

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL OPERA REVIEW

Erkki-Sven Tüür, Wallenberg: at the Estonian National Opera, Tallinn, 5.6.2009*(GF)

The Staging Concept: Dmitri Bertman
Stage Design, Costumes and Staging: Ene-Liis Semper
Stage Directors: Dmitri Bertman, Neeme Kuningas
Lighting Artist: Neeme Jõks

Cast:

Wallenberg – Rauno Elp
Eichmann – Priit Volmer
Wallenberg 2 – Roland Liiv
German Officer – Jassi Zahharov
Ronald Reagan – Väino Puura
The First Survivor – Teele Jõks
The Second Survivor – Andres Köster
The Third Survivor – Mart Laur
The First Guest/Jacob Wallenberg – Mart Madiste
The Second Guest/American General – René Soom
The Third Guest/American Soldier – Aare Saal
The First Diplomat – Helen Lokuta
The Second Diplomat – Annaliisa Pillak
The Third Diplomat – Juuli Lill
Dame – Riina Aireenne
Woman – Aile Asszonyi
The First Russian Officer – Urmas Põldma
The Second Russian Officer – Vladislav Horuženko
The Three Gulag Prisoners – Villu Valdmaa, Mati Vaikmaa, Aare Kodasma
Wallenberg 3 – Vahur Agar
The Estonian National Opera Chorus and Symphony Orchestra / Risto Joost

Raoul Wallenberg (1912 - ?) was a member of the influential Swedish banking family who worked as a not too successful businessman around the world - including at least two visits to Budapest. In 1944 he was assigned to the Swedish legation there. His mission was to help save Hungarian Jews from being sent to the Nazi extermination camps. According to certain sources he managed to save about 100,000 Jews, though there is some disagreement as to how important his achievement really was. When the Russian army invaded Hungary in 1945 he was imprisoned, possibly due to suspicion of him being enrolled by the US secret service. What happened to him then is unclear. Official Soviet sources state that he died in prison in 1947 but there are reports that he had been seen at later dates. He has become a symbol for humanity and self-devotion and posthumously been awarded a lot of distinctions, not least honorary citizenship of the US; Sir Winston Churchill being the only other recipient.

Erkki-Sven Tüür's opera, based on Wallenberg's life, or rather the dramatic period in Budapest and his posthumous reputation, was commissioned by Theater Dortmund and premiered there on 5 May 2001. On 1 June 2007 it was first performed at the Estonian National Opera and immediately became a remarkable success. I visited Tallinn just a couple of weeks after the premiere but then the season was already over and after that I have been to a number of performances at the Estonian National Opera but not until now a have been

able to catch *Wallenberg*, which is now in its third year and counting – rather exceptional for a new opera. A conversation with Artistic Director Arvo Volmer in February this year (see interview) was a further instigation to see the opera and I was really overwhelmed.

By sheer coincidence I saw Dmitri Bertman's staging of *The Queen of Spades* in Stockholm ([review](#)) only a couple of weeks earlier and was quite annoyed by the over-busy production. He may be over-explicit here too but his point-making is far more motivated, and only makes

libretto is marvellous in its concentration, presenting the story in a series of episodes, tightly knitted together. There is a swarm of characters popping in and out of the action but the central individuals, Wallenberg and Eichmann, are no mere cardboard figures; they are properly three-dimensional and far from the archetypical black vs white characters too. Eichmann may be the evil genius but he has redeeming features and Wallenberg is no saint – even though Eichmann is dressed in pitch black and Wallenberg in shining white. Wallenberg's good intentions are even called in question. This does in no way reduce the message of humanity that permeates the opera but in the end, when the 'real' Wallenberg is dead – or at least almost so – and Wallenberg 2 appears, in silver-lined white and Elvis Presley hair-style, reality is pushed in the background and Wallenberg the idol, the icon, is pushed forward. The concluding Wallenberg Circus, with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck as hosts, a crooning Disney-inspired women's choir and some ultra-parodical American characters – including a general in sore need of a toilet and Ronald Reagan, in white cowboy hat, depicted as a puppet – becomes a farce.

In a drama where so much is centred around the possibility of surviving this is of course grotesque – and there are other scenes as well where the parody elements are to the fore – but the performance never loses sight of the overriding message and at the end of this barely two-hour-long performance, one is still deeply affected.

The action takes place on a bare inclined plane, built over the orchestra pit, so the orchestra and conductor are invisible. Lighting effects are more important than the few props that are utilized: a table that is being lowered and raised, a rostrum that is carried in during the Wallenberg Circus. Costumes are realistic though Eichmann's uniform has a certain likeness to a toreador's outfit. The three female diplomats are for some reason dressed in beautiful 18th century robes at their first entrance. As hopefully can be understood from my description, the whole production is multifarious and contrasts wealth with poverty, freedom with imprisonment. In fact this later aspect frames the proceedings with survivors in rags entering in total darkness and complete silence, carrying candles, sitting down on the empty floor, forming a Jewish star. In the final scene they enter again and surround Wallenberg 3, a mute role, lying crucified on the bare floor.

It was, I believe, impossible for Erkki-Sven Tüür to express these bleak and horrifying tidings in easy listening, ingratiating musical terms. There is no room for hummable melodies and simple major and minor chords – apart from the aforementioned women's chorus in the final scene. Instead, the score is filled with harsh harmonies, dissonances, aggressive brass choruses and a lot of percussion. But it is marvellously expressive and many-faceted music that feels exactly attuned to the libretto and it is alive and descriptive, rhythmic and full of variety. Visitors who are not normally at home in contemporary music may at first be somewhat taken aback, but very soon even the most averse listener must be caught by the powerful musical language and the organic concord between music and text. The choral passages in particular are invested with great intensity and hypnotic harsh beauty and there is a brief passage of airy impressionist orchestral music when the yellow autumn leaves are floating down over Budapest. The central characters have a lot of solo singing to execute, not exactly arias but long scenes that no doubt are demanding but which also demonstrate Tüür's fine sense for the human voice.

The solo singing is uniformly on a high level and it may be unfair to mention some of the singers in preference of others. However, Rauno Elp makes Wallenberg a powerful as well as sensitive character and the magnificent black-voiced bass Priit Volmer, whom I have praised on several earlier occasions, is a formidable Adolf Eichmann. The three diplomats, sung by Helen Lokuta, Annaliisa Pillak and Juuli Lill also stand out. But this is very much an ensemble

opera and the whole cast are truly committed in singing as well as acting. The conductor this evening was the young Risto Joost, who also is a countertenor, and he inspired his forces to playing and choral singing of the standard that one expects from the Estonian National Opera these days but that can't be taken for granted anywhere in the world.

This was a truly engrossing experience and I hope it will remain in the repertoire for years to come, maybe also spreading to other stages through guest appearances. This production was recorded live in September 2007 and is available on DVD. The cast is almost identical – the major differences are that the National Opera's music director Arvo Volmer is conducting and that the title role is sung by Swedish baritone Jesper Taube. A review of that DVD will appear before long.

Göran Forsling