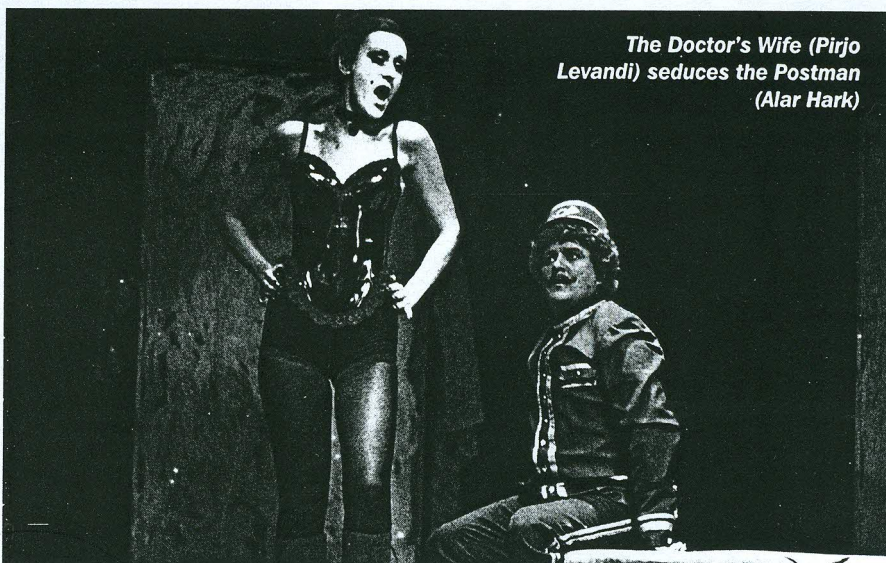




Ain Anger as the Prince



The Doctor's Wife (Pirjo Levandi) seduces the Postman (Alar Hark)

Heart attack

The Heart Raimo Kangro
ESTONIAN NATIONAL THEATRE
TALLINN

When this new opera was premiered, in Tallinn, even the orchestra got into the act. **Brendan Carroll** reports

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY ROSPU

Billed as the world's first opera to feature a heart transplant and the first opera written in Estonian since democracy arrived here 10 years ago, Raimo Kangro's *The Heart* (or *Süda*) was certainly an event to remember. Not to be confused with Pfitzner's 1931 opera *Das Herz* (which offers a conventional if somewhat stodgy love story), Kangro's two-act work was especially commissioned by the Estonian National Theatre two years ago, after a nationwide competition to find a new opera. Twenty-four libretti were submitted, including one by Kangro's own two daughters, which was ultimately the winner. It naturally followed that the jury commissioned their father – one of Estonia's leading composers who has written eight previous operas – to write the score. Given the parlous state of the Estonia Theatre's finances, it is laudable that its new board of directors decided to commit a large part of its limited resources to a new work, which was presented as the outstanding centrepiece of a major contemporary music festival.

The result is an extraordinary blend of Stravinskian brittleness, Leonard Bernstein at his brashest and a melodic overlay that occasionally lapses into popular song. The opera is not for the faint-hearted. Set in a private

clinic for experimental medicine, the macabre tale is clearly suggested by the Faust legend. Here the 'Doctor' is promised untold riches if he will give a new heart to the wealthy Prince (*Mephistopheles?*) who, after a cardiogram, is shown not to have a heart to begin with! The Doctor, a charlatan with no skills, needs money because his clinic is a failure: all the patients are dying. Some of these half-finished cases appear in Act I, including a pianist with 16 fingers, and a severely allergic lady who looks to be literally rotting away.

The proceedings get ever more bizarre. The maniacal doctor decides that he can satisfy the Prince – and achieve revenge at the same time – by killing his adulterous wife's young lover (the Postman) and using his heart for the transplant. A particularly effective seduction scene provided Pirjo Levandi (as the Doctor's wife) with an opportunity to impersonate Marlene Dietrich and the moving of a bed back and forth between her and the Postman (to suggest intercourse) was a nice touch. As Act I ends, the transplant operation takes place but at its climax, the heart falls on the floor. In spite of this, the Prince (conscious throughout!) gets off the operating table and congratulates the Doctor.

In Act II, things degenerate further. Several months on and the Doctor has squandered his new-found wealth. He is now suffering from persecution mania. He accepts an invitation to a medical conference – and after being awarded prizes and honours is shocked when the Postman he left without a heart, arrives in a deranged state with a gun and massacres the entire delegation.

Everyone is killed (the entire cast in fact) as the Prince watches from a corner of the stage. He then invites the dead victims to his residence as a choir of angels sings a hymn of praise. All of this is set to lively, highly rhythmic music with some extremely difficult and taxing vocal lines and richly colourful orchestration. There is never a dull moment either on the stage or in the pit and the staging is well

paced, helped by vivid costume design and atmospheric lighting. The premiere (which was widely publicised) was a tremendous success with the public, and all performances were sold out, more being planned for May, when it will be televised.

Kangro apparently had significant input to the story (much to his daughters' annoyance) and actually takes a non-singing role in the opera himself – that of the Prince's Servant. At the premiere, the theme of the opera encompassed everything with all the theatre front-of-house staff together with the entire orchestra and the conductor Paul Mägi dressed in surgical gowns and masks. Mägi actually conducted the work with a scalpel! Appropriately, the production was 'supported' by a local hospital. It was all tremendously enjoyable.

Vocally, it was somewhat uneven but Ain Anger (*The Prince*) was an impressive baritone with considerable presence and gave a powerful performance. The large chorus plays an important role, almost like a separate character, reflecting the famous song-festival tradition of Estonia where massed choirs assemble every five years to sing national folk music in a huge open-air arena outside the city.

The imaginative production was minimalist in design – at Kangro's suggestion. He prefers this style apparently – as does the producer and designer Neeme Kuningas. The subject was especially poignant for Kuningas, who actually suffered a heart attack two years ago.

Kangro is well-known in his native land for a series of rock-operas, as well as numerous symphonic and chamber works, yet he is a somewhat enigmatic figure and when I interviewed him the day after the premiere, gave little away about his methods. His views on opera in general however were interesting:

'My opera was written quickly – largely using a computer and synthesiser – in just five months. It uses a standard orchestra with

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prominent parts for piano, bells and a large percussion group. In this work, I have not sought to write for star singers but rather character voices. For me, rhythm is always more important than melody ...

'The score is "through composed" and not especially Estonian in style, although there are folk elements. More importantly, I have incorporated popular elements in the score because there is precedent for this. Think of how Mozart was extremely up-to-date yet not alienating his audience. Opera nowadays must reflect elements of popular music, jazz, rock and so on if it is to succeed and survive.'

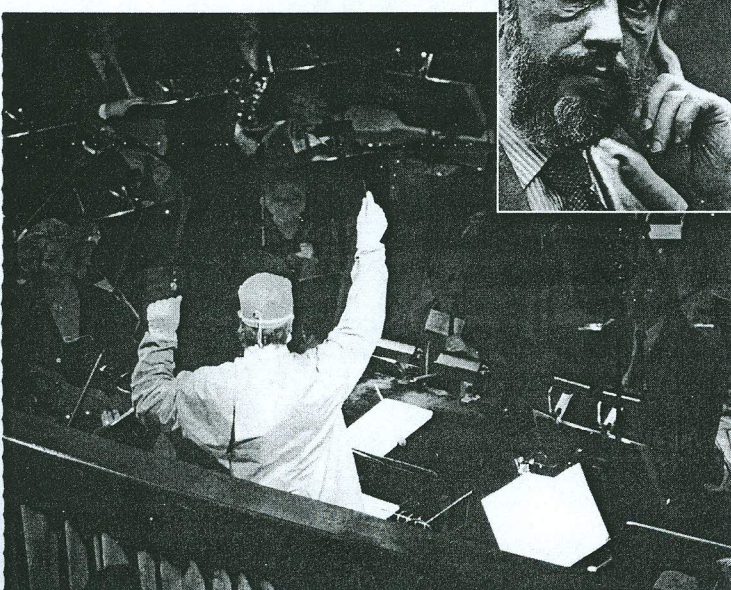
To this end Kangro sees no difference between his so-called Rock Operas and works such as *The Heart*. Each can co-exist and should do so, he believes. He is utterly disparaging of atonality or serial procedures and considers these traits to be 'the greatest misfortune to befall music in the 20th century'.

Above all he wants to be 'accessible'. He only writes music if he is commissioned: 'I don't compose for pleasure' he says, ruefully. His next work is a children's opera *JUKU*, to be given at the Theatre Vanemuine in Tartu. When he isn't composing, he tends his garden (he lives in the country) and has a busy teaching schedule - unusually combining posts at the Music Academy in Tallinn where he teaches composition and basic class music at his local elementary school.

His major influences in composition were Bach, Mozart, Prokofiev and Steve Reich and he assures me that one can detect seeds of each in his work, although when pressed for a description of his style, he is evasive, saying 'it is all in the rhythm'.

In many respects, he represents the recent development of populist musical theatre. The despised works of Lloyd Webber and the more admired music-theatre of Sondheim and others are well known to him and he is happy to be included in their company. But will *The Heart* succeed outside Estonia? No English translation of the libretto was included in the programme unfortunately, so most of the ironic humour of the piece was lost on me. I was assured by co-librettist Maarje Kangro that it would translate effectively, even if the many puns would be lost and the story itself is not especially Estonian in theme or location. Perhaps then, this highly novel work could be the first Estonian opera to reach a wider audience? Kangro hopes so: 'I believe in opera reaching the widest public. I don't write for minorities. If humanity has a future, then so has opera.'

Composer of *The Heart*, Raimo Kangro: Opera nowadays must reflect elements of popular music, jazz, rock and so on if it is to succeed and survive'



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Südamerabandus / Raimo Kangro ooper "Süda" Rahvusooperis "Estonia"

Brendan Carroll, Opera Now, March/Aprill 2000

Raimo Kangro "Süda" – reklaamitud kui maailma esimene ooper südame siirdamisest ning esimene ooper, mis kirjutati pärast demokraatia jõudmist Eestisse 10 aastat tagasi – on kindlasti meeldejääv sündmus. Seda ei tohi segi ajada Pfitzneri 1931. aastal valminud ooperiga "Das Herz". Kahevaatuselise ooperi tellis Kangrolt Rahvusooper "Estonia" pärast kaks aastat tagasi toimunud libretokonkurssi. Konkursile laekus 24 libretot, sealhulgas Kangro kahe tütre töö, mis lõppkokkuvõttes võitis. Sellele libretole kirjutaski Kangro muusika. Arvestades Rahvusooperi täbarat finantsolukorda, on kiirduväärt, et teatri juhtkond otsustas suure osa oma piiratud võimalustest panustada uude teosesse, mis oli kavandatud kaasaegse muusika festivali keskse sündmusena.

See ooper pole nõrganärvilistele. Tegevus toimub eksperimentaalmeditsiini haiglas. Veresaun on ajendatud Fausti legendist. "Doktorile" lubatakse rikkusi, kui ta annab uue südame varakale Vürstile (Mefistofeles?), kellel, nagu pärast kardiogrammi selgub, südant polegi /.../ Eriti efektse võrgutamistseeni tegi Pirjo Levandi, kes sobis kehastama Marlene Dietrich-i. Tema ning Postimehe vahel edasi-tagasi liikuv voodi oli kena vihje. /.../ Ooperi lõpus kõik tapetakse, seda jälgib Vürst lavanurgast. Siis kutsub ta ohvrid enda juurde, samal ajal laulab ingliskoor kiiduhümni. Kõik see on pandud elavasse, rütmikasse muusikasse, milles esineb mõni eriti raske vokaalpartii, ja värvikasse orkestratsiooni. Ei laval ega orkestriaugus pole ühtegi igavat momenti. Lavastus on hästi läbimõeldud. Sellele aitavad kaasa erksad kostüümid ja sobivat õhkkonda loov valgus. Esietendusel oli tohutu publikumenu, etendused olid välja müüdnud, järgmised on planeeritud mai kuusse.

Kangro on ilmselt teinud olulise panuse ka libretosse, ooperis võtab ta aga endale hoopis mitte-laulva rolli Vürsti teenrina. Esietendusel haaras ooperi teema kogu teatrit – alates teenindavast personalist kuni orkestri ja dirigendi Paul Mägini, kes olid riietatud kirurgi riietusse ja maskidesse. Muide, Mägi dirigeeris teost skalpelliga! Ooperi teemaatikale kohaselt toetas lavastust haigla. See kõik oli ääretult lõbus.

Vokaalselt oli esitus pisut ebahütlane, kuid Ain Anger (Vürst) oli muljetavaldav bariton, kes pani ennast vaatama ning andis võimsa etenduse. Olulist rolli mängis suur koor, peaaegu iseseisev karakter, meenutades kuulsat Eesti laulupeotraditsiooni.

Rikkaliku fantaasiga lavastus oli oma kujunduses Kangro soovitusel minimalistlik. Helilooja eelistab selgelt seda stiili, nagu ka lavastaja ja kunstnik Neeme Kuningas. Eriti õrn oli ooperi teematika Kuninga jaoks, kellel oli kaks aastat tagasi südameatakk.

Kangrot tuntakse mitmete rock-ooperite, aga ka sümfooniliste ja kammerteoste loojana. Ta on pisut salapärane kuju. Teda esietendusejärgsel päeval intervjuerides, rääkis ta pisut oma huvitavatest meetoditest: "Kirjutasin ooperi kiiresti, kasutades peamiselt arvutit ja süntesaatorit, viie kuuga. See on kirjutatud orkestri tavakooosseisule, olulisemad partiid klaverile, kelladele ja suurele löökpillide rühmale. Ma ei tahtnud kirjutada tähtsolistidele, pigem karakterhäälele. Minu jaoks on alati rütm tähtsam kui meloodia... Partituur on "läbikomponeeritud" ja mitte just eriti eesti stiilis, kuigi seal on rahvamuusika elemente. Tähtsam on, et kaasasin popp-muusika elemente, sest siin oli eelsoodumus selleks. Näiteks, Mozart oli äärmiselt kaasaegne, kuid samas ei võõrandunud oma publikust. Et ooper tänapäeval ellu jääks ja menukas oleks, peab ta sisaldama popp-muusika, jazz, rocki elemente".

Kangro ei näe erinevust oma nõ. rock-ooperite ja selliste tööde nagu "Süda" vahel. Kõik saavad koos eksisteerida ja peaksidki. Ta suhtub põlastavalt atonaalsuse või serialismi kasutamisse ning peab neid ilminguid "suurimaks ebaõnneks, mis võib tabada 20. sajandi muusikat". Üle kõige tahab ta olla "vastuvõetav". Ta kirjutab muusikat ainult tellimuse peale: "Ma ei kirjuta lõbu pärast". Tema järgmine teos on lasteoper "Juku", mis etendub "Vanemuises". Kui ta parajasti ei komponeeri, hooldab ta oma aeda. Kangrol on ka tihe pedagoogitöö graafik – ta jagab end ebaharilikult Muusikaakadeemias kompositsiooni õppejõu ja kohalikus põhikoolis muusikaõpetaja ameti vahel.

Tema suurimad mõjutajad olid Bach, Mozart, Prokofjev ja Steve Reich. Ta veenis mind, et nende algeid võib leida kõigis tema teostes. Kui palusin tal kirjeldada oma stiilis, oli ta puiklev: "See seisneb rütmis". Lugupidamist talle avaldades, võib öelda, et ta esidab hiljutist arengut populaarses muusikateatris. Lloyd-Webberi, Sondheimi ja teiste tööd on talle hästi teada ning ta on rõõmus olles arvatud nendega ühte seltskonda. Aga kas "Süda I" oleks edu ka välajspool Eestist? Inglisekeelset libretot kavas polnud, nii et enamus ironilisest huumorist läks minu jaoks kaduma. Kaaslibretist Maarja Kangro veenis mind, et seda saaks hõlpsalt tõlkida; isegi kui mõned sõnamängud kaduma läheksid, oleks lugu üldmõistetav, see pole isenesest väga eestikeskne. Võib-olla saaks siis see tõeliselt uudne teos esimeseks eesti ooperiks, mis jõuab laiemale vaatajaskonnani. Kangro loodab seda: "Ma usun ooperisse, mis jõuab laiemate rahvahulkadeni. Ma ei kirjuta vähemusele. Kui inimkonnal on tulevikku, siis on seda ka ooperil."