

## Festivals

## Estonia

Night Stars Festival,  
Tallinn

Wallenberg Tüüri

Cyrano Tamberg  
ESTONIAN NATIONAL OPERA  
TALLINN

When the Estonian National Opera decided to present the national premiere of one of the most significant Estonian operas of the past 50 years, and asked one of Russia's leading stage directors, Dmitri Bertman, to bring it to fruition, it could not have foreseen that the production would become embroiled in an international political crisis – yet so it turned out.

The removal of the Soviet war monument in Tallinn in April caused major civil unrest, with violent street riots (in which one man died) and a political stand-off between Estonia and Russia. This situation subsequently led to Bertman being forbidden to visit Tallinn to direct *Wallenberg*. As a result, he had to rehearse the opera via a web-link – possibly the first time that this has ever been done – and relied on his old friend Neeme Kuningas, chief producer of the Estonian National Opera, to execute his ideas and co-produce with him. Only in the last few days did Moscow relent, and Bertman arrived to put the finishing touches to his creation.

The result was worth all the tension. *Wallenberg* by Erkki-Sven Tüüri (who began his career as a rock musician but is now a leading contemporary composer) is an important work that, apart from its unsuccessful first staging in Dortmund in 2001, has mostly languished, unproduced and forgotten. Telling the powerful story of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg who, like Oskar Schindler, saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews (in Budapest) during WWII and was then imprisoned by the Red Army, its theme could not be more poignant or apposite given the prevailing circumstances surrounding this production.

Bertman and Kuningas (together with the gifted designer Ene-Liis Semper) created a striking, visually dynamic and always thought-provoking interpretation that avoided cliché and theatrical vacuity and illuminated the libretto in a most satisfying way. It also used the newly installed state-of-the-art stage machinery here to telling effect.

The opera is in two concise, well-constructed acts and its libretto is in German, not only to suit its theme but also because it was commissioned by a German theatre. The entire stage, which is made to cover the pit, is raked and the large orchestra is concealed and recessed, making the drama even more immediate. Bertman and Kuningas wisely eschewed using such clichéd symbols as the swastika or the hammer and sickle, preferring a totally surrealistic approach that suits both the libretto and the eclectic, and extremely contemporary score.

Costumes are striking throughout, with the Swedes wearing highly stylised 18th-century garb, the Germans in black and silver uniforms and the Jews in peasant dress, resembling the Israelites of Biblical times.

The opening is quite magical – a choral prologue with a candlelit chorus which gradually forms into a Star of David (visible on the raked floor of the stage), whispering the name Wallenberg repeatedly. In fact, there is a good deal of profound choral writing in this work, so much so that it would work equally well as a concert piece. There are many dramatic set pieces and a good deal of stage trickery to keep the dramatic momentum. While the German pronunciation was imprecise, subtitles in both English and Estonian were provided which helped considerably to follow the action and pick up on the subtleties of the writing.

Of course the subject is grim, but in Bertman's hands, it is never overwhelming. It is almost as if we are looking back on these events through a kind of modernistic prism from the future and trying to make sense of them. In a note in the programme, Bertman said he tried to imagine how mankind, in

the 42nd century, would recall the incredibly tragic events of this period. In so doing, he presents the stark tragedy of the holocaust in contrast, as it collides with weird fantasy, and even humour.

The herding of the Jews onto trains is a case in point. It could have been morbid but here it was presented as a surreal tableau without being overly theatrical, and a scene where a Jewish woman hands back the Swedish passport that will save her life, so that she can be with her family and friends, was particularly harrowing and wonderfully sung by Riina Airene.

In Act II, the cell in which Wallenberg is incarcerated by the post-war totalitarian regime rises dramatically (and unexpectedly) from the floor, while various characters that seemed to have escaped from Disney World (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck!) are joined by Ronald Reagan and even a reincarnated version of Wallenberg as Elvis Presley. Wacky, yes – but it never jarred and the performance was of such conviction, it carries it along inexorably.

All of it is brilliantly staged, a real *coup de théâtre*, that is never dull for a second, matched by a largely tonal, albeit uncompromising score of crystalline brilliance and enormous difficulty (especially for the large percussion section) that was performed exceptionally well under the baton of Arvo Volmer, the chief music director here. *Wallenberg* is apparently Tüüri's

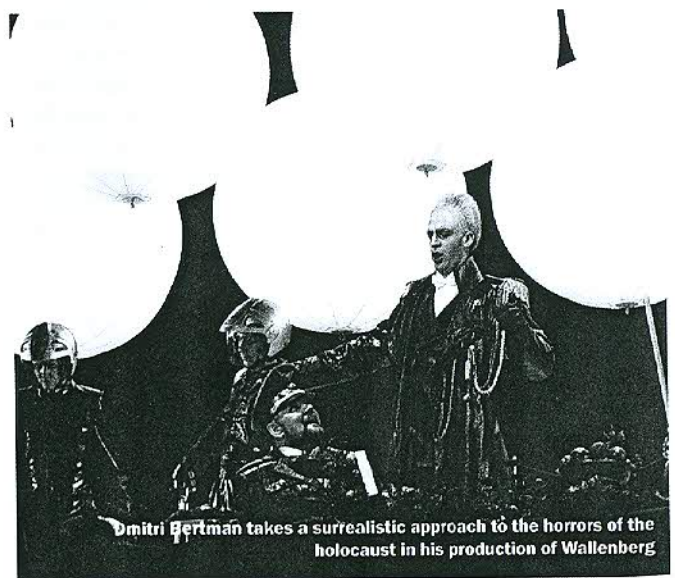
only opera to date. I am hopeful that he may write more, for he clearly has skill and a gift for the theatre.

The Swedish baritone Jesper Taube gave an outstanding performance in the title role, which on this evidence, is one of the most demanding in modern opera, running the gamut of emotion and physicality. Also worthy of mention is baritone Priit Volmer who gave a powerful performance as Adolf Eichmann, portrayed in the libretto as a calculating but ruthlessly sane villain. There are no major female roles in the opera but the vocal writing throughout makes severe demands on the large cast.

Dmitri Bertman is renowned for his ability to shock, but in this fascinating, provocative staging he achieved a compelling fusion of tragedy and humour to illuminate a great human story. It will be revived in the next season and is well worth seeing.

Perhaps the most famous operatic treatment of Edmond Rostand's noble tragedy *Cyrano de Bergerac* is that by Alfano (memorably revisited a few years ago by Plácido Domingo in New York and then in London), but this richly romantic opera by the dean of Estonia's post-war composers, Eino Tamberg, is by no means an also-ran.

Tamberg is not very well known outside of Estonia (which is a great pity) and this work is considered



Dmitri Bertman takes a surrealistic approach to the horrors of the holocaust in his production of *Wallenberg*

his best, one of four operas he has written to date. After hearing *Cyrano*, I was keen to investigate the others. The music of this compelling and beautifully crafted work is moving, eloquent and masterfully scored and is wonderfully written for major voices. It is also very dramatic, supported by an iridescent, glittering orchestral canvas that, in its heroic, densely chromatic brass writing, is frequently reminiscent of early Janáček.

Tamberg loves luminous, translucent instrumental colours so the score is replete with celeste, harp, glockenspiel and piano, along with numerous exotic percussion instruments adding magically to the fascinating soundscape that underpins his sure and confident handling of the vocal lines. He also provides some outstanding choral writing for the big ensemble scenes and his sense of form, structure and dramatic pacing made the opera tense and dramatic, adhering to and complementing the taut libretto by Jaan Krossi, a free adaptation of Rostand's original.

The biggest surprise of all about the piece, however, is that it was composed in 1974, during the period of Soviet occupation here – yet it is unabashedly emotional and romantic. Compared to the 'permitted' (and aurally wretched) contemporary opera being written in Prague at the same time (that I recall only too well), it was a delightful surprise for me. English surtitles made it easy to follow the action and the poetic text was rendered well.

The dependable Neeme Kuningas has skilfully and imaginatively adapted the earlier production from 1995 and even retained some design elements from the original staging of 1976, while at the same time he wisely adopted a minimalist approach.

This is such a potent and intimate human drama and it depends ultimately for its success on the intensity of performance of the principals, not spectacle. Few props, no scenery – save for the occasional rear-projected image (a stained glass window for the marriage of Roxane and Christian, a red backdrop for the battle scene) – but throughout, atmospheric lighting and exceptional performances,

particularly from Raino Elp in the title role.

Elp is a star singer of enormous range and presence with a marvelously creamy voice of varied colour. I have heard him sing in many roles here but *Cyrano* was by far the best. He was simply outstanding, not only vocally (it is an extremely demanding role) but also in his sheer physical acting. Often, one could assess what was happening by his body language alone.

Roxane was sung by Angelika Mikk (who had been recently ill, though one could hardly tell) and she navigated this extremely high-lying role (a kind of modernistic Zerbinetta if you can imagine such a thing) with relative ease.

The tenor Mati Kõrts made the largely unsympathetic role of her inadequate lover Christian credible, although he seemed a little old for the role. His Act III duet with Roxane was especially beautifully sung.

Tamberg makes some punishing demands on the ensemble too. The so-called Epilogue (really a short fourth act) begins with a long chorus sung totally a capella which makes the requirement to stay in key critical as the orchestra finally enters, with Ragueneau (Urmas Pöldma) who brings news of the fatal attack on *Cyrano*.

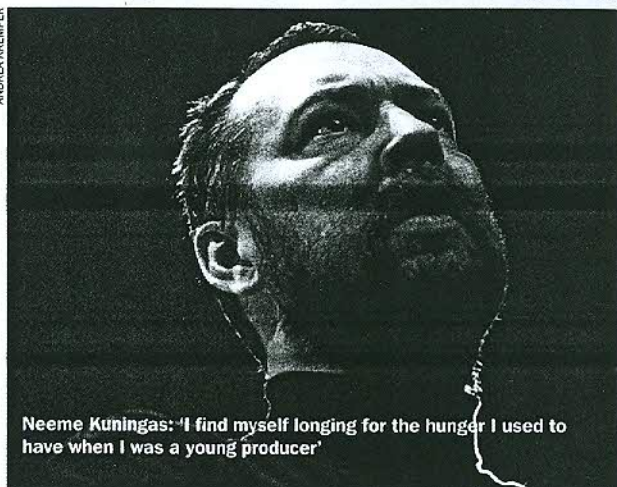
The final duet, between the dying *Cyrano* and Roxane, as she realises the truth about him and how she really loves him, was a lovely piece of writing – long melodic lines and radiant orchestration. *Cyrano's* death gave a touchingly muted conclusion to the drama.

A special word for conductor Vello Pähn who kept a tight rein on things and maintained exceptional balance within the large orchestra, while giving the singers every opportunity to shine. If occasionally the ensemble was a little bit ragged, it did not detract seriously.

Tamberg's opera is a very fine work that I would like to hear again. It also deserves to be translated and presented internationally. For a star baritone, it is a gift and happily, it is a staple part of the repertory here for the foreseeable future.

BRENDAN G CARROLL

ANDREA KREMPER



Neeme Kuningas: 'I find myself longing for the hunger I used to have when I was a young producer'

## The theatre of life

Neeme Kuningas is genuinely part of the furniture at the Estonian National Opera, where he is now chief producer. He started as a member of the opera chorus over a quarter of a century ago, in the days when Estonia was merely a tiny satellite of the sprawling Soviet Union, dependent on the Kremlin for financial support, and the dilapidated Estonian Opera was struggling to maintain its artistic integrity and independence.

Today, the theatre has been transformed – along with the city – after an eight-year restoration project which has cost over 200m Kroons but which, unlike similar efforts elsewhere, has come in *under* budget. The Opera plays to almost full houses all season and is one of the chief attractions for foreign visitors. Neeme Kuningas is one of the main reasons it enjoys such success; yet meeting this somewhat shy, unprepossessing man, all thoughts of the flamboyant, temperamental producer are dispelled. If Kuningas commands respect on stage, it is a quiet authority.

Kuningas began producing opera over 20 years ago and has grown with the theatre. He now presides as part of a triumvirate with general manager Paul Himma and artistic director Arvo Volmer and guides the work of a team of younger producers as well as undertaking major productions in Estonia and abroad.

Kuningas is sanguine about the upheavals of the past six years: 'As well as the closure of our theatre for restoration, we have had three artistic leaders during this time and clearly the system wasn't working, which is why the new structure was devised.'

He is referring obliquely to the abrupt departure of artistic director Paul Magi and the clash of artistic wills with his replacement, Arne Mikk, in 2004; but if artistic concord appears now to prevail, Kuningas does not proclaim it too loudly and is at a reflective stage in his career: 'I am 51 now and one has to make crucial decisions at such an age. I am proud that we have maintained and indeed improved standards here, but I now feel I want to do something new, even if I do not know exactly what that is. I will, of course, remain in this theatre – I am grateful to it for my career – but I find myself longing for the hunger I used to have when I was a young producer. This has subsided and I must find a means to replace it or re-ignite it.'

To this end, Kuningas has been instrumental in commissioning specially composed operas for children of which the latest, *Minna – Napoleon!* (Me – Napoleon!), has been particularly successful.

Ambitious plans include the first ever production of *Tristan und Isolde* in Estonia, scheduled as the big event for 2008, as well as ventures into Baroque opera, which is almost unknown here.

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## OPERA NOW, Sept/Oct 2007, Brendan Carroll

### Festival "Suveöö tähed", Tallinn

"Wallenberg" Tüür  
"Cyrano" Tamberg

RAHVUSOOPER ESTONIA  
TALLINN

Kui Rahvusoper Estonia otsustas lavale tuua viimase 50 aasta ühe kõige olulisema eesti ooperi esietenduse Eestis ja palus Venemaa ühel juhtivamal lavastajal see teoks teha, poleks keegi osanud ette näha, et selle lavastamist ümbritseb rahvusvaheline poliitiline kriis – just nii see välja tuli.

Nõukogude sõjamälestusmärgi eemaldamine aprillis Tallinnas põhjustas suuri vastuhakke koos vägivaldsete tänavarahutustega (mille käigus üks inimene sai surma) ning Eesti ja Venemaa poliitiliste suhete jahenemist. See olukord viis tagantjärele selleni, et Bertmanil keelati tulla Tallinna "Wallenbergi" lavastama. Selle tulemusena pidi ta ooperi proove tegema veebilingi kaudu, võib-olla esimest korda kui seda nii tehti, ja ta jäi lootma oma vana sõbra, Rahvusoperi Estonia pealavastaja Neeme Kuninga peale, et too tema ideid teostaks ja kaaslavastajaks oleks. Alles viimastel päevadel andis Moskva järele ja Bertman saabus oma loomingule viimast lihvi andma.

Tulemus oli kogu seda pinget väärt. Erkki-Sven Tüüri (kes alustas oma karjääri rokkmuusikuna, kuid on praegu üks olulisemaid kaasaegseid heliloojaid) "Wallenberg" on tähtis teos, mis arvestamata selle ebaõnnestunud esmalavastust 2001. aastal Dortmundis, on suuremalt jaolt kiratsenud, olles lavastamata ja unustatud. Jutustades Rootsi diplomaadi Raoul Wallenbergi võimast lugu, kes, nagu Oskar Schindler, päästis tuhandete juutide elu (Budapestis) Teise maailmasõja ajal ja vangistati seejärel Punaarmee poolt, ei saanud ooperi teema olla mõjuvam või kohasem, arvestades seda lavastust ümbritsevaid valitsevaid asjaolusid.

Bertman ja Kuningas (koos andeka lavakujundaja Ewe-Liis Semperiga) löid rabava, visuaalselt dünaamilise ja alati mõtlema ajendava interpretatsiooni, mis vältis klišeesid ja teatraalset tühjust ning heitis libretole valgust kõige rahuldustpakkuvamal viisil.

Ooper on kahes sisutihedas terviklikus vaatuses ja selle libreto on saksa keeles, mitte üksnes selleks, et see teemaga paremini sobiks, vaid ka seetõttu, et ooperi tellis Saksa teater. Kogu lava, mis on pandud katma orkestriauku, on kaldu, ning suur orkester on varjatud ja paigutatud orva, muutes draama veelgi vahetumaks. Bertman ja Kuningas vältisid targalt selliste klišeedeks muutunud sümbolite kasutamist nagu haakrist ning sirp ja vasar, eelistades täiesti sürrealistlikku lähenemist, mis sobib libreto ja äärmiselt kaasaegse partituuriga.

Kostüümid on läbinisti rabavad – rootslased kandmas äärmiselt stiliseeritud 18. sajandi rõivastust, sakslased mustades ja hõbedastes mundrites ning juudid talupoja riietuses, meenutades piibliaja israeliite.

Algus on üsna nõiduslik – koori proloog, mida laulab küünaldega valgustatud koor, mis vähehaaval moodustab Taaveti tähe (nähtav lava kaldpõrandal), sosistades korduvalt Wallenbergi nime. Tegelikult on selles teoses väga palju sügavamõttelist koorimuusikat, isegi niivõrd, et see toimiks sama hästi ka kontsertpalana.

Dramaatilise hoo säilitamiseks on palju dramaatilisi dekoratsioonide detaile ja lavalisi kavalaid võtteid. Kuna saksa keele hääldus oli ebatäpne, siis oli ooper varustatud eesti- ja ingliskeelsete subtiitritega, mis aitasid oluliselt tegevust jälgida ja teose peensusi märgata.

Loomulikult on ooperi teema sünye, kuid Bertmani kätes ei ole see kunagi rõhuv. Me peaaegu justkui meenutaksime neid sündmusi vaadetes tulevikust läbi mingi modernistliku prisma ja püüaksime neist aru saada. Kavalehe kommentaaris ütleb Bertman, et ta püüdis ette kujutada, kuidas inimkond meenutaks 42. sajandil selle ajastu uskumatult traagilisi sündmusi. Seda tehes, esitab ta holokausti karmi tragöödia, mis on vastuolus, kuna põrkub kokku veidra fantaasia ja isegi huumoriga.

Juutide, nagu karja, ajamine rongidesse on sobiv näide. See oleks võinud olla morbiidne, kuid siin esitati seda sürrealistliku elava pildina, olemata ülemäära teatraalne, ning stseen, kus juudi naine annab tagasi oma elu päästva Rootsi passi, et ta saaks olla koos oma perekonna ja sõpradega, oli eriti südantlõhestav ja Riina Airene poolt imeliselt lauldud.

Teises vaatuses tõuseb vangikong, kus sõjajärgne totalitaarne režiim hoiab Wallenbergi vangistuses, dramaatiliselt (ja ootamatult) põrandalt ülespoole, samal ajal kui erinevate tegelaskujudega, kes näivad olevat põgenenud *Disney World*ist (Miki Hiir, Piilupart Donald!) ühineb Ronald Reagan ja isegi Wallenbergi inkarnatsioon Elvis Presleyna. Ogar, jah, kuid see ei käinud kordagi närvidele ja esitus oli niivõrd veenev, et kannab tegevust pidurdamatult edasi.

Kõik see on säravalt lavastatud, tõeline *coup de théâtre*, mis pole sekundiksi igav, millega sobitub suurelt osalt tonaalne, ehkki kompromissitu kristalselt särav ja tohutult keerukas partituur (eriti suure löökpillide osa jaoks), mida esitati erakordselt hästi Arvo Volmeri, siinse loomingu juhi dirigendikepi all. "Wallenberg" on tänaseni ilmselt Tüüri ainus ooper. Ma loodan, et ta kirjutab veel oopereid, sest ta omab selgelt teatri jaoks oskusi ja annet.

Rootsi bariton Jesper Taube esitas nimiosa silmapaistvalt, mis selle tõenduse põhjal on kaasaegse ooperi üks nõudlikumaid rolle, valades välja kõik tunded ja füüsilisuse. Samuti mainimist väärt on bariton Priit Volmer, kes esines võimsalt Adolf Eichmannina, keda on libretos kujutatud kaalutleva, kuid halastamatult terve mõistusega kaabakana. Ooperis pole suuri naisrolle, kuid vokaalteos esitab kogu ulatuses rangeid nõudmisi kõikidele osatäitjatele.

Dmitri Bertman on tuntud oma võime poolest šokeerida, kuid selles lummavas ja provotseerivas lavastuses saavutas ta tragöödia ja huumori vastupandamatu kokkusulamise illustreerimaks suurt inimlikku lugu. See äratatakse uuesti ellu järgmisel hooajal ja see on vaatamist väärt.

Edmond Rostandi ülla tragöödia "Cyrano de Bergerac" võib-olla kõige kuulsam ooperi töötlus on kirjutatud Alfano poolt (mida mõned aastad tagasi meeldejäädavalt laulis Plácido Domingo New Yorgis ja seejärel Londonis), kuid see Eesti sõjajärgse heliloojaskonna ühe vanema liikme külluslikult romantiline ooper pole kaugeltki mitte silmapaistmatu.

Tamberg ei ole väljaspool Eestit eriti tuntud (millest on väga kahju) ja seda tööd peetakse tema parimaks tööks, olles üks neljast ooperist, mida ta on tänaseni kirjutanud. Pärast "Cyrano" kuulamist tahtsin innukalt ka teisi oopereid uurida. Selle lummava ja kaunilt loodud teose muusika on liigutav, väljendusrikas, partituur meisterlik ja see on suurepäraselt kirjutatud peamistele häälele. See on ka väga dramaatiline, mida toetab sillerdav ja sädelev orkestri poolt maalitud lõuend, mis oma kangelasliku, kompaktselt kromaatilise vaskpillidele kirjutatud osaga meenutab sageli Janáčeki varasemaid teoseid.

Tamberg armastab helendavaid läbikumavaid instrumentaalvärve, nii et partituur on täidetud tšelesta, harfi, kellamängu ja klaveriga koos arvukate eksootiliste löökpillidega, mis lisanduvad võluvael lummavale helimaastikule, mis toetavad vokaalpartiide kindlat käsitlemist tema poolt. Tema teoses on ka mõned suurepärased kooripartiid suurte ansamblistseenide jaoks ning tema vormitunnetus, teose ülestehitus ja dramaatiline tempo loomine tegid ooperi pinevaks ja dramaatiliseks, järgides ja täiendades Jaan Krossi pingelist libretot ning olles Rostandi originaali vaba adaptatsioon.

Kuid kogu teose suurimaks üllatuseks oli fakt, et see komponeeriti 1974. aastal, siinse Nõukogude okupatsiooni ajal – ometi on teos piinlikult mittetundvalt emotsionaalne ja romantiline. Võrreldes “lubatud” (ja heliliselt armetu) kaasaegse ooperiga, mida samal ajal kirjutati Prahast (mida ma mäletan liigagi hästi), oli see minu jaoks vaimustavaks üllatuseks. Inglisekeelsed subtiitrid tegid selle järgimise lihtsaks ja luuleteksti kanti hästi ette.

Usaldusväärne Neeme Kuningas on oskuslikult ja rikkaliku kujutlusvõimega adapteerinud varasema 1995. aastast pärit lavastuse ja säilitanud isegi mõned 1976. aasta originaallavastuse kujunduselemendid, kasutades samal ajal targalt minimaalset lähenemist.

See on niivõrd võimas ja intiimne inimlik draama ja selle edu sõltub lõplikult peaosaliste esituse intensiivsusest, mitte vaatamängust. Mõned rekvisiidid, puuduvad dekoratsioonid – välja arvatud juhuslikud tagantprojektsiooniga kujutused (värvilisest klaasist aken Roxane'i ja Christiani abielu stseenis, lahingustseeni punane tagasein) – kuid läbi kogu ooperi õhustiku valgustamine ja erakordsed esitused, eriti Rauno Elbilt nimiosas.

Elp on tohutu hääleulatusega ja lavalise kohalolekuga, imepäraselt varieeruva värvinguga kreemja häälega esilaulja. Olen kuulnud teda siin laulmas paljudes rollides, kuid tema Cyrano oli kaugelt parim. Ta oli lihtsalt erakordne, mitte üksnes vokaalselt (see on äärmiselt nõudlik roll), vaid ka oma füüsilise näitlemise poolest. Tihti võis mõista, mis toimub, juba üksnes tema kehakeele järgi.

Roxane'i laulis Angelika Mikk (kes oli äsja haige olnud, kuigi sellest oleks hädavaevu võinud aru saada) ja ta liikus selles äärmiselt raskes rollis (nagu modernne Zerbinetta kui suudate sellist asja ette kujutada) suhtelise kergusega.

Tenor Mati Kõrts tegi Roxane'i küündimatu armastaja Christiani suuremalt jaolt ebasümpaatse rolli usutavaks, kuigi ta paistis rolli jaoks pisut vana. Tema kolmanda vaatuse duett Roxane'iga oli eriti kaunilt lauldud.

Tamberg esitab ka ansamblile mõningad kurnavad nõudmised. Nii-nimetatud epiloog (tegelikult lühike neljas vaatus) algab pika koorilauluga, mida lauldakse täielikult *a capella*, mis teeb helistikus püsimise kriitiliseks, kui lõpuks tuleb sisse orkester koos Ragueneau'ga, kes toob uudise Cyrano saatusliku kallaletungi kohta.

Lõpduett sureva Cyrano ja Roxane'i vahel, kui ta saab teada Cyrano kohta tõe ja selle, kuidas ta Cyranod tegelikult armastab, oli imekena – pikad meloodilised käigud ja särav orkestratsioon. Cyrano surm andis draamale liigutavalt sõnatu kokkuvõtte.

Eraldi mainimist väärib dirigent Aivo Välja, kes hoidis asju kindlalt ohjes ja säilitas suure orkestri erakordse tasakaalu, andes samal ajal lauljatele kõik võimalused säramiseks. Kui mõnikord oligi ansambel pisut konarlik, ei kahjustanud see tõsiselt muljet.

Tambergi ooper on väga tore teos, mida ma tahaksin uuesti kuulata. Samuti väärib see tõlkimist ja rahvusvahelist esitamist. Esibaritoni jaoks on see kingitus ja õnneks kuulub see lähemas tulevikus siinsesse põhirepertuaari.