

Report on "Die tote Stadt"
Finnish National Opera, Helsinki
Saturday, 16th November, 2013 at 2pm.

Rarely, if ever, one is confronted by absolute beauty in an opera house. This was the case last Saturday, at National Finnish Opera. One is also confronted by absolute beauty, in the slow movement to Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Man supreme, who defied gravity and locked-in-ness of the World, by landing on the Moon. Where there is Light (beauty), be sure that there is Dark (Evil), lurking in the shadows. My getting to Helsinki was compromised by a technical failure, followed by the nightmare that is "Cancellation", Not being in Business Class, one faces a long queue. I eventually got an alternative proposition, Helsinki, via Amsterdam, with a very short interval between flights. Because of my knowledge of Schiphol Airport, I made the second flight with minutes to spare. And of course "Murphy's Law" the furthestmost gate from Passport Control and Security. I was seated beside two other Irish Victims, one a pilot, the other a Rugby Coach. The 2hours -30 mins flew. We arrived at 00.20 hours.

My hotel was 30 mins from the airport The Hilton Helsinki" Kalastajatorppa" five mins by foot to the tram. Next day I took the No.4 Tram to the Opera House euro 2.80 one way. The journey took 15 mins the stop, is in fact, the Terminus "Katajanokka". It was a cold and windy afternoon, but I was greeted with a warming smile from the lady tram driver. I've been in this house before, for "Parsifal" as part of the Richard Wagner Verband International Congress in Helsinki/Tallin. There may be a report re same on our website <http://www.wagnersociety.ie>

The opera started at 2pm and ended at 5-10 pm. Three acts of 45 minutes each, with two intervals of 30 mins. Now the Opera (there was a threatened strike at the airport, which thankfully didn't materialise on my return. I had two options Train to Russia or a Ferry to Stockholm. The latter was my plan B! Echoes of Stralsund RWVI Congress and the Ash Cloud debacle). The players were: Paul (Klaus Florian Vogt); Marietta/Marie (voice) (Camilla Nylund); Actor (Marie silent role) Kirsti Eiche; Frank/Fritz (Markus Eiche); Brigitta

(Sari Nordqvist); Juliette (Hanna Rantala); Lucienne (Nina Keitel); Victorian (Per-Hakan Precht); Albert (Juha Rihimaki); Gaston (Antti Nieminen). The Conductor, (Mikko Franck-outstanding); Regi Kasper Holten. Orchestra Finnish National orchestra with Choir and Children. There were three sets of Surtitles, Finnish, Swedish and English. The House seats c. 1,437 and is warm and intimate.

The production had one large room as a setting with a very large BED not out of context for a change. Marie is on the bed and remains in the room for most of the opera. Paul interacts with her, throughout the opera, and in the final Act, Marie is confronted by Marietta, she can see her from the beginning of the Act. The troubadours come up through the bed in Act II, very clever and indeed funny. The "Robert the Devil" G. Meyerbeer part is very short lived. Not a dead resurrected Nun in sight. I cannot imagine a more ugly sight than a dead resurrected Nun! So we were spared the images! The "Procession" scene was done tastefully, with the end of the room, which had a large Venetian blind, raised with little miniature houses etc. being used to display the heads of the Choir. The children sang off-stage. Frank/Fritz (Clown outfit) was dressed in a US Army uniform, a master sergeant with an Iron Cross affixed to his chest. He was a fine singer, not a Hermann Prey, but good! Brigitta was excellent, as were the Group. Camilla Nylund who sang Marietta, and Marie Off-stage was outstanding, beautiful voice. Klaus Florian Vogt, who is not a natural Paul, like Rene Kollo, sang beautifully (No high B flat). Act I was the most beautiful 45 minutes, I ever have heard in an operahouse. Acts II and Act III were equally outstanding. The orchestra was brilliant, especially the brass section and timpini; with inspired reading by the conductor, Mikko Franck. I didn't want it to end, as the last notes faded, followed by silence, then thunderous applause. My only thought was of returning on December, 3rd. "Die tote Stadt" is a wonderfully beautiful opera, if performed by really good singers, and if the production isn't created by one of the modern school of lunatic producers.

And now a note on the composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957), an Austrian Jew. He was recognised by Gustaf Mahler as a Child Prodigy. He co-wrote the Libretto with his father, Julius "Paul Schott". Its construction is based on the "Leitmotif" and is largely influenced by Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. One can clearly hear "Salome" (Marietta "I live to Dance" and "Parsifal" Act II (Kundry) within the work (The rage at Marie who has

Paul's heart, but like most men, lust takes over temporarily, until after the sex act, when conscience and guilt return to plague them) - GUILT is FEARSOME!! The Lock of hair is cut by Marietta , from Marie's head with a scissors, Marie leaves the stage in great distress. Marietta uses this lock of hair to taunt Paul, "I live to dance"; despite his warnings that it's sacred, bringing about her death by strangulation.

As the work is set mainly in a Dream, Marietta returns to collect her Roses; all is well, we the audience can relax. Then we hear the concluding, amazingly beautiful poem, and musical conclusion; on the subject of leaving the dead too their rest, by not mourning them too extremes. Life is to be lived!

For a 23 year old, it's beyond belief, that such sensitive music could be written by someone so young. It was my forth production and most likely my last! - last Saturday will never be equalled. I suffered for it, but was very well rewarded, by a brilliant production, the producer bringing clarity, and understanding, to the piece. "Life is to be lived"!

Christopher McQuaid,
19th November, 2013.