

Mari Vihmand, *The Formula of Love* : at the Estonian National Opera
17.10.2008. World Premiere. (GF)

Libretto by Mari Vihmand and Maimu Berg after the novel *The Mathematics of Nina Gluckstein*

Concept and dramaturgy: Mari Vihmand and Liis Kolle

Stage Director: Liis Kolle

Designer: Ann Lumiste

Lighting designer: Airi Eras

Choreographer: Ana Mondini

Cast:

Nina Gluckstein – Helen Lokuta (mezzo-soprano)

Chucho Santelmo – René Soom (baritone)

Roberta Gómez Dawson – Riina Airene (mezzo-soprano)

First journalist – Angelika Mikk (coloratura soprano)

Second journalist – Janne Ševtšenko (soprano)

Third journalist – Juuli Lill (mezzo-soprano)

Fourth journalist – Andres Köster (tenor)

Fifth journalist – Priit Volmer (bass)

Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra / Arvo Volmer

Domestic Estonian opera is in good health. In June 2007 Erkki-Sven Tüür's anti-fascist opera *Wallenberg* was premiered at the Estonian National Opera and has been – and still is – a great success. That opera was originally commissioned by Dortmund Opera in 2001 but Mari Vihmand's *The Formula of Love* is a work specifically written for the National Opera and judging from the world premiere last Friday it has all the prerequisites of having a long run too.

The story, based on Esther Vilar's bestselling novel, deals with universal questions like artists' integrity and eternal love, projected against the unhappy love story of Argentinean tango singer Chucho Santelmo and Nina Gluckstein and also the old poet Roberta Gómez Dawson and her unsuccessful love relationship, a kind of parallel which we get to know in the shape of fragments interwoven in the central story. It is a tragedy and we are informed of the outcome from the beginning. After the short overture, rhythmically jagged and built on short motifs, gradually becoming motorically insistent, Nina, all dressed in white, sings a mourning song in Spanish with the message '*never will I see your eyes again*' whereupon she shoots herself with her silver pistol. The chorus somewhat later relates what happened to her husband, which means that the rest of the opera is a series of flashbacks, presented in the shape of a number opera. Although it is a tragedy, it doesn't exclude moments of humour and even satirical elements, most notably the merciless drive of the journalists against Nina – and also Chucho – under the motivation that 'we represent our readers, we ask what interests them'.

The music is utterly *cantabile*, tailored for the soloists and unabashedly romantic without a trace of sentimentality. This does not by definition imply that Mari Vihmand

rubs the audience up the right way all the time. The harmonic garb is rather bold and the orchestration inventive and colourful with many instrumental solo contributions. The general idiom is modern but held within accessible tonality: many of the vocal solos are achingly beautiful. Most impressive of all though is the choral writing. The chorus has a very central role in this opera, from dramatically participating crowds to more abstractly commenting functions. Some of their contributions are in fact more oratorio like than operatic – which is in no way a negative feature. In fact, an opera that ends with the loving couple, dressed in white, performing a trapeze act, presumably in "The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn No traveller returns", has more than a whiff of oratorio about it. Within the drama, there are also incorporated quotations from Oscar Wilde and Ovid, which are sung evocatively, in the original languages, by the chorus.

The main male character is a tango singer but *The Formula of Love* is decidedly *not* a tango opera. There are scenes where tango is unavoidable, like Chucho's two songs in the second act and the above mentioned trapeze sequence and Mari Vihmand even makes use of Astor Piazzolla's prelude to *Balada para mi muerte*, but otherwise

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Visually it is also an enticing production with suggestive lighting effects, projections and scenes gliding seamlessly over into the next one. Nina and Chucho have *alter egos* in the shape of ballet dancers, sometimes appearing simultaneously with the 'real' characters, mirroring their feelings. This is especially psychologically expressive in the scene where Nina is waiting for Chucho to arrive home and in the meantime reading magazines and newspapers, where scandalous and insulting things are said about her. Outwardly she seems calm, controlled, in spite of the slander that she relates, but her *alter ego* expresses much more palpably the fury and despair that rages within her.

The performance on the first night was a strong one with excellent playing from the orchestra and the chorus obviously relishing in their great numbers. Helen Lokuta sang and acted Nina Gluckstein as to the manner born: stylish, elegant, charismatic and singing magnificently. René Soom also had the appearance of a star in the public scenes and the warmth of an affectionate lover in the private ones. Vocally he also impressed, most of all in the restrained singing of his final song – after his demise – delivered from one of the boxes. Riina Airene, with an impressive list of important roles to her credit, was an expressive and believable Roberta. Some tendencies to loosened vibrato may be ascribed to the fact that her character is supposed to be around 80. The five journalists were just as nasty as one could expect from some of that species. They sing mostly as a group but were also excellent individually with the mighty bass voice of Priit Volmer, whom I have praised on several occasions before, standing out especially.

The Formula of Love is sung in Estonian with Estonian and English surtitles and the programme book has the full libretto in Estonian as well as in English. It is scheduled for four performances in October-November and another three in April next year, but I would be surprised if it doesn't get a second – and even third – run during seasons to come. As I intimated initially it has all the ingredients to attract a wide audience. Those frightened of the conception 'contemporary opera' should know that contemporary it certainly is, since it was written in present time, but the tonal

language is such that even the inexperienced listener will need only a minimum of indulgence to appreciate it and long stretches of the music is as beautiful as any 19th century opera.

Göran Forsling