tulusamale tööle välismaal. Vaatamata nendele raskustele on õhkkond selles toimekas ja töökas kollektiivis kindlalt uuendusi soosiv ja väljaspoole vaatav, mis on iseloomulik eestlaste suhtumisele üldse. Järgmise hooaja plaanis olev "Mees, kes pidas oma naist kübaraks" ja selle hooaja Albert Herring annavad tunnistust jätkuvast huvist Briti repertuaari vastu. Suuresti tänu kohalikule koorilaulu traditsioonile, on Britten kñgi enam tuntud 20.sajandi inglise helilooja Eestis, kuid (arvestamata "Let's Make an Opera" produktsiooni 1977.aastal) Herring on ainuke tema ooper, mida siin on mängitud. See oli kollektiivi jaoks hea valik. Vaatamata selle ooperi tugevale inglise-pärasusele, on suur osa huumorist (nii palju kui ma aru sain) ka läbi tõlke säilinud ja nagu mulle räägit, pakkus meeleshutust ka võimalus võrrelda mitmeid karaktereid prominentsete figuuridega kaasaegsest Eesti elust. Kui kõrvale jäätta mõningad veidrad momendid, võib öelda, et see oli igati intelligentne ja efektne lavastus, tundlik toonimuutustele ja tihedale paroodiakasutusele Britteni partituuris. Lavakujunduse ja kostüümide stilis välitis slaavipärist realismi, soosides lialdust ja karikatuuri, ja etendus, mida ma nägin, oli tugev nii vokaalselt kui ka mänguliselt, millele oma eriti meeldiva panuse andis Mati Kõrtsi Albert.

PHILIP OLLESON
Tõlkinud Ene Jürna

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