

◀ TALLINN

National symbol: Estonian National Opera's home, known as 'The Estonia', has an iconic place in the cityscape of Tallinn today. The opera house, which celebrated its centenary in 2013, was originally the work of the celebrated Finnish architect Armas Lindgren and Finland's first female architect, Olivia Mathilde Lönn. Their initial designs were decidedly Art Nouveau, in keeping with the nationalist style that was in vogue at the start of the 20th century. By the time it was completed, however, The Estonia's design had tipped towards the fashion for Neoclassicism.

The building is unusual in shape, with a long colonnaded façade that conceals a concert hall and opera theatre linked by a series of function rooms. Nothing this big nor expensive had been built in Estonia for centuries.

Building blocks: Estonian National Opera's general director, Aivar Mäe, who trained as a conductor and spent ten years as a rock singer, speaks of the theatre with a mixture of pride and frustration: 'The building of this house was a big nationalistic act. At the time there were only 75,000 Estonians in Tallinn and they were living in simple two-storey houses. There had been nothing like this. It took government money and loans from banks. Two thirds of them never got it back!'

Since he took the helm of Estonian National Opera in 2009, Mäe has presided over a dynamic era of modernisation, opening up the theatre to global trends and influences and cultivating a new audience from a younger, more liberal generation of Estonians.

One of Mäe's most urgent wishes is to build a new opera house in Tallinn, fit for the 21st century. 'The acoustics of the current theatre are not good,' he says. If Tallinn is to be a serious player in Europe's cultural scene, says Mäe, a city-centre site has to be found for an iconic new building. He has an eye, he adds, on Tallinn's marina – a waterfront site that would echo new performing arts venues in Oslo, and Bergen and Reykjavik. The current economic crisis has made this dream seem more distant than ever, but Mäe is a determined man.

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▲ 'The Estonia', an iconic feature of Tallinn's cityscape