

ESTONIA

In review:
ESTONIAN NATIONAL THEATRE
TALLINN

Ernani Verdi
Don Giovanni Mozart
Carmen Bizet

Ernani is something of a rarity in the Baltic States, although it was staged in Tallinn (then known as Reval) as early as 1860 in a theatre sadly no longer standing. The Estonian National Theatre production was its first contemporary staging here and the background to the production was apparently fraught, due to budget problems. As a result, the production team of Reili Evert (costumes) and Liina Keevallik (Sets) were forced to compromise.

Yet the solution was both striking and apposite. Taking the visual style of Goya as a starting point, the opera was staged with dramatic, richly coloured back projections with well-chosen foreground props and minimum furnishings. It was highly effective and one never felt anything was lacking in the staging. The direction of Arne Mikk, however, was too static – and the opera is already static enough! What acting there was rendered the drama in a rather muted and stagnant manner, which was a pity. I could not decide whether this was because Mikk wanted to stage the work as a series of tableaux – as if we were watching a painted landscape, which slowly changed – or if it was a deficiency in performance.

The eponymous hero was sung by a guest, Oleg Orlov, a strident Latvian-born Russian tenor, who clearly did not know the part well enough and demonstrated vocal insecurity throughout. The Don Carlo was a strong, if unsubtle baritone Aare Saal, although the high notes were all there and he sang the big monologue in front of

HARRI ROSPU



Riina Airene as Carmen
in the Estonian National
Theatre's unusual
production

only one of the most charming and stylish traditional productions of the work that I have ever seen anywhere, but to find it decently sung by a young and talented cast, that made up for what it lacked in experience with a freshness and enthusiasm that truly sparkled.

Let us start with the set. A simple yet highly effective solution was found to the many scene changes by an elegant rectangular classical pavilion, placed on a revolve, with four contrasting sides that incorporated various stairways and balconies, yet retained the three-dimensional depth to the opposite walls, all fully built on both sides. It was tremendously effective, beautifully lit and completely appropriate. The designer of the set and costumes was Anna Kontek, from Finland and she is to be congratulated, as is Neeme Kuningas, who directed. The production drew out all of the humour and irony of Da Ponte's libretto, without obtrusive over emphasis. Throughout, the story was well told, and easy to follow. How often can one say that these days? The Act I finale in particular was especially well handled.

Musically, everything was consistent and the largely Estonian cast was exceptionally well matched. Of the women, the Donna Anna (Valentina Taluma) and the Zerlina (Kristina Vähli) were both outstanding, with Ms Vähli in particular possessing a

Carmen is actually quite hard to get wrong. It has a foolproof libretto that is wonderfully constructed. Musically, it is one of the most tuneful operas in the repertoire, which is why it was so easily transmogrified into the hit musical *Carmen Jones*. And it is known the world over, thanks to the various orchestral suites and arrangements that have made its melodies so familiar – even behind the former 'Iron Curtain'!

The Estonia National Theatre therefore probably felt it had a sure-fire hit on its hands. Certainly the colourful costumes and excellent chorus and orchestra, ably conducted by one of the theatre's most promising younger talents, Aivo Valja, meant that as a whole, the right flavour at least, was captured for this most exotic score.

Ultimately, however, a successful *Carmen* depends on those singing the two main protagonists, and in Tallinn, neither should have been on the stage. As an actress, Riina Airene made a fair stab at the title role and about 10 years ago, it might have been a different story. As it was, she was far too mature to play a wanton gypsy girl, and this extended to her voice – a dark, heavy instrument with a wide vibrato and coarse upper register – at least, what there was of it. Whenever called upon to sing above the stave, she made very heavy weather of it, with everything sounding so much of an effort. She was at her best singing quietly because, in spite of her limitations, she is a musical singer. The 'Habanera' was ade-

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The eponymous hero was sung by a guest, Oleg Orlov, a strident Latvian-born Russian tenor, who clearly did not know the part well enough and demonstrated vocal insecurity throughout. The Don Carlo was a strong, if unsubtle baritone Aare Saal, although the high notes were all there and he sang the big monologue in front of Charlemagne's tomb with the required gravitas. Pille Lill sang Elvira, who started poorly, almost hesitantly but had improved greatly by Act II. It was an excitable, somewhat frenetic portrayal, although at climactic moments she met the considerable challenges well. The veteran bass Mati Palm showed everyone what style was all about however and brought a great distinction to his portrayal of Silva. The voice is rich, dark-toned and very powerful and stood in sharp contrast to the rest of the ensemble.

As for the orchestra and chorus, once again it was fairly tough going. Both seemed under rehearsed with some missed cues from the chorus, which was inexcusable. The conductor was the excellent Jüri Alpernten but even he could not compensate for the rough string playing and ragged ensemble at key moments.

By the last Act, things had improved considerably and the final trio and duet were nicely sung. It was ultimately a lukewarm performance however and one could not help feel that, with a little effort, this production of *Emani* could have been a triumph of style over production limitation. The tepid audience response merely confirmed how below par everything was, and there were almost no curtain calls.

Over the years, my experiences of hearing Mozart in Eastern Europe have been uniformly unhappy ones. The reasons for this are largely to do with an absence of tradition in the repertoire. Under Soviet rule, Mozart was never a priority and the schools of performance and teaching were unable to encompass the necessary style and technique.

It was with a heavy heart therefore, that I braced myself for an Estonian production of *Don Giovanni*. Imagine my delight when I was confronted with not

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Musically, everything was consistent and the largely Estonian cast was exceptionally well-matched. Of the women, the Donna Anna (Valentina Taluma) and the Zerlina (Kristina Vähl) were both outstanding, with Ms Vähl in particular possessing a radiantly beautiful voice. Mati Kõrts was a most attractive Don Ottavio although 'Dalla sua pace' (added by Mozart for the Vienna premiere in 1788) was regrettably omitted here. In 'Il mio tesoro' he showed an elegance of phrasing that surprised me, even if his legato was not always steadily maintained. However, his tone was sustained and beautiful. Taimo Toomast (Don Giovanni) was excellent, if slightly underpowered dramatically and vocally. The Russian bass-baritone Mihail Koleļšvili was a fine, funny Leporello. This is a big, characterful voice and a very physical performer who brought out all the nuances of the part, playing the high comedy with great style.

In the pit, the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra was well-balanced, incisive and expertly controlled by Juri Alpernten, who maintained strict, pointed tempi throughout. In all, a delightful evening on all counts. It is revived next season and is worth catching.

There are times when, as an itinerant opera critic, sitting in a theatre in a far-away country, that I really begin to wonder – what makes some people believe they can actually sing?

This question arose frequently during the Estonian National Opera's recent staging of Bizet's masterpiece with – I was proudly informed – an entirely Estonian cast.

This production was actually a revival, having first appeared in 1998. It was serviceable enough, with an adaptable set that doubled for Seville, the Inn, the hideout and the Arena exterior reasonably well, although, in style, it looked rather like it had been left over from *Beau Geste*.

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However, her performance was truly stellar compared to Don José. A tenor called Vello Juma took this role, and rarely have I endured such a wretched demonstration of how not to sing. That this gentleman has risen through the ranks to take leading roles with such a voice – even if there is a shortage of tenors – surprises me. He was totally inadequate for what Bizet requires, having neither the technique nor even the range to sing the part.

The Flower Song was sung forte throughout. No melting, heartfelt pianissimo here – but a truly awful can belto that rendered this most tender aria with a uniform coarseness of tone and total disregard for phrasing. The high Bb at the end was excruciating and it was a profound relief when it was over. The muted applause spoke volumes.

For the rest, Rauno Elp was a rather underpowered, sexually bland Escamillo, and only Heli Veskus brought anything approaching distinction, with a touching and sweet-toned Micaëla.

The last act was suitably tense although by this stage, I was rather hoping that, in line with some perverse producer's whim, Carmen might actually dispatch Don José instead. However, as Carmen fell to her death throes, I was quite unprepared for what happened next. As the music built to its final crescendo, the gates of the bull-ring were thrown wide to reveal – a field of sunflowers! What the significance of this was, I cannot tell you.

Perhaps with a stronger cast, this production would be more convincing but overall, it was one of the least successful I have ever seen of this opera.

BRENDAN G CARROLL