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Brilliant Criminal Opera in Tallinn

May 26, 2015

Hindemith *Cardillac* Soloists, Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Vello Pähn (conductor). Estonian National Opera, Tallinn 14.5.2015. Premiere (GF)

Cast:

Cardillac, the goldsmith: Rauno Elp
Cardillac's daughter: Tamara Gallo
The Officer: Jyrki Anttila
The Gold Merchant: Mart Laur
The Cavalier: Sergiu Saplacan
The Lady: Heli Veskus
The Police Chief: Pavlo Balakin

Production:

Stage Director: Vilppu Kiljunen
Designer: Kimmo Viskari
Lighting Designer: Anton Kulagin

Hindemith's "Brilliant Criminal Opera" *Cardillac* is a fairly rare bird in the world's opera houses but this spring season it is produced in three houses almost simultaneously: Tallinn (14 May – 6 June), Flensburg (6 June – 14 July) and Vienna State Opera (22 – 29 June). The story, based on the short story *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, is certainly ghastly. The setting is Paris in the 17th century. Cardillac is a goldsmith held in high esteem by the Parisians for his priceless jewellery, which he loves more than he loves his daughter, so much that he searches out his customers and murders them to get his creations back. In the end he admits that he is the mysterious murderer that everybody is frightened of, but he shows no repentance and the crowd lynches him. The last thing he does before dying is to try to grab a golden chain, not to hold the hand of his daughter.

There is an obvious parallel with Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* insofar as man's thirst for gold becomes fatal. Musically there is no connection between the works. Hindemith's much talked of "New Objectivity" in the 1920s, when the work was created, was instead a reaction against Wagner and the late romantic ideals. At the same time Hindemith also adopted structures from a much earlier opera tradition and wrote a number opera with arias, duets and even a quartet. There is even solo instrumental obligato parts in the manner of many of

Johann Sebastian Bach's arias. Cardillac's Daughter's aria has solos from oboe, French horn and violin. Another possible parallel is to Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, when the flirtatious but slightly aged Lady in the first act sings her aria about the time that passes so swiftly. Hindemith's music is hardly as sophisticated as Strauss's or Alban Berg's (to mention a near contemporaneous composer – *Wozzeck* was premiered less than a year before *Cardillac*) but it is expressive and powerful and easier to assimilate for a first-time visitor to a 'modern' opera than *Wozzeck*. The chorus has a lot to do and in the opening of the opera, when the Parisians are panicking from fear of the murderer, they are hiding behind blood-red walls and floor with lids that are opened when they are singing. This scene is a spot-on illustration of a society in frustrating terror and it paves the way for a totally captivating production up to the very end with the off-stage chorus a thing of great beauty. Sets and costumes are fanciful and lends a surrealistic atmosphere to the proceedings.

I have praised the Estonian National Opera Orchestra several times before – I was deeply impressed when I heard them playing in *Tristan und Isolde* seven years ago and in modern works they have also showed their paces. Here they deliver assured playing that makes one believe that this is music that is their bread and butter. As a matter of fact this is the first time ever that this music is being played in Estonia. Vello Pähn can be proud of his forces.

Finnish Director Vilppu Kiljunen has also worked wonders with his international cast. Romanian tenor Sergiu Saplacan is a suitably amorous Cavalier in the scenes with the horny Lady, a role that Heli Veskus plays very convincingly and she sings gloriously in her big aria. Mart Laur never lets things down and his Gold Merchant is another fine creation. As Cardillac's Daughter American soprano Tamara Gallo is youthful and has a great voice. Her suitor, the nameless Officer (Cardillac is the only character in this opera with a name) is impressively sung by Finnish tenor Jyrki Anttila, who seems to be moving towards more dramatic roles nowadays. He is a splendid actor as well.

But the most important role is of course Cardillac, the goldsmith himself, and here Rauno Elp adds another memorable portrait to his CV. I have lost count on how many roles I have seen him in. Occasionally his singing has been a bit uneven but he is masterly at getting into a role and identify with it: Mozart, Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, Wagner, Prokofiev, Tüür's *Wallenberg* and now Cardillac, which arguably is his greatest achievement so far. He has enormous stage presence and perfect timing. There are only four performances of *Cardillac* this spring but it will return with one performance in September. The opportunities to see this opera are few and I urge readers to give it a try. This Tallinn production is a triumph for all involved.

Göran Forsling