

Estonian National Opera – One Hundred Years of Dignity

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Estonia: state, building and theatre

Magnificent and stately, the great building dominates the city centre of Tallinn, the capital of the Republic of Estonia. All Estonians call it simply and homely Estonia, which is understandable, as the house has been a witness to everything significant during the changeable times of independence and occupation.

In the early 19th century, society movement uniting people from different social strata was encouraged in Estonia and Livonia. By 1865, among several others of the same kind, the movement gave rise to the development of the singing and acting society *Estonia*. Acting in Estonian language in the society began in 1871 and continued intermittently until the end of the century. By the beginning of the 20th century, the abundance and potential of performances in Estonia Society were such that people started talking about the formation of a professional theatre and founding of a theatre and concert company.

The revolution of 1905 made the Estonia Society a place for political debates and a stand for national independence movement in Estonia, which was back then a province of a monarchist Russia. In 1906, a young talented director and actor **Paul Pinna** led the establishment of a professional theatre *Estonia*.

In the years 1907–1909, operettas and operas were added to the theatre's programme besides plays and singspiels. Initial repertoire mostly contained romantic dramas, which were often changed, but before the First World War, the plays became more sophisticated and professional. The demands for content and performance standards were brought along with Estonian actors, directors and musicians, who had received schooling mainly in Russia and Germany. The public viewed *Estonia* as something viable, ambitious and national, but most importantly, as artistically noteworthy and influential. It is worth mentioning that even before the theatre building was completed, sixteen plays from eleven Estonian authors premiered in Estonia Society, many of which touched upon contemporary affairs or were allegorical. **Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, Hauptmann, Dumas, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky and others** were the authors favoured by the heads of theatres in the first decade of the past century. This was not due to personal creative whims but caused by the society's interest and a conscious attempt to start a passionate media discussion. Tendencies in theatre hit the

Estonians' social nerve and provoked a debate on national identity and independence. Those processes caused a demand for a new theatre and concert building for the Estonia Society.

In 1908, a grandiose international architectural competition was held, and soon the construction of the new building designed by Finns **Viivi Lönn** and **Armas Lindgren** was started with the money collected from Estonian community, and with considerable bank loans. According to a romantic legend, the famous poet **Juhan Liiv**, who was poor as a church rat, donated his old threadbare coat to support the construction. The ceremony for laying the cornerstone was carried out in complete silence – this was the Estonians' clever way of bypassing the demand of **Izmail Korostovets**, governor of Estonia, to hold the event in Russian.

In 1913, the new *Estonia* building was opened in Tallinn downtown with the premiere of **William Shakespeare's** *Hamlet*. The theatre started with gusto and was morally and materially supported by a full house of Estonians with growing awareness and timid thoughts of sovereignty.

The events of the First World War gave a taste of the future of the building named after the state – it would become a symbol witnessing the sad or happy historical, national and romantic events. Performing in 1914–1918 was often disturbed and even stopped from time to time. An improvised military hospital was established in the theatre, the concert hall housed Russian Orthodox services.

The conclusion of the war and the events of October Revolution in Russia gave Estonia (as well as Finland and other Baltic provinces) a historical chance to realize their attempts for independence. The sitting of the Constituent Assembly in 1919 naturally took place in *Estonia* theatre, as did many later events significant for the state of Estonia.

The period between world wars was a time for passionate search and European development. A ballet troupe was formed, first original Estonian operas were advertised, and the audiences still favoured the operetta.

The Second World War and the subsequent years of occupation and chaos left their mark also on the theatre. The facade of the building still boasted the victorious swastika, when at the night of 9 March, 1944, the bombs allegedly thrown by Soviet women pilots hit Tallinn city centre. The *Estonia* theatre house was also hit, which stopped the ballet performance of *Goblin* by a great Estonian symphonist **Eduard Tubin**. The performers rushed out of the flaming building, led by the Goblin himself, which reflected the surreal decadence of the barbaric times in the best artistic way, even if in a slightly confusing and dramatic manner.

The house was restored in four years with the help of war prisoners and volunteers, the drama company moved into the neighbouring former German Theatre, and the *Estonia* theatre house remained the home of music, singing and dancing. And of a large painting in the ceiling of the theatre hall picturing a dozen Red Army soldiers. The interior was renovated in the seventies, but the facade, stage equipment and inner rooms got a fresh look in 2005, when the magnificent opera and concert house opened its doors for the audience as a modern, stylish European building.

Every year, on Estonian Day of Independence on February 24, a gala concert, ball and reception by the President of the Republic of Estonia, the patron of Estonian National Opera, is held in the building.

Estonia – a House Full of Music

Estonian music theatre was born in the era of national movement and enlivened cultural life in the second half of the 19th century. Musical director **August Wiera** brought **von Weber's**, **Offenbach's**, **Strauss's** and other authors' popular operettas and even operas into the programme of Tartu theatre Vanemuine. *Estonia* also continued with operettas, singspiels and musical comedies, but the first full-length opera performance (**K. Kreutzer's *A Night's Lodging in Granada***) was not staged before 1908. Until 1918, operas were staged once a year or every two years.

After the end of the First World War, *Estonia* could already be considered a classical repertoire theatre; every season the audience could enjoy well-known operas by authors ranging from **Mozart** and **Verdi** to **Tchaikovsky** and **Wagner**. In the early 20th century, directors **Hanno Kompus** and **Agu Lüüdik** together with a conductor and music director **Raimund Kull** created a repertoire policy based on the aesthetic principles, which the Estonian National Opera still adheres to today: to bring the best operas to the audience, to promote the creation of original operas, and to offer a more demanding repertoire to more sophisticated audiences.

In the 1930s, the singers' vocal and artistic levels rose, largely due to new learning opportunities, but also thanks to performances of numerous visiting soloists on the theatre's stage.

A new page in the history of Estonian music theatre was opened with the world premiere of the first national opera, composer **Evald Aav's *Vikerlased* (The Estonian Vikings)**, in 1928, which was followed by other original works: **Artur Lemba's *Kalmuneid* (Grave Maiden, 1929)** and ***Armastus ja surm* (Love and Death, 1931)**, **Adolf Vedro's**

Kaupo (1932). The attempts to picture ancient times in Estonia in excessively romanticist operas point to the authors' and theatre's desire to ennoble the nation's past, but also to increase the self-awareness of the independent nation and to value the preservation of the nation.

The standard of operetta performances developed between the world wars into a notable phenomenon, the troupe was professional and the repertoire great. The standard achieved at that period is still the goal of young operetta singers. Thanks to this, the operetta tradition in *Estonia* theatre never stopped; even now the programme includes, for instance, **J. Strauss** and **F. Lehár**.

The symphony orchestra and choir of the Estonian National Opera are also celebrating their 100th anniversary in 2007. For decades, both have been active in theatre as well as giving a great number of concerts. In addition to concert performances of vocal-symphonic works and operas, the orchestra has, at the initiative of its chief conductors (**Neeme Järvi**, **Eri Klas**, **Paul Mägi** and **Arvo Volmer**), added to the programme of Estonia Concert Hall demanding symphonic repertoire.

In 1926, an enthusiastic choreographer **Rahel Olbrei** put together a professional ballet troupe. Relying on the aesthetics of classical Russian school has enabled the best of classical ballet to remain constantly in the repertoire. The last quarter of the past century enriched the programme with neo-realist and avant-garde performances, mainly in the works created by idiosyncratic choreographer **Mai Murdmaa**. Chief ballet master **Tiit Härm** has shaped the ballet repertoire of today's *Estonia* to include performances that represent classical, modern and avant-garde tendencies, supported by a strong and creatively well-motivated company.

The Second World War changed the history of the Estonian National Opera. Tough occupation years, deportations, bombing and renovation of the theatre house, the separation of the drama company in 1949 and the ideological restrictions of the Soviet time were inevitably reflected in the theatre's repertoire, staff and troupe, and unsteady artistic level of performances.

Looking back, we have to admit that despite unfavourable social and political conditions, *Estonia* and its troupe managed to stay alive and develop so that the 70s and 80s were even called the golden era of opera. The collective included truly brilliant and talented singers in all vocal ranges.

Estonia with its popular talented soloists and daring repertoire was considered the first-class opera house in the Soviet Union; the troupe often performed in Moscow,

Leningrad, Kiev and Minsk, and even abroad from time to time. Talented baritone and wonderful actor **Georg Ots** enjoyed a well-deserved popularity all over the Soviet empire.

Hundred-year-old Estonia today is a beautiful building full of music, sold out performances and concerts, modern stage equipment and exemplary management. But first of all, it is full of excellent singers, dancers and musicians, whose work, based on dignified traditions, is European, professional and looking optimistically into the future.