

Tallinn celebrates its prima donna theatre

Of the three Baltic capitals, Riga has probably done the most to let the world know about its opera company. But it shouldn't be allowed to eclipse the others. A new production of Carl Orff's *Die Kluge* supplied the pretext for a visit to the Estonian National Opera in Tallinn – the other ENO – where the season runs from August to June and performances sometimes number more than 30 a month, including ballet and children's performances. Not bad for country of only 1m inhabitants.

The strong Estonian economy allows the government to provide 80 per cent of budget. And while the theatre may not be the gem that Riga's is, it is special enough. The 700-seat theatre forms part of an imposing two-hall complex (the other half is used for concerts) which was built nearly a century ago. The complex has a special place in the hearts of Estonians, because in 1919 the legislative assembly of a newly independent Estonia met there following Lenin's uncharacteristically magnanimous decision to allow people rights of self-determination. Bombed by the Russians in 1944 when Estonia was under German occupation, it was rebuilt by the Soviets but at the loss of much of its art-nouveau detail. It will soon undergo renovations primarily for structural and technical reasons, but it would be a pity if efforts weren't also made to restore something of

its original appearance.

Die Kluge is part of a theme emphasising independent-minded women, which will culminate in May with a festival called *Prima la Donna* that will also include *The Merry Widow*, *Salome*, and Falla's *La vida breve*, plus the ballets *Cassandra* and *Anna Karenina* (to music by Marco Schiavoni and Rodion Shchedrin) – no shrinking Puccini heroines here. The "Clever Girl" of Orff's opera, based on a fairytale by the brothers Grimm, is a peasant whose intelligence leads the King to ask for her hand. But when she gives advice to the loser in a dispute over a donkey, which the King had adjudicated, he denounces her for undermining his authority and sends her away. Told she may take her favourite possessions with her in a trunk, she prepares a final meal for the King, drugs him and packs him in the trunk. When he awakes, they reconcile.

Die Kluge premiered in Frankfurt in 1943 and thus ranks as one of the very few notable operas to come out of Nazi Germany. After the war Orff was the subject of denazification proceedings which ended in his favour, but questions about his Nazi leanings persist, and it has even been suggested that some works trumpet a Nazi propagandistic theme. If there is any evidence in *Die Kluge* to support this, it was lost on me. In fact, the opera's exaltation of reason

over authority seems quite un-Nazi-like. And the simple textures of Orff's music, with its bright melodies and insistent rhythms, contribute to an overall impression of *Die Kluge* as an appealing, if rather slight (80 minutes plus an interval), opera whose primary purpose is to divert.

Neeme Kuningas, who is also the ENO's artistic director, gave the opera a smart-looking, updated production that made the King into a kind of Wizard of Oz who makes his pronouncements via his own TV channel. Hardi Volmer's sets, consisting largely of a scrapheap of old appliances, were perhaps meant to suggest the dangers of over-reliance on technology but in any case allowed the story to unfold clearly.

Margit Saulep brought an attractive, soft-grained soprano and fine stage presence to the title role. Väino Puura's baritone was amplified, apparently to give the King more booming presence, but it certainly didn't need it. The promising young tenor Urmas Poldma sang with sweet lyricism as the donkey owner. And as the Girl's father, the bass Teo Maiste sang strongly in the opera's opening monologue. The conductor Aivo Välja upheld fine orchestral standards in a theatre where Neemi Järvi and Eri Klas were once musical directors.

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