

Elke Albrecht &
Eeva-Taina Forsius-Schibli (eds.)



FINLAND - A NATION OF OPERA

19 essays about contemporary opera



Muusakirjat

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Translation into English by Jaakko Mäntyjärvi

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Foreword

JORMA SILVASTI

I first came into contact with opera when singing in the Savonlinna Opera Festival Choir at the age of 15–16. The year was 1975 and the occasion was the premiere of *Ratsumies* (The Horseman) by Aulis Sallinen, which also marked the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Olavinlinna Castle, the festival venue. Afterwards, we the performers were euphoric: although we could have no inkling of what was about to unfold, we did feel we were part of something larger, an emerging process that would eventually come to be called the Finnish opera boom. For myself, this experience in the summer of 1975 inspired me to take singing lessons.

At that time, Olavinlinna Castle in the town of Savonlinna in Eastern Finland was the only large-scale opera performance venue in Finland, and the opera boom that the festival launched can now be seen as an important boost for the project to build a new Opera House in Helsinki. After many twists and turns, the new Opera House was inaugurated in 1993, marking the ascent of the Finnish National Opera to international prominence. This achievement is a tribute to the status of Finnish contemporary opera and by extension elevates our national self-esteem.

Gradually, a broad range of new works emerged that enabled musicians, particularly singers, to perform opera in their native language. Composers explored today's society, Finnish history and folk poetry as sources for opera librettos. The entire production community – directors, singers, musicians – engaged in experiments in form, style, composition technique and new approaches. These new departures had a way of attracting new audiences too.

To my mind, all this was put into words most aptly by Aulis Sallinen in an interview: “Do you really imagine that central European provincialism is somehow more universal than Finnish provincialism?”

World premieres have always attracted much attention in Finland, yet revitalising the repertoire remains a major current challenge in our field. There is an incredible range of operas out there, a true embarrassment of riches for opera producers to choose from. The Savonlinna Opera Festival aims to make an effort to contribute to a renewal of the core repertoire as far as a summer festival can within its resources, but the stated mission of the Finnish National Opera to produce works of Finnish national significance is also an important part of cherishing our national culture.

Savonlinna, nestled amidst the gorgeous scenery of the Finnish lakeland, is an excellent and unique venue for both traditional and contemporary opera, for both grand dramatic productions and intimate performances for the whole family. These help the next generation, our future audiences, to enter and explore the mysterious and wonderful world of opera.

The writers contributing to this compendium form a significant part of the unique phenomenon of Finnish opera, as indeed do many other composers not featured here. In their music and their writings, they enshrine the multitude of nuances and variations that may be found in this field. However different they may be in approach and style, they have all written works that provide audiences with unforgettable opera experiences and contribute for their part to the continuation of this grand tradition.

Jorma Silvasti

Artistic Director of the Savonlinna Opera Festival
Savonlinna, August 2015

Foreword by the editors

ELKE ALBRECHT & EEVA-TAINA FORSIUS-SCHIBLI

Finland's two leading opera institutions recently celebrated their 100th anniversary: the Finnish National Opera in 2011 and the Savonlinna Opera Festival in 2012. In the run-up to these celebrations, in summer 2010 to be precise, we conceived the idea of publishing a collection of essays by Finnish composers discussing their opera output. We already knew that Finland would be the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in autumn 2014, and as a multi-national and bilingual editing team we naturally had an interest in this. This was why the plan was to translate the book into German first and into English later. Recent decades have seen Finnish operas transcending our national borders, and the Finnish opera boom that started in 1975 is an acknowledged phenomenon among international cognoscenti. As Atso Almila and Jukka Linkola perceptively write in their respective essays, "we are a nation of opera" (this quotation was the title of the original edition) and "we cannot live in a museum".

What we wanted to offer Finnish opera composers – the heart, soul and driving force of a unique phenomenon – was an open forum for writing about what it is like to be an opera composer in this day and age. Not everyone whom we approached agreed to contribute. Some felt that a composer should only express himself in his music. Others simply did not have the time to write an essay by the deadline, which was dictated by the timetable of the Frankfurt Book Fair. Still others said that they wanted to think about it a bit longer, saying they may return to the subject at some point in the future.

What we wanted to offer opera lovers was an opportunity to understand what it means for the creator of a work to be at the centre of a gigantic production process and what all that involves.

The only limitation we imposed on our contributors was that their essay had to be principally about opera, but in all other respects they were free to write in any style or with any approach they chose, from systematic analysis to humorous anecdotes. We wanted to gain a highly diverse and colourful documentation of the work of an opera composer working in Finland, with all of its positive as well as negative aspects and feelings. Discussion of opera as an art form and how it has changed, and of the status of opera in the past and the present, were also welcomed. It was of crucial importance for us to preserve the authenticity, colour and style of the essays we received, and for this reason we only performed minimal editing on them, mainly to correct typographical errors and punctuation, and so on.

We sent our contributors a list of questions to get them started in the process of thinking about their essay. It goes without saying that they were at liberty to ignore it completely if they chose. Its purpose was to point out that even the tiniest practical details may be interesting to an outsider. As we read the essays that came in, we found that many of our questions were reflected in the texts, sometimes even as structural elements. We therefore decided that the reader too should know the questions.

- Why write an opera in this day and age?
- For whom do you write music?
- What are your influences?
- How do you find ideas or inspiration?
- How do you choose a topic?
- What is your relationship to the *Kalevala* and other national subjects?
- What dramaturgical concepts do you employ, or favour?
- Where do your librettos come from?
- Do you write your own librettos?
- How does your composition process work in practice? Do you use pencil and paper, or a computer?
- How do you technically prepare for the process of composing an opera?
- Do you collaborate with singers and other musicians? If so, how?
- What is the status of opera in Finland today? Is contemporary music in general, and contemporary opera in particular, somehow special in Finland?
- What is it like to write an opera to a commission?
- Do you collaborate with cultural authorities and (foreign) opera houses?
- What happens after a world premiere? Are your works performed in other productions in Finland and/or abroad?

- How has writing an opera affected how you write other works? Has it had any stylistic influence?
- How do you see the future of opera?

For the benefit of readers not familiar with Finnish history and culture, we have provided a glossary of names and terms.

We would like to extend our special thanks to Jorma Silvasti, the current Director of the Savonlinna Opera Festival, for contributing a foreword; Tiina Lehtoranta and Johanna Pitkänen from the Finnish Literature Exchange (FILI) for their ongoing support and advice; Rainer Oesch, our legal counsel; Sigfried Schibli for much practical advice; Claus Carlsen for kindly letting us have his camera; Pekka Hako and Maarit Kytöharju for letting us have some photos; Kiti Häkinen, Katja Kuuramaa and the cultural-co-operative Vehrä, the Finnish publisher of the original edition, for giving us permission to use and edit one of the original covers; our translator into English, Jaakko Mäntyjärvi; our language editor, Peter Kislinger; Alfred Kordelin Foundation for financially supporting the translations; and, finally, Pro Musica Foundation for endowing the editor with a research grant.

Last but not least, we would like to thank the most important people of all: the composers who wrote us an essay. Without them, this book would not exist.

Elke Albrecht & Eeva-Taina Forsius-Schibli
Helsinki & Basel, August 2015

Is it all over for opera?

KALEVI AHO

In 1967, composer and conductor Pierre Boulez declared in the now notorious provocative interview for the German *Der Spiegel* magazine: “Blow up the opera houses!”¹ As far as Boulez was concerned, the history of opera ended with Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* – he said that not a single proper opera worth mentioning had been written since then. Boulez considered even the quite successful modernist operas of Hans Werner Henze to be old-fashioned rubbish and compared Henze to Charles de Gaulle, the then President of France, quipping that he could produce any kind of crap because he thought he would be king forever. Mauricio Kagel and György Ligeti lacked a sufficiently broad expertise of theatre, Boulez went on, and he derided Boris Blacher’s recent opera *Zwischenfälle bei einer Notlandung* (Incidents after a crash landing) as being nothing more than film music.

Boulez was irritated by the fact that all the opera houses of the world programmed the same narrow core repertoire. He considered Paris to be an especially provincial opera city; he felt that the Paris Opera was full of dust and shit – a threadbare museum that catered mainly to tourists.

However, all this in no way prevented Boulez from conducting *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, which is a museum to Wagner if anything, in 1967. His view was that *Parsifal* was to a great extent absolute music that simply needed to be cleansed of all the late Romantic layers mistakenly imposed on it.

¹ ‘Sprengt die Opernhäuser in die Luft’, interview with Boulez by Felix Schmidt and Jürgen Hohmeyer, *Der Spiegel* 40/1967 (25 September 1967).

So is it all over for opera? Even today, the repertoire of the world's opera houses consists largely of the same 20 to 30 works as in the 1960s: Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Strauss... Contemporary operas are being written all the time, and Finland has enjoyed a particularly remarkable opera boom, but they never seem to have staying power. However impressive and successful a new opera may seem, it is almost axiomatic that after a couple of productions it will remain on the shelf gathering dust. When opera houses wish to revitalise their repertoire, they usually go for an obscure 19th-century work rather than anything more recent.

Finland is a fortunate exception in that a handful of contemporary operas have indeed established themselves in the core repertoire. The most successful Finnish opera of all time is *Viimeiset kiusaukset* (The Last Temptations) by Joonas Kokkonen, premièred in 1975. Operas by composers such as Sallinen, Rautavaara and Ilkka Kuusisto are also staged more or less regularly.

Having said that, the default is still that once a new opera has been premièred, it will sink into obscurity. Despite this apparently depressing fact, most composers still dream of writing an opera. Why is that?

For me, the answer is simple: opera is an art form with a unique fascination that stimulates the imagination and fires up the emotions. Also, an opera has both words and music. In opera, you can clearly express things that you cannot express with music alone.

This is why I have written five operas. The most important element for me is the libretto. It has to be something that I can identify with and can use to convey something important to viewers and listeners. A libretto has to be dramaturgically feasible, specifically in the context of opera. I was never interested in writing operas where the text is chopped up into tiny bits, obscuring the meaning of the text. My purpose in opera has always been to communicate directly to the viewer-listener, while in instrumental music my approach is more abstract.

For an opera to work in the way the composer intended, it must be directed and staged in a way that does justice to the work and enhances its core nature. The kind of *Regietheater* that has become increasingly common since the 1960s is quite the opposite, with the director superimposing a new and modern staging on an old work while retaining the original words and music. This may have the effect of rendering the story unrecognisable and incomprehensible for the audience.

Modernised stagings of old operas can be impressive when the director has confidence in the underlying narrative and the music. As an example, I might mention Patrice Chéreau's production of Wagner's *Ring*, which was booed at its premiere in 1976 but given a standing ovation with bravos lasting 45 minutes at its final performance in 1980. I also enjoyed the imaginative production of Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* directed by Dario

Finland is a nation of opera. Nowhere else in the world are there as many contemporary operas being produced per capita as in Finland. Finnish audiences are receptive and interested, and indeed proud of the high quality of Finland's music culture.

But what is it to be an opera composer in Finland and in today's increasingly globalised society? In this book, editors Elke Albrecht and Eeva-Taina Forsius-Schibli provide facts and up-to-date information but principally give composers themselves a voice in a collection of essays with personal musings concerning everything about opera, from its history to its aesthetic principles. For the reader, this yields a unique opportunity to glance behind the scenes of the incredibly complex production process of the joint artwork that is opera. Along the way, we learn of the meaning of success and also something of the downside of artistic creativity.

The book includes contributions by Kalevi Aho, Atso Almila, Markus Fagerudd, Paavo Heininen, Mikko Heiniö, Heinz-Juhani Hofmann, Pekka Jalkanen, Olli Kortekangas, Juha T. Koskinen, Ilkka Kuusisto, Timo-Juhani Kyllönen, Jukka Linkola, Ulf Pulkkinen, Veli-Matti Puumala, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Herman Rechberger, Kaija Saariaho, Aulis Sallinen and Tapio Tuomela as well as a preface by Jorma Silvasti.

Elke Albrecht is an Austrian-German musicologist and music theatre scholar resident in Helsinki. She completed a doctorate at the University of Vienna on operas based on the Kalevala. Her research focuses on the Finnish opera boom, its reception abroad, the works for music theatre of Aulis Sallinen and the works of Kalevi Aho.

Eeva-Taina Forsius-Schibli is a musicologist and linguist who was born in Helsinki and is now a Finnish language teacher and dance instructor in Basel. She completed a doctorate at the University of Frankfurt on the aesthetics of opera. She has published writings on Finnish opera in German and has collaborated with Elke Albrecht since 2007.

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