ESTONIAN NATIONAL OPERA

Article provided by the Estonian National Opera

At a glance

The roots of the Estonian National Opera go back to 1865, when the song and drama society "Estonia" was founded. In 1906, the society became the basis for a professional theatre. The ballet troupe began regular work in 1926, but the first full-length ballet, Delibes's "Coppélia" was performed in 1922 already. Since 1998, the theatre is officially named the Estonian National Opera. Estonian National Ballet that operates under Estonian National Opera was founded in 2010. The Artistic Director and Chief Conductor is Vello Pähn, the Artistic Director of the Estonian National Ballet is Thomas Edur and the General Manager is Aivar Mäe.

The theatre's repertoire includes classical and contemporary operas, ballets, operettas and musicals. In addition, different concerts and children's performances are delivered and compositions of Estonian origin staged. Estonian National Opera is a repertory theatre, giving 350 performances and concerts a year, being famous for its tradition of annual concert performances of rarely staged operas, such as Alfredo Catalani's "La Wally", Verdi's "Simon Boccanegra", Rossini's "Guillaume Tell", Bizet's "Les pêcheurs de perles", Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi", "I puritani" and "Norma", Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Tsar's Bride" and "Snegurochka", Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier", etc.

History of the Estonian National Opera

In 1865, the song and drama society "Estonia" was founded in Tallinn. Acting was taken up in 1871. From 1895 onwards the society began to stage plays regularly, which usually included singing and dancing. In 1906, the society became the basis for a professional theatre called "Estonia Theatre" founded by the directors and actors Paul Pinna and Theodor Altermann.

Throughout its history, the Estonia Theatre has had several names, but since 1998, it bears the name Estonian National Opera and operates as a body governed by public law according to the National Opera Law passed in 1997 in the Republic of Estonia.

Since 1918, the drama troupe was led by an actor and director Ants Lauter. Plays were staged until 1949, when the troupe was disbanded and Estonia Theatre continued as a music theatre. In 1906, Otto Hermann was appointed as the first music director. 1907 saw the premiere of the first operetta, Hervé's "Mam'zelle Nitouche" and in 1908 the first opera, Kreutzer's "Das Nachtlager in Granada" was brought to the stage. There has been a steady production of operas since the season 1918/19.

The first Estonian operetta, Adalbert Wirkhaus' "St. John's Night" was staged in 1911. The first Estonian opera, Evald Aav's "Vikerlased", was staged in 1928 and 1944 saw the production of the first Estonian ballet, Eduard Tubin's "The Goblin".

1912 saw the founding of the Estonia Music Department (EMO) that began organising concerts. The EMO, under the guidance of conductor August Topman established a mixed

choir that later evolved into an oratory choir.

In 1922, the theatre hosted its first full-length ballet performance, "Coppélia" by Léo Delibes. Choreographer Rahel Olbrei founded a permanent ballet troupe in 1926 and the ballet productions became more regular throughout the 1930s. In March 2010 the ballet troupe was officially named the Estonian National Ballet.

The Chief Conductor and Music Director Otto Hermann was succeeded by Adalbert Wirkhaus (1908–1912), Raimund Kull (1912–1942), Juhan Aavik (1925 and 1933), Verner Nerep (1942–1944), Priit Nigula (1942–1951), Kirill Raudsepp (1951–1963), Neeme Järvi (1963–1975), Eri Klas (1975–1994), Paul Mägi (1995–2002, Artistic Director since 1998), Jüri Alperten (2002–2004), Arvo Volmer (2004–2012) and Vello Pähn (Artistic Director since 2012).

Operas have been directed by Hanno Kompus (1920–1944), Eino Uuli (1937–1951), Paul Mägi (1954–1961, Chief Producer since 1958), Udo Väljaots (1961–1979, Chief Producer since 1977), Arne Mikk (since 1970, Chief Producer in 1977–1994, Artistic Director in 2002–2004), Neeme Kuningas (since 1985, Chief Producer 1994–2001 and 2006–2010) and others. The man behind the brilliant image of Estonia Theatre's operetta was Agu Lüüdik (operetta director 1927–1946).

Rahel Olbrei (ballet mistress 1925–1944) was followed by the ballet masters and mistresses Anna Ekston (1944–1951), Viktor Päri (1956–1964), Enn Suve (1966–1973, Chief Ballet Master since 1969), Mai Murdmaa (1964–2001, Chief Ballet Mistress since 1974), Tiit Härm (Artistic Director of the ballet company in 2001–2009). Since 2009 the Artistic Director of the Estonian National Ballet is Thomas Edur.

From the season 2009/2010 the theatre is being led by the general manager Aivar Mäe.

About the Building of the Estonian National Opera

The theatre building in Jugend-Classicist style was conceived by Finnish architects Armas Lindgren and Wivi Lönn and it was the largest building in the early 20th century Tallinn. One side of the two-wing building was intended for a theatre and the other for a concert hall. This arrangement continues to this day. Between the magnificent flanks was a lower part that housed a restaurant (White Hall) and a cloistered inner court that gave colour to the building. The theatre and concert building was inaugurated on the 16th of September 1913. Sculptor August Weizenberg donated to the new theatre two of his most stunning marble sculptures, Koit (*Dawn*) and Hämarik (*Dusk*) that decorated the Red Hall of the theatre. Just a year later, after the outbreak of World War I, the theatre building housed a military hospital. The balcony side of the concert hall was used as an Orthodox church. As the theatre hall had not been taken over by the military, the actors continued to play at their own expense.

On the 23rd of April 1919, the first Estonian Parliament – the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of Estonia – assembled in the concert hall of the Estonia Theatre. A new era began in the history of the theatre and the whole country. In 1927 Estonian Broadcasting Union found its home in the theatre building and continued broadcasting its shows for eighteen years. The theatre building was reconstructed in 1934, the balcony in the front of the White Hall was closed and the Green Hall was added to the building.

During the Soviet aerial bombardment on March 9, 1944, the theatre building was destroyed together with many others. The building was renovated in the second half of the 1940s according to the designs by Alar Kotli and Edgar Johan Kuusik. Alar Kotli's design was inspired by Neoclassicism of the 1930s and by the Stalinist classicism pertaining to the post-war period. The architect tried to preserve the look of the Estonia Avenue side façade of the building and completely changed other façades. The interior was also changed from Jugend style to a more sombre classicist design.

The concert hall was reopened for the public in 1946 and the theatre hall was reopened in 1947. Reconstruction works were completed in 1951 but the lower part between the two flanks was reconstructed only in 1991 as the Winter Garden. In Autumn 2003 a multifunctional Chamber Hall was opened, in 2004 the theatre received contemporary stage constructions, and in 2006 for the centennial of the Estonia Theatre as a professional theatrical institution the main hall was renovated and new cafés were opened.

The building that belongs to the Estonian National Opera houses three independent institutions – the Estonian National Opera, the State Concert Institute "Eesti Kontsert" and the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra. In 1997–2005 the building has undergone major renovations and in 2013 the house will celebrate its centenary.

Performances

The performing season of the Estonian National Opera begins in September and ends in mid-June. The theatre's wide repertoire includes about thirty productions from different genres, featuring the best of classical opera, ballet, operetta and musical. There are evergreen operas from Verdi to Wagner, ballets from Tchaikovsky to Prokofiev, operettas and musicals from Loewe to Kálmán but also many modern stage productions and the works of world top choreographers. Estonian original productions play an important part in the theatre's repertoire, as do performances for children.
In addition to regular performances, different concerts are delivered. New Year's Eve Ball and the festive celebration of the anniversary of the Republic of Estonia are a natural part of the theatre's season.

Each season, about 350 performances and concerts are given. The annual number of visitors is about 180 000. The permanent staff numbers about 470, including 94 musicians in the orchestra, 40 singers in the choir, 18 vocal soloists, 8 principal dancers, 6 soloists, 6 demi-soloists, 3 young soloists and 43 dancers in the ballet troupe.