

Estonian opera comes home

◆ By Alec Charles,
TALLINN

Like Bela Bartok, whom he met in Budapest in 1938, the Estonian composer Eduard Tubin was inspired by the traditions of Eastern European folk music and myth; and, like Bartok, Tubin was forced to flee the totalitarian regime that engulfed his native land. But, unlike the Hungarian maestro, whose parents were both music teachers, Tubin was a true son of the soil: his family were smallholders and fishermen. He's reputed, as a child, to have practiced his flute while he herded the pigs; and his father is said to have sold a calf at market to buy a second-hand piano for the boy.

Tubin's opera "Barbara von Tisenhusen" was written in Sweden and based upon a Finnish retelling of a German version of the



NO LAUGHING MATTER: Eduard Tubin's "Barbara von Tisenhusen" is considered by some to be the finest Estonian opera ever written.

Estonian legend (founded in historical fact) of a 16th century noblewoman whose love for a commoner led to her death at the hands of her vicious brothers.

Commissioned by the Estonian National Opera, and completed in 1968, the opera's streak of social egalitarianism no doubt appealed the Soviet authorities; yet, despite Tubin's condemnation as a collaborator by many of his fellow emigres, its themes of the injustice and capricious cruelty of the law – and its revitalization of Estonian cultural history – may be seen today as a resounding act of resistance against an occupying power.

"It's the best Estonian opera," says Vardo Rumessen, chairman of the Eduard Tubin Society. "The story is contemporary and perennial: the struggle between two understandings of the world – on the one hand a use of power to keep people under rules and ideologies, and on the other an innocence based on love."

"Eduard Tubin was, first of all, a great symphonic composer," adds Margus Partlas, a professor at the Estonian Academy of

Music. "One can feel it listening to this opera: its orchestral part is both highly dramatic and full of interesting musical details."

The opera opens during a wedding party, envisioned in the new production as a raucous beer-swilling knees-up in which men dressed like Henry VIII sing bawdy songs that drunkenly celebrate the charms of the daughter of the Tisenhusen house.

There's no overture and no messing around: Tubin pulls us right into the action with a dramatic – an almost cinematic – score that leaps from gutsy vulgarity to sentimental naivety, but which never loses its robust force.

This is music that speaks from and to the heart and the stomach, and isn't afraid to deal a few low blows. From halfway through the second act to the end of the third – as the story really gets going and really gets nasty – Tubin takes us on a rollercoaster ride and doesn't let go.

"It's like a steamroller," says Arvo Volmer, the production's conductor and musical director, and artistic director of the Estonian National Opera. "It rolls over you." However, Volmer admits that at times "Barbara von Tisenhusen" can go too far.

He cut about 40 bars from the final scene – shortly

before the heroine descends beneath the ice to her watery grave, like a saintly Don Giovanni dragged down to a frozen hell. The director chose to lose the part in which the local peasantry refuses to help Barbara's diabolical brothers cut the hole in the ice. "It's a bit too much," he says. "This kind of national romantic intermezzo perhaps isn't necessary."

"Barbara von Tisenhusen" was described by Shostakovich as his ideal modern opera, yet it's hardly a piece of postmodern experimentalism, nor is it as self-indulgent (or indeed as long) as operas sometimes tend to be. "Tubin was a conservative thinker," Volmer says. "But his personality didn't leave any room for weeping or feeling sorry for himself, and that's reflected in his music." □

"Barbara von Tisenhusen" is currently playing at the Estonia Opera House in Tallinn. Visit www.opera.ee for times and ticket prices.



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