

Seen and Heard International

"The Formula of Love": Göran Forsling meets the Estonian composer Mari Vihmand after the premiere of her first full-length opera (GF)



'Were you satisfied with the performance last night?' I ask Mari Vihmand when we as through drifts of autumn leaves on our way from The Estonian National Opera for a cup of tea and a chat in a café in Tallinn's Old Town. It is the day after the world premiere of her opera *Armastuse valem* (The Formula of Love - [see review](#)).

Mari nods and smiles lightly: 'Yes, I was very satisfied. Everything went fine.' Mari is not a friend of big words. She is far from compliant, she knows what she wants but she is definitely not the breast-beating kind. She is a fairly tall and slim woman in her early forties, born in 1967 in Tartu, who studied composition at the Estonian Academy of Music with Professor Eino Tamberg and later with Professor Lepo Sumera, receiving her Master's degree in 1997. She also studied composition in Lyon, France, with Gilbert Amy and Philippe Manoury.

She has primarily written chamber music but there are also some orchestral pieces, including *Floreo*, which won First Prize at the UNESCO-sponsored contest 'International Rostrum of Composers' in Paris in 1996 in the category of composers under 30 years of age. The conductor then, as at the opera premiere yesterday, was Arvo Volmer. She has also written choir music and children's songs.

The premiere of *The Formula of Love* was the climax of two hectic months of rehearsals and Mari has been deeply involved. Not only did she write the music but she also assisted Maimu Berg with the libretto, arranged, added and cut things. 'My contribution was maybe ten per cent', she says modestly. She also worked out the dramaturgy together with stage director Liis Kolle and after the rehearsals started, there had to be adjustments to the score, including some rewriting of the vocal parts. It was decided a couple of years ago who would to sing the central roles and Mari worked with the singers voices in mind and was clear about the need to be flexible with the singers' wishes. Composing the music took one year, balancing the musical craftsmanship with taking care of her two children.

But the actual process started long before that. More than ten years ago, Paul Mägi, then Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Estonian National Opera, asked Mari for a new opera. She had already written a chamber opera *A Story of Glass*, which was awarded the Estonian National Cultural Prize in 1995, so she wasn't a newcomer to the genre, but a full-scale opera is something different of course. She was hesitant at first but the idea was aroused and subconsciously she searched for suitable material.

One evening she saw on TV in Germany, where she has been living for ten years, an

But the actual process started long before that. More than ten years ago, Paul Mägi, then Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Estonian National Opera, asked Mari for a new opera. She had already written a chamber opera *A Story of Glass*, which was awarded the Estonian National Cultural Prize in 1995, so she wasn't a newcomer to the genre, but a full-scale opera is something different of course. She was hesitant at first but the idea was aroused and subconsciously she searched for suitable material.

One evening, she saw on TV in Germany, where she has been living for ten years, an interview with the author Esther Vilar, who talked about relations between men and women. Somebody then gave Mari the novel *The Mathematics of Nina Gluckstein*, and since she was so fascinated by what she had heard, she read it – and was hooked. She presented the idea to Paul Mägi who encouraged her and the project was soon in its stride.

'It really has been team work', Mari says. Transforming the novel to an opera libretto was no easy task because the book is a strict narration, actually of two different stories with a common denominator: two women whose love goes wrong. In the opera the love story of Nina Gluckstein and Chucho Santelmo becomes the central theme but the other story, that of the old poet Roberta Gómez Dawson, is interwoven into it. The novel has little dialogue, so this had to be created and there were references to Oscar Wilde and Ovid, but no strict quotations. Mari had to go through their works and find the original wordings, which were then incorporated in the opera as choral pieces, sung in their original languages.

During the work, Paul Mägi left the Estonian National Opera but Arvo Volmer, who took over, was just as enthusiastic. The opera was scheduled for premiere some years ago but was postponed several times. This wasn't really a disadvantage: 'It gave me more time to finish my work', Mari says.

The whole thing seems very much a labour of love for Mari, who ended up translating the whole novel into Estonian. She takes out a copy of the book from her handbag. The cover is red as blood – or love. 'It's a thin book', she says, 'but it contains so much. And there is a lot here that there wasn't room for in the opera.'

There is to be a presentation of the opera and the novel at the Winter Garden of the Estonian National Opera this same afternoon, where Esther Vilar, the author of the novel, will be present but unfortunately which I can't manage. The book, however, has been a bestseller in Spain, France and Germany. The central male character in the opera, Chucho Santelmo, is an Argentine tango singer but Mari stresses that this is not a tango opera. 'There is tango in it, well, kind of – the scene where Nina and Chucho fall in love, Chucho's two songs in the second act and the final scene with two white figures on trapezes – but it was never important to underline the Argentinean setting. The central theme is universal and so is the music.

I mention the accordionist, who has a central role in the opera. 'Originally I had intended to have him incorporated in the orchestra but it didn't work out very well so instead he became a soloist. I wrote the music for him but the accordion is very much an instrument for improvisation and Jaak Lutsoja embellished and amended the music in his fashion.'

How did she start the process of composition?

'I wrote all the melodic material first and only then did I go on harmonizing and later orchestrating it. I wanted the song lines to be *bel canto*.'

'And the choral music? It is very important in this opera and at times I got a feeling of oratorio.'

'Maybe.'

'And in the Ovid chorus there were even echoes of Gregorian chant.'

'Maybe. I never thought that way.'

'Is there any specific composer that has been influential on you?'

here that there wasn't room for in the opera.'

There is to be a presentation of the opera and the novel at the Winter Garden of the Estonian National Opera this same afternoon, where Esther Vilar, the author of the novel, will be present but unfortunately which I can't manage. The book, however, has been a bestseller in Spain, France and Germany. The central male character in the opera, Chucho Santelmo, is an Argentine tango singer but Mari stresses that this is not a tango opera. 'There is tango in it, well, kind of – the scene where Nina and Chucho fall in love, Chucho's two songs in the second act and the final scene with two white figures on trapezes – but it was never important to underline the Argentinean setting. The central theme is universal and so is the music.'

I mention the accordionist, who has a central role in the opera. 'Originally I had intended to have him incorporated in the orchestra but it didn't work out very well so instead he became a soloist. I wrote the music for him but the accordion is very much an instrument for improvisation and Jaak Lutsoja embellished and amended the music in his fashion.'

How did she start the process of composition?

'I wrote all the melodic material first and only then did I go on harmonizing and later orchestrating it. I wanted the song lines to be *bel canto*.'

'And the choral music? It is very important in this opera and at times I got a feeling of oratorio.'

'Maybe.'

'And in the Ovid chorus there were even echoes of Gregorian chant.'

'Maybe. I never thought that way.'

'Is there any specific composer that has been influential on you?'

Mari hesitates but eventually says: 'Veljo Tormis is a composer I really appreciate. He writes choral music that goes to the roots of the Estonian people and is simple and accessible. Another composer who means a lot to me is György Ligeti.'

The Estonians are a singing people and Mari admits that choral music is close to her heart. 'I have always been a choral singer. In Germany I sing in a church choir. We are working on Handel's *Messiah* and the Bach Passions.'

'What else do you do?'

'I'm working with old people. Singing old German folk songs as a kind of therapeutic activity. I feel that this is very important. Just as my work with children is, back in Estonia. Colleagues of mine were working with drama at school and I wrote some music for them. After the premiere yesterday I got a single rose from a person whose name I didn't know but she had been in this group and was so grateful. This really warmed me.'

And what is she working on at present?

'Nothing!' Mari says plainly.

'Are there any plans for a new opera?' I ask when we walk back through Old Town in the October chill.

'No. Well, maybe in twenty years', Mari answers with a smile.

I dearly hope it won't be that long.

Göran Forsling

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL OOPERIARVUSTUS

Mari Vihmand, Armastuse valem: Rahvusoper Estonias 17.10.2008.
Maailma esiettekanne. (GF)

Libreto autorid Mari Vihmand ja Maimu Berg, romaani "Nina Glucksteini matemaatika" põhjal
Kontseptsioon ja dramaturgia: Mari Vihmand ja Liis Kolle
Lavastaja: Liis Kolle
Kujundus: Ann Lumiste
Valguskujundus: Airi Eras
Koreograaf: Ana Mondini

Osades:

Nina Gluckstein – Helen Lokuta (metsosopran)
Chucho Santelmo – René Soom (bariton)
Roberta Gómez Dawson – Riina Airenne (metsosopran)
Esimene ajakirjanik – Angelika Mikk (koloratuursopran)
Teine ajakirjanik – Janne Ševtšenko (sopran)
Kolmas ajakirjanik – Juuli Lill (metsosopran)
Neljas ajakirjanik – Andres Köster (tenor)
Viies ajakirjanik – Priit Volmer (bass)
Rahvusoper Estonia koor ja orkester / Arvo Volmer

Eesti kodumaine ooper on hea tervise juures. 2007. a juunis esietendus Eesti Rahvusoperis Erkki-Sven Tüüri antifašistlik ooper "Wallenberg", mis on olnud – ja on siiani – väga edukas. Selle ooperi tellis algselt, 2001. aastal, Dortmundi ooperiteater, kuid Mari Vihmandi "Armastuse valem" on spetsiaalselt Rahvusoperile kirjutatud teos ja eelmisel reedel toimunud maailma esiettekande järgi otsustades on ka sellel kõik eeldused kauaks lavale jääda.

Esther Vilari edukal romaanil põhinev süžee käsitleb universaalseid küsimusi nagu kunstniku eneseväärikus ja igavene armastus. Need on projitseeritud Argentiina tangolaulja Chucho Santelmo ja Nina Glucksteini õnnetule armuloole, samuti vana poeedi Roberta Gómez Dawsoni isikule ja tema nurjunud armusuhtele - omamoodi paralleel, millest saame aimu kesksesse loosse põimitud fragmentide varal. See on tragöödia ja algusest peale oleme lõpplahendusest teadlikud. Pärast rütmiliselt vahelduvat ja lühikestele motiividele üles ehitatud avamängu, mis järk-järgult muutub liikuvamaks ja intensiivsemaks, laulab üleni valgesse riietatud Nina hispaaniakeelse leinalaulu, mille sõnumiks on '*enam kunagi ei näe ma su silmi*'. Seejärel laseb ta end oma hõbedasest püstolist maha. Veidi hiljem jutustab koor tema abikaasaga juhtunust, seega on ülejäänud ooper sari tagasivaateid, mis on esitatud numbrioperi laadis. Kuigi tegemist on tragöödiaga, ei välista see humoorikaid momente ja koguni satiirilisi elemente. Need on kõige märgatavamad ajakirjanike armutus nõiajahis Nina- ja samuti Chucho - vastu, õigustusega, et 'meie esindame oma lugejaid, me küsime seda, mis neid huvitab'.

Muusika on läbinisti *cantabile*, solistidele kohandatud ja varjamatult romantiline, siiski ilma mingi sentimentaalsuseta. See ei tähenda tingimata, et Mari Vihmand oma

publikut kogu aeg pärikarva silitab. Harmoonia on küllaltki julge ning orkestratsioon leidlik ja värvikas, sisaldades hulgaliselt instrumentaalseid soolonumbreid. Üldilme on tänapäevane, kuid jääb kergesti haaratava tonaalsuse piiresse: paljud vokaaloolod on valutegevalt kaunid. Kõige muljetavaldavam on siiski kooriosa. Kooril on selles ooperis vägagi keskne roll, alates dramaatilises tegevuses osalevatest rahvahulkadest kuni abstraktsemate kommentaarideni. Mõned selle numbriest on tegelikult pigem oratooriumisarnased kui ooperlikud – mis pole mingil juhul negatiivseks jooneks. Ooperis, mille lõpus esitab valgesse riietatud armastajapaar trapetsinumbri (eeldatavasti "sel uurimata maal, kust ükski rändur ei tule tagasi"), peabki ju rohkem kui terake oratooriumi olema. Libretoosse on kaasatud ka Oscar Wilde'i ja Ovidiuse tsitaate, mida koor laulab väljendusrikkalt originaalkeeltes.

Meespeategelane on tangolaulja, kuid "Armastuse valem" ei ole kindlasti mitte tango-ooper. Leidub stseene, kus tango on vältimatu, nagu näiteks Chucho kaks laulu teises vaatuses ja eelpoolmainitud trapetsinumber, ning Mari Vihmand kasutab isegi Astor Piazzolla prelüüdi teosest "Ballada para mi muerte", kuid muus osas pole minceid otseseid viiteid ooperi tegevuspäiaale. Nii muusikaliselt kui javaliselt oluline

kunstniku eneseväärikus ja igavene armastus. Need on projitseeritud Argentiina tangolaulja Chucho Santelmo ja Nina Glucksteini õnnetule armuloole, samuti vana poeedi Roberta Gómez Dawsoni isikule ja tema nurjunud armusuhtele - omamoodi paralleel, millest saame aimu kesksesse loosse põimitud fragmentide varal. See on tragöödia ja algusest peale oleme lõpplahendusest teadlikud. Pärast rütmiliselt vahelduvat ja lühikestele motiividele üles ehitatud avamängu, mis järk-järgult muutub liikuvamaks ja intensiivsemaks, laulab üleni valgesse riietatud Nina hispaaniakeelse leinalaulu, mille sõnumiks on '*enam kunagi ei näe ma su silmi*'. Seejärel laseb ta end oma hõbedasest püstolist maha. Veidi hiljem jutustab koor tema abikaasaga juhtunust, seega on ülejäänud ooper sari tagasivaateid, mis on esitatud numbrioooperi laadis. Kuigi tegemist on tragöödiaga, ei välista see humoorikaid momente ja koguni satiirilisi elemente. Need on kõige märgatavamad ajakirjanike armutus nõiajahis Nina- ja samuti Chucho - vastu, õigustusega, et '*meie esindame oma lugejaid, me küsime seda, mis neid huvitab*'.

Muusika on läbinisti *cantabile*, solistidele kohandatud ja varjamatult romantiline, siiski ilma mingi sentimentaalsuseta. See ei tähenda tingimata, et Mari Vihmand oma

publikut kogu aeg pärikarva silitab. Harmoonia on küllaltki julge ning orkestratsioon leidlik ja värvikas, sisaldades hulgaliselt instrumentaalseid soolonumbreid. Üldilme on tänapäevane, kuid jääb kergesti haaratava tonaalsuse piiresse: paljud vokaalsoolod on valutegevvalt kaunid. Kõige muljetavaldavam on siiski kooriosa. Kooril on selles ooperis vägagi keskne roll, alates dramaatilises tegevuses osalevatest rahvahulkadest kuni abstraktsemate kommentaarideni. Mõned selle numbritest on tegelikult pigem oratooriumisarnased kui ooperlikud - mis pole mingil juhul negatiivseks jooneks. Ooperis, mille lõpus esitab valgesse riietatud armastajapaar trapetsinumbri (eeldatavasti "sel uurimata maal, kust ükski rändur ei tule tagasi"), peabki ju rohkem kui terake oratooriumi olema. Libretosse on kaasatud ka Oscar Wilde'i ja Ovidiuse tsitaate, mida koor laulab väljendusrikkalt originaalkeeltes.

Meespeategelane on tangolaulja, kuid "Armastuse valem" ei ole kindlasti mitte tango-ooper. Leidub stseene, kus tango on vältimatu, nagu näiteks Chucho kaks laulu teises vaatuses ja eelpoolmainitud trapetsinumber, ning Mari Vihmand kasutab isegi Astor Piazzolla prelüüdi teosest "Ballada para mi muerte", kuid muus osas pole mingeid otseseid viiteid ooperi tegevuspaigale. Nii muusikaliselt kui lavaliselt oluline roll on akordionist Jaak Lutsojal, kes kõnnib ooperi alguses orkestriaugu ees ja ilmub hiljem ka lavale .

Ka visuaalselt on lavastus meelikõitev oma sugestiivsete valgusefektide, projektsioonide ja sujuvalt vahelduvate taustadega. Ninal ja Chuchol on *alter egod* balletitantsijate näol, kes mõnikord ilmuvad lavale "tõeliste" tegelastega samaaegselt, peegeldades nende tundeid. See on psühholoogiliselt eriti väljendusrikas stseenis, kus Nina ootab Chuchot koju. Oodates loeb ta ajakirju ja ajalehti, kus kirjutatakse tema kohta skandaalseid ja solvavaid asju. Väliselt näib ta rahulik, valitseb end vaatamata laimule, millest ta jutustab, kuid tema *alter ego* väljendab palju käegakatsutavamalt naises möllavat raevu ja ahastust.

Esietendus oli tugev, orkester mängis oivaliselt ja koor nautis silmnähtavalt oma suurepäraseid numbreid. Helen Lokuta laulis ja näitles Nina Glucksteini rolli justkui selleks sündinuna: stiilselt, elegantselt, karismaatiliselt ja võrratu lauluga. Ka René Soom tõusis massistseenides tähena esile, olles intiimsetes stseenides samas õrn ja kiindunud armastaja. Ka vokaalselt jättis ta tugeva mulje, kõige rohkem oma viimase (surmajärgse) laulu hillitsetud esitusega - see esitati ühest loožist. Riina Airene, kelle pagasis on muljetavaldav nimekiri suurrolle, oli Robertana väljendusrikas ja veenev. Mõningane kaldumine lahtise vibraato poole oli küllap õigustatud sellega, et tema tegelane pidi olema umbes 80-aastane. Viis ajakirjanikku olid just nii ebameeldivad nagu mõnelt nendesuguselt võikski oodata. Nad laulavad enamasti koos, kuid olid ka eraldivõetuna suurepärased, eriti tõusis oma vägeva bassihäälega esile Priit Volmer, keda olen varemgi mitmel korral kiitnud.

"Armastuse valem" lauldakse eesti keeles, eesti- ja ingliskeelsete tiitritega, ja kavaraamatus on täielik libreto nii eesti kui inglise keeles. Mängukavas on neli etendust oktoobris-novembris, samuti kolm etendust järgmise aasta aprillis. Kuid ma ei imestaks, kui ooper pälviks tulevikus teisegi - ja isegi kolmanda- hooaja. Nagu juba sissejuhatuses märkisin, on sellel kõik eeldused laia vaatajaskonna võitmiseks. Need, keda hirmutab mõiste 'kaasaegne ooper', peaksid teadma, et kindlasti on ooper kaasaegne, kuna see on tänapäeval kirjutatud; kuid ooperi helikeel lubab seda hinnata ka kogenematul kuulajal, kel on veidikegi huvi. Ning pikad muusikalõigud on sama kaunid kui ükskõik missuguses 19. sajandi ooperis.

Göran Forsling