

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL OPERA REVIEW

Kálmán, Silva, Die Csárdásfürstin (Premiere): at the Estonian National Opera, Tallinn, 16.9.2010 (GF)

Stage Director and Designer – Mart Sander

Choreographer – Marina Kesler

Lighting Designer – Hellar Bergmann

Cast:

Silva Varescu – Janne Ševtšenko

Prince Leopold – Tõnu Kilgas

Anhilte, his wife – Riina Airene

Edwin, their son – Andres Köster

Stasi – Maris Liloson

Boni – Urmas Pöldma

Feri – Väino Puura

MacGrave, ambassador of the USA – Sir Richard Rowlands

Estonian National Opera Chorus, Orchestra and Estonian National Ballet / Jüri Alperden.

Together with Franz Lehár (1870 – 1948), the somewhat younger Emmerich Kálmán (1882 – 1953) was the most successful composer of the so called Silver Age of Viennese operetta during the first quarter of the 20th century. Both were Hungarian born but spent most of their lives in the Austrian capital. *Die Csárdásfürstin* premiered in 1915 is arguably Kálmán's best work and as a melodist he surpasses even Lehár. This operetta is a formidable string of pearls of beautiful and captivating tunes from beginning to end. Where Lehár scores is in compositional technique and – not least – in sophisticated orchestration. Kálmán often paints with broad glaring brushstrokes, often with the brass instruments (especially the trumpets) dominating the pallet. This is a subjective opinion of course and I can easily overlook this 'deficiency' when faced with so many ravishing melodies. They have been familiar to me for many years, mainly through recordings. The EMI set from the 1960s, conducted by Willy Mattes and with Anneliese Rothenberger and Nicolai Gedda in the leading roles has long been a great favourite. Unfortunately I have had very little opportunity to see a staged production. I was lucky to catch a performance at Volksoper in Vienna some eight years ago and here I had a new chance in Tallinn.

It was a production very much to my taste. The sets were lavish, historically correct WW1 upper class costumes matching (the men invariably in tailcoats) and over-theatrical acting to give a healthy distance to the proceedings. The ballet was a further attraction and, being performed in Estonian by native speakers, the action was kept on the move - often a problem with operetta where the spoken dialogue can be rather tiring. Director Mart Sander also had the courage to let some musical numbers be performed 'unadulterated' just sung without background acting. It very often seems that directors distrust the audience's patience and thus have to arrange side-plots. I am very grateful to Mart Sander that he allowed some of the finest musical moments to be just fine *musical* moments.

Where I still have objections is in the first scene of the operetta in which some arguing developed into a mass fight. Fighting for fun on a stage is against my anti-violence principles. It was professionally and skilfully done, no doubt about that, but completely unnecessary.

Musically, this was a splendid performance with Jüri Alperden drawing stirring rhythmic playing from the orchestra as well as some languorous backgrounds for the tear-jerking love singing. And here the leading couple Silva and Edwin reaped laurels with their well focused singing. Janne Ševtšenko at times allowed her vibrato to spread unduly but by and large hers was a splendid reading, both vocally and scenically. Andres Köster's beautiful and effortless lyric tenor felt rather pale in the first act but in the second act he grew and found the right glow in the singing. Urmas Pöldma's intensely acted Boni was a decided asset to the performance and it was a great tragedy that he injured his left leg at the end of Act II; so seriously in fact that he had to be taken by ambulance to hospital for immediate operation of a ruptured Achilles' tendon. In his place stage director Mart Sander

Stasi – Maris Liloson

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Apart from the first act taking some time to settle – but that is more Kálmán's fault than the ensemble's - the present production of *Silva* is a resounding success, which will hopefully play to sold out houses for years to come. Operetta lovers shouldn't miss the opportunity to see and hear one of the most satisfying works in the genre.

Göran Forsling