

playing. Every now and then one caught snatches of the great composer Strauss could be, but all that did was prompt an urge to revisit *Rosenkavalier*. As so often with Strauss, when the tables had been cleared, Arabella had given Mandryka a glass of water, and the valet had blown out the last candle, not a rack was left behind. MICHAEL HENDERSON

## China

### Hong Kong

The first ever performance of *Lohengrin* in Hong Kong was given by the SAVONLINNA OPERA FESTIVAL on March 21 under the aegis of the HONG KONG ARTS FESTIVAL. Plucked from its original setting at Olavinlinna, the production may have shed some of its mystical aura, which was not entirely compensated for by Wolfgang Goebbel's lighting designs. Hermann Feuchter's set—a castle facade fronted by broad stairways with a huge totem-like cross in the forecourt—looked rather dour in the narrower confines of the CULTURAL CENTRE GRAND THEATRE. Nevertheless, Roman Hovenbitzer's staging, rich in symbolism (which highlighted the irreconcilability of reality and utopia) and perceptive in *Personenregie*, did well in illuminating the dilemmas of the characters as well as in the galvanizing effect the emergence of an anonymous yet charismatic leader has on a community gripped by political uncertainty. It also brought home a message that may still be relevant today—that certain things, when explained prematurely or too exhaustively, lose their power to inspire, resulting in missed opportunities that we might come to regret.

As the swan knight, Bryan Register sang expressively, but his bright tenor was not always under perfect control and this somewhat diminished the stature of his performance. Kirsten Chambers charted Elsa's psychological progression with conviction, though her vibrant soprano lacked the ideal limpidity for the dreamier sections. Jordanka Milkova infused Ortrud's every word with malice, but she could have made more of 'Entweihete Götter'. Thomas Hall tackled the vocally treacherous role of Telramund with tremendous gusto, while Wilhelm Schwinghammer's commanding Heinrich and Matias Tosi's robust Herald were likewise excellent. The Savonlinna Festival Chorus delivered swathes of lush sound and was attentive to the dynamic gradations in Wagner's choral writing. Under Jari Hämäläinen's purposeful direction, the shimmering strings and swaggering brass of the Hong Kong Philharmonic provided a fitting orchestral counterpart to this romantic drama. VINCENT H.K. LAU

## Estonia

### Tallinn

When Hindemith found himself out of fashion in the cultural realignment that followed World War II, he must have recognized that history was repeating itself. He had been the new composer Germany so badly needed at the end of World War I, when Strauss fell out of step with the times. Now his response, like Strauss's, was to carry on composing regardless, and his music took on a deeper melancholy—in his short study of the composer, Ian Kemp characterizes this sadness in Hindemith's music as going beyond personal sentiment and being akin to a natural phenomenon such as the poignancy of falling rain—and addressed the biggest questions in life. His two final

operas, though contrasting in their scale—sprawling versus intimate, cosmic versus domestic—sum up his artistic credo. Whereas the Kepler-inspired *Die Harmonie der Welt* (1957) explores notions of the infinite universe, *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1962) represents a world of no beginnings and no ends, taking as its basis Thornton Wilder's play about the unending cycles of birth and death as presented in a family scene, with succeeding generations gathered around the same Christmas table.

Despite the modest demands made by this poignant masterpiece, *The Long Christmas Dinner* remains a rarity—an indication of Hindemith's continuing neglect. But the adventurous ESTONIAN NATIONAL OPERA (which next season stages the composer's first big opera, *Cardillac*) has made a renewed case for the work, with a performance that captures all the tender translucence of the piece. It was, after all, the final opera of a composer (he was to die just after Christmas 1963) who had always had a soft side; the recently recorded *Tuttifantchen* (cpo 777 802-2), a 1922 children's Christmas play, is another reminder of this. It also marked a return to the one-act form he had explored so extensively at the beginning of his career (not least for a practical reason—the unaffordability of manuscript paper in Weimar Germany). Having developed a close affinity with American culture during his years of wartime exile, Hindemith turned for his libretto not only to Wilder's play but to the playwright himself, who—though he made a habit of turning composers down—happily cooperated. His text is a brilliant distillation, keeping certain lines verbatim, simplifying others while making some anew. The play's symmetries and repetitions are well suited to musical forms, and the resulting libretto—with no extraneous detail—

■ Hindemith's 'Long Christmas Dinner' in Tallinn, with (l. to r.) Teele Jõks, Janne Ševišenko, Oliver Kuusik and Kristel Pärtna



is perhaps even more haunting than the original itself. Stage directions follow the play, with three entrances: a portal on the audience's right through which characters enter or are 'born', a portal on the left signifying death, and a neutral opening in the middle.

It may seem strange that Hindemith wrote so many operas when his music is not inherently dramatic, but opera had been in his bones since his early Frankfurt days as leader of the orchestra at the Oper (he must be the only major composer to have experience of playing a lot of Wagner in the pit). In *The Long Christmas Dinner* he employs not so much Leitmotifs as 'characteristic motifs', while the Anglo-Saxon tone of the piece is underlined by quotes from 'God rest ye merry, gentlemen' at the opera's opening and close. A highlight is 'We talk about the weather', a diatonic and bittersweet sextet in which five of the characters chatter inconsequentially while the last one (Sam) sings a melancholy serenade as he prepares to go off to war in Europe, exiting via the left portal. The work was premiered in Mannheim at Christmas 1962 in Hindemith's own German translation of the libretto, and first heard in English the following spring at Juilliard, with the composer himself conducting.

This first Estonian performance was given in an Estonian translation—rightly, for the conversational nature of the piece demands attentive listening—and in celebration of the veteran director Arne Mikk's 80th birthday. His production was beautifully and simply accomplished, capturing the way in which 90 years are distilled into one meal. Staged in the theatre's CHAMBER HALL, and with the orchestra hidden behind the walls of the set, the designs (by Kristi Soe) were economical and effective. Two family portraits and a number of blank picture frames hung on the wall at the start, with the empty ones being turned around to reveal further portraits as the characters passed on; at the end of the sextet, Sam (played here by Andres Köster) turned over his own portrait before exiting. Further images were projected at key moments—showing an old Indian woman during the opening discussion about earlier inhabitants on the land, evoking Alaska when Brandon returns from the north, or amplifying references to World War I. Costumes were of the period, and little details were added as time progressed—greying hair or bushier whiskers, a pair of glasses here and there. Simple imagery spoke profoundly: the black-shrouded pram, for instance, that was wheeled across the stage from one portal to the other.

The opera's symmetry was also underlined in the casting of the same singer as Mother Bayard at the beginning and Ermengarde at the end; Annaliisa Pillak did well in both parts and played the old Mother Bayard sensitively. Janne Ševtšenko disclosed a gleaming soprano as Lucia, and Rauno Elp was on good form as Roderick, singing with the naturalness of speech. All were fine actors, but Oliver Kuusik and Teele Jõks were especially lively as Charles and Genevieve. Kristel Pärtna proved herself a bright soubrette as Leonora, and Mart Madiste's defiant youth of a Roderick II injected tension towards the end.

There is not a wasted note in the score, yet this is not a piece that plays itself: it still takes a sympathetic conductor to find the right tone. The April 27 performance under Risto Joost captured the melancholy spirit that is in slightly short supply on the work's only recording (a performance in German), starting with a slower prelude and establishing a more concentrated, elegiac atmosphere. A recording in English is surely overdue: will someone record Leon Botstein's American Symphony Orchestra performance at Lincoln Center this coming December?

JOHN ALLISON



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