

Estonian National Symphony Orchestra 80

By Toomas Velmet

On 18 December 1926, first minutes of programme by OÜ Raadio Ringhääling [Radio Broadcast Ltd.] were aired; music was played by a trio headed by legendary Estonian violin virtuoso Hugo Schüts (1900–69), who was professionally titled the music director of Radio Broadcasting in 1926–1929. The airing of this chamber collective is considered the birthday of later State Broadcasting orchestra, Estonian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Estonian Television and Radio Committee symphony orchestra, and since 1975, of Estonian National Symphony Orchestra (ERSO).

Eighty years of history contain, like any other history, noteworthy events, crises, historical breaking points, and creative breakthroughs. It's a fact that today, ERSO is not only the first orchestra in the Republic of Estonia, but also a top collective in Estonian music culture, which the world has honoured with a Grammy (2003), which has been praised and awarded by BBC Music Magazine (2006) and written about in *The Gramophone* and *Billboard*. But even more important than the recognition in the world, is to be proud of the knowledge that our small country has a stable top-level symphony orchestra, which gives around 60 concerts a year, not lacking audience or acclaim home or abroad.

The year 1926 was the time of deepening economic crisis in Estonia, and as a result, in the music life as well. Twenty-year-old *Estonia* theatre orchestra, which also constantly performed symphony concerts, was reduced to 27 members and only 2 (!) concerts were given in the season 1926/27. These years, a dozen bandsmen even went as far as Australia to look for work. Those kinds of breaking points reoccur in Estonian symphonic music history from time to time. At the same time, already 80 years ago and up to now, in times of hardship, a special force has emerged, which has not allowed the crises to put a stop to the existence of the orchestra, but has rather formed a basis for the new quality. Thus, the crisis of 1926 almost killed Estonia's only small symphony orchestra, but also put a start to a new orchestra. Despite the fact that our nation state was only 8 years of age, national music education only 7 years of age, and economy in deep crisis, both the state and the music culture survived the low period. In cooperation with *Estonia* theatre orchestra, the Radio Broadcasting orchestra grew into a respectable and capable symphonic institution.

Before the next 'big bang' in 1940, the orchestra developed step-by-step onto a new level both quantity- and quality-wise, which made it possible to see such Estonian conductors

as Raimond Kull (1882–1942), Juhan Aavik (1884–1982), Arkadius Krull (1895–1975) and Priit Nigul (1899–1962), as well as foreign visitors Nikolai Malko, Hermann Abendroth, Albert Coates, Leo Blech, Issay Dobroven and Walerian Berdiajew in the conductor's stand. Alexander Glazunov and Igor Stravinsky conducted their personal concerts. The programme included almost everything from the classical symphonic literature, and young Estonian music. In 1935, a reviewer said that a leap in the development of the field is to be expected, as the orchestra performing symphony concerts does not consist of random musicians anymore, but has finally two stable collectives – *Estonia* theatre orchestra and State Broadcasting orchestra. A young pianist and conductor **Olav Roots** (1910–1974) started to earn increasingly more attention at that time, and he became the chief conductor of Broadcasting orchestra (1939–44). He was particularly successful with performances of Estonian composers (Artur Kapp, Heino Eller, Eduard Tubin), but also with a remarkably high-level performance of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in 1939. Despite the fact that a proper 80-member symphony orchestra was put together from the orchestras of theatre *Estonia* and State Broadcasting, programmes with big collectives were not that rare in the music life back then. Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Dmitri Shostakovich, Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók recurred in concert programmes with great success.

When the Soviet Union occupied the Republic of Estonia in 1940, many institutions had to change. The Broadcasting (Radio) remained formally, but the Broadcasting orchestra continued to operate in reality as well (chief conductor Olav Roots). The year 1941 and the war brought along mobilization, and forced and voluntary evacuation to the east. So many musicians moved to the east that already in March of 1942, the National Art Ensembles of the Estonian SSR (ERKA) were formed in the city of Yaroslavl in the rear of the USSR, which also included a symphony orchestra (conducted by composer Eugen Kapp and Roman Matsov). At the same time, under the German occupation a radio station Landessender Reval worked, where the Broadcasting symphony orchestra continued, giving regular symphony concerts in *Estonia* concert hall.

Even during the global catastrophe of the Second World War, the Broadcasting symphony orchestra's work was not interrupted; still, in 1944, it had to start again from the scrap. This time, hundreds of musicians, including orchestra members and chief conductor Olav Roots, fled west in the autumn of 1944 for fear of Soviet occupation. In the same autumn, Estonian Radio Symphony Orchestra was formed on the basis of the remains of the Broadcasting symphony orchestra and ERKA orchestra, returned from Yaroslavl, which meant that the season 1944/45 was not off either. The first chief conductor was **Paul Karp**

(1905–1981), other conductors were Roman Matsov (1917–2001) and Sergey Prokhorov (1909–1985). The period of 1944–1950 in Estonian culture has been called the period of shock as well as the period of recovery from the shock. For ERSO, it was probably both. On the one hand, the whole nation was recovering in spite of tragic events, on the other; everything had to be started anew. The more terrifying were the later deportations and ideological repressions. Estonian Radio Symphony Orchestra managed to continue operating nevertheless, despite the shortage of space and musicians.

From 1950, **Roman Matsov** became the orchestra's chief conductor and Sergey Prokhorov was the second conductor. Estonia was visited by guest conductors and world-famous soloists from Moscow and Leningrad at first; but when the concert life became more organized, guests started arriving from other Soviet republics as well. Composing became more active, recording and concert performances were the task of the radio orchestra. And they managed well. In the fifties, the efficient old-republican core of the orchestra ensured a work and performance culture highly esteemed by guest conductors and soloists. To illustrate this statement we should mention some of the names of people who worked with the orchestra immediately after the war until the sixties: conductors Alexander Gauk, Nathan Rachlin, Kurt Sanderling, Karl Eliasberg, Yuri Aranovich and Kirill Kondrashin; at the end of the decade, quite unexpectedly, also Tauno Hannikainen from Finland; among notable soloists were pianists Pavel Serebriakov, Emil Gilels, Maria Grinberg, Tatiana Nikolayeva, Maria Yudina, Sviatoslav Richter; stringed instrument players Svyatoslav Knushevitsky, Daniel Shafran, Mstislav Rostropovich, David Oistrakh, Galina Barinova, Leonid Kogan, Mikhail Vaiman, Igor Bezrodny. These top conductors and soloists were the kind of school for the orchestra none of music high schools could replace, and they emerged from this challenge victorious. We should add that at this time, Roman Matsov and Sergey Prokhorov conducted the Estonian premiere of Shostakovich's 8th and 9th symphonies (which was the third performance thereof, after Leningrad and Moscow). Prokhorov conducted the premiere of the 5th and 6th symphonies of Eduard Tubin (1905–1982), who had emigrated to Sweden. This signified a great breakthrough in new music in Estonia, represented in Eino Tamberg's *Concerto grosso* (1956) and Veljo Tormis's *Overture No. 2* (1959).

In the 1950s, after Tallinn State Conservatoire had recuperated from the war, it started to send reinforcements to all instrument groups in the orchestra; thus it was possible again to perform any works from any era with any number of musicians. Great events were the performances of Handel's, Bach's, Haydn's, Mozart's and Beethoven's oratorios, held with

the Estonian Radio mixed choir and conducted by Roman Matsov. This was a definite breakthrough in Soviet repertoire policy.

In 1960, the 23-year-old **Neeme Järvi** (1937) returned to Estonia after having graduated from Professor Nikolai Rabinovich's conducting class in Leningrad Conservatoire. This meant a significant change in the development of ERSO. In a year, a chamber orchestra was established in Tallinn, and the best Estonian musicians had to work for 24 hours in a row. Already in 1963, Järvi became the chief conductor of the orchestra. Hard work became enjoyable, and the audience returned. The programme included Hindemith, Bartók, R. Strauss, Britten, and a large amount of new Estonian music, primarily by authors such as Veljo Tormis, Eino Tamberg, Jaan Rääts, Arvo Pärt, Jaan Koha, Heino Jürisalu and Kuldar Sink. Premieres were often sensational and guaranteed full halls for quite a long time.

That era saw the change of generations in the orchestra, which certainly was not painless, but useful for the quality. The 1960s were the time of some liberation in the USSR, later named Khrushchev's thaw. The thaw brought the following conductors in front of our orchestra – Carlo Zecchi, Karel Ančerl, Kurt Masur and Paavo Berglund; which in turn brought along new quality requirements and the orchestra members' readiness to satisfy the requirements. In 1960–80, the orchestra was on such a level, that they could start recording under the record company Melodiya label, which enjoyed the status of a monopoly in the USSR, but was more demanding as a result. During the twenty years, almost 50 (!) records were released, with primarily Estonian works performed by Estonian musicians.

If recording was one of the more usual tasks for the orchestra besides giving concerts, the first true concert tours took place in the time of Neeme Järvi. Some of these took the musicians even abroad (to Bulgaria, Romania, and Kuwait). But more important were the regular trips to Leningrad and concerts in the Great Hall of the Philharmonic Society, into which visiting orchestras were allowed only after they had reached a certain international quality standard. As of 1975, the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra with conductor Neeme Järvi was on the required level. Neeme Järvi did the Estonians a favour of bringing wonderful, top-of-the-world soloists to perform with ERSO; for instance, the performance of all Beethoven's piano concertos with Emil Gilels.

In 1977, ERSO's *An Hour in Studio* was started, at first only in Estonian Radio programme, later together with Estonian Television. This combination allowed the symphony concerts to be heard and viewed with good quality by thousands of people. Employing two media channels in the service of symphonic music was probably unique in the whole world.

The next crisis and breakthrough happened in 1980, when Neeme Järvi left Estonia (and the USSR) with his family, and the responsibilities of the chief conductor were entrusted to 30-year-old **Peeter Lilje** (1950–1993), who had also studied in Leningrad conducting school (under Prof. Mariss Jansons). Everything seemed to be going on naturally, but no one knew what this meant for the chief conductor. Guest performances in Leningrad and Moscow, touring all over ‘the sixth of the world’, another change of generations in the orchestra, conditions at home were not particularly favourable for making music, it was the time of political crises and changes. But Peeter Lilje still managed to premiere with Rudolf Tobias’s oratorio *Jonah’s Mission* (created in 1909) in its entirety, which soon became the symbolic piece of music for the Republic of Estonia. He interpreted symphonies by Brahms, Sibelius, Bruckner, Shostakovich, and Tubin, taking ERSO another step further in the development, which immortalized the chief conductor, who passed away quite early in life.

In 1990, when Lilje resigned and the orchestra members used the opening up of borders to look for work and happiness in the wide world, the orchestra went through the next crisis. For three following seasons, for the first time, the chief conductor was a foreigner, a German organist and conductor **Leo Krämer** (1944). By that time the orchestra’s feet were touching the bottom, but its nose was barely above the water; the crisis was economic-political, not to mention cultural. When your feet touch the bottom, push yourself upwards – and that’s what the orchestra tried to do for three years. As a result, they did not drown but managed to stay afloat until the next chief conductor came from the school in St. Petersburg. **Arvo Volmer** (1962), who had studied under Prof. Ravil Martynov, had worked as a conductor with ERSO from 1987. By the time he took over ERSO, a full symphony orchestra of stringed instrument players had left the country, and this tendency continued. Fortunately, the times were becoming more stable, and the Estonian Academy of Music worked without major problems. Volmer undertook some daring and grandiose projects. He began with the concert performances of Puccini’s *Turandot* and Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande*. He took ERSO to Europe – to the Baltic festival in Stockholm, to Europamusicale in Munich, to a successful tour in Germany. He started cooperation with the symphony orchestra of the music academy, resulting in great performances of Shostakovich’s Seventh and Bruckner’s Eighth symphonies. He started recording on a new level, resulting in recordings of all Eduard Tubin’s symphonies for Alba Records. The recordings earned international attention and acclaim from the state of Estonia. Arvo Volmer established the foundation and gave an impulse for the increase in ERSO’s artistic achievements, which continues up to today without setbacks, although he himself left the orchestra in 2001.

When Arvo Volmer began, he mentioned in an interview that the orchestra had many weak links, which may hinder its development. The present chief conductor **Nikolai Alexeev** (1958) from St. Petersburg, who took over in 2001, has said that the weak links in the orchestra are gone, "...this collective could play any repertoire on any stage of the world". When Alexeev had just started, he thought that the stringed instruments did not quite fill the potential in the orchestra, but now both our own and foreign critics stress the intensity and rich timbres of ERSO's stringed instruments. If Alexeev thought in the beginning that he would not introduce too much Russian music into the programme, the best experiences he has offered with ERSO are works by Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Stravinsky.

80-year-old ERSO is still young and vigorous, with a promise that the rapid pace of development in the last decade is only the beginning of occupying good positions in the world market, nor seems there to be any obstructions in becoming the first in line.

"Everything's great, if nothing changes," told the chief conductor Nikolai Alexeev to the press in the opening of this season.