

Murdering the customers, murdering the score: *Cardillac* in Estonia

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By [Ilana Walder-Biesanz](#), 16 May 2015

“First time in Estonia!” read the posters and brochures for [Estonian National Opera](#)’s premiere of *Cardillac*, excited exclamation point and all. [Hindemith](#)’s pithy, dark work is generally infrequently performed. It has a tight dramatic plot, but its sometimes-chaotic music and heavy vocal demands can make it difficult to pull off. While the Estonian National Opera’s production is visually striking, the orchestra and singers sometimes get tripped up by Hindemith’s score.



Rauno Elp (Cardillac) and Tamara Gallo (Cardillac's daughter)

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[Cardillac](#) tells the story of a series of murders tied to the jeweler Cardillac’s creations. Mysteriously, everyone who purchases one of his works gets stabbed. In the first act, a lady puts her cavalier to the test: is he brave enough to purchase and bring her Cardillac’s most beautiful work? He does, and he meets his inevitable end. In the next two acts, an officer who loves Cardillac’s daughter tries to persuade her to run away with him. She refuses; when the officer goes to seek her father’s permission for their marriage instead, he realizes that Cardillac loves his jewelry more than his daughter. The officer buys a gold chain. The murderer comes for the officer, but the officer overpowers and unmasks him – only to find

that it is Cardillac himself! He tells Cardillac to flee and accuses a gold merchant instead. But as the mob insults the murderer, Cardillac reveals his own guilt. He is killed by the mob. As his daughter and her lover comfort the dying goldsmith and recognize the heroic glory of his amoral devotion to his work, Cardillac reaches not for his daughter, but for the gold chain around her neck.

The staging by Vilppu Kiljunen and set by Kimmo Viskari are spot-on. Singers in exaggerated, period-inspired costumes stumble across an angular, expressionistic set. Trap doors in the walls and floor allow the mob to appear and disappear suddenly. The production's colour palette of reds, oranges, black and white combine with the sharp corners and surprise entrances to create an atmosphere of suspense and terror – perfect for what's essentially a crime thriller in music. Well-coordinated stylized gestures convey events like the mob's lynching of Cardillac more effectively than a messier, more naturalistic staging could.



Sergiu Saplacan (The Cavalier) and Heli Veskus (The Lady)
© Harri Rospu

Where this show struggles is with the music. Hindemith's score always has a lot happening, and it demands crisp playing and strong conductorial choices about which instruments are leading at any given point. Conductor Vello Pähn doesn't often make those decisions clear; as a result, the music becomes muddled. Hindemith was famously criticized as an "atonal noisemaker". He isn't, but the reading of his score on Thursday night sometimes justified such an accusation. Additionally, the orchestra frequently overwhelmed the singers, so that their voices became just one more instrument in the chaotic musical texture.

The singing itself was uneven. Two of the Estonian National Opera's in-house singers impressed most. As Cardillac, Rauno Elp deployed an expressive baritone voice in the role's demanding range, sometimes singing lyrically and sometimes speech-singing. His acting perfectly conveyed the goldsmith's heroic insanity and was especially impressive during his internal debate about whether to kill the officer. The other stand-out vocal performance came from Heli Veskus as the lady. Her voice is both huge and honey-sweet, and her aria at the beginning of the second scene was the musical highlight of the night. She also had fabulous

chemistry with her cavalier (Sergiu Saplacan), but while his solid tenor voice was up to the role's demands, it was no match for Veskus' soprano.



Jyrki Anttila (The Officer) and Tamara Gallo (Cardillac's daughter)
© Harri Rospu

The other couple struggled more. Cardillac's daughter (Tamara Gallo) and the officer (Jyrki Anttila) seemed stiff and awkward on stage together. Their voices were also difficult to hear. During the *a cappella* section at the opera's end, I was surprised by the smooth, warm quality of Gallo's voice, which had previously been hard to pick out. Anttila still failed to impress. The role is admittedly a thankless one – the officer must fight a large orchestra and sing many decidedly unmelodic phrases – but the harshness and strained quality of Anttila's tenor didn't make much of it. The chorus also encountered difficulties. The women were quite audible and produced a glorious, edgy sound, but the men (who seemed to be much fewer in number) couldn't always make themselves heard. As a whole, the chorus had coordination issues, with some mistaken timings for cut-offs and entrances.

Overall, this staging fits *Cardillac* perfectly, but Hindemith's idiosyncratic musical idiom isn't done justice by the conductor and orchestra. It's worth taking this chance to see an exciting and rarely performed piece, but know that the reading you'll hear doesn't do the score justice.