

Hanno Kompus as a style-sensitive opera director: the cases of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Eugene Onegin*

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This study focuses on two stage productions by Hanno Kompus, the first professional opera director in Estonia: *Tristan und Isolde* in the 1933/1934 season and *Eugene Onegin* in 1934/1935. My aim is to explain how Kompus's style sensitivity was expressed in different works. Proceeding from his own theoretical writings, I have concentrated on two of his approaches: a stylized approach to Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, and a realistic one to Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

As a methodological basis for analysing the stage productions I have used a systematic questionnaire devised by Patrice Pavis, a leading French expert in theatre studies. Pavis's questionnaire divides a stage production into fourteen subsections concerning artistic and technical decisions (general characteristics, scenography, lighting, stage properties, costumes and maquillages, actors' performances, etc.) and thus provides guidelines for analysis. In order to analyse a historic stage production, it first had to be constructed (Thomas Postlewait 2011) on the basis of information derived from photos and reviews, scores and Kompus's writings, and by taking into account the general historical context. Reviews of the "Estonia" theatre's stage productions published in the daily papers *Kaja*, *Päevaleht*, *Rahvaleht*, *Rahva Sõna*, *Revalsche Zeitung*, *Tallinna Teataja*, *Tartu Postimees*, *Uudisleht* and *Vaba Maa* were the basic source for this study. In addition to the reviews I have used photos of the productions preserved at the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.

Hanno Kompus's stage work was largely connected with the "Estonia" theatre (Tallinn), where he worked as stage director from 1923 to 1936, and as managing director from 1925 to 1929. During these years, Kompus brought more than 40 operas to the stage. Kompus was a multi-talented person with an exceptional range of interests. His signature production style was influenced by his studies in architecture at the Riga Polytechnical Institute, as well as by visiting the performances of the Moscow Chamber Theatre and becoming familiar with Alexander Tairov's innovative views on theatre. While in Moscow, Kompus also attended Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's courses on rhythmic gymnastics and attached great importance to the actor's physical expressiveness on the stage. In the 1922/1923 season Kompus worked as assistant stage manager at the Dresden State Opera, and thus gained the practical knowledge that prepared him for the stage director's job at the "Estonia".

In the early 1920s Kompus was interested in the different new currents in theatre. At that time, his views were considered rather radical (see the critical review of *Eugene Onegin* in *Tallinna Teataja*, 2 Feb 1920). Kompus was in favour of stylization in art, i.e., the artistic, abstract and non-realistic approach to staging. For him, the aim of the arts was the interpretation and concentration of the visible world, not its truthful imitation. He was of opinion that opera production should also be stylized – the singers' acting should be non-realistic, more spectacular, simplified and less detailed than in dramatic performances, because in opera it is the music and the orchestra that lead the drama. Later, while already working as a stage director, he came to change this viewpoint. However, stylization remains one of his staging strategies, among other approaches.

Stylization presents itself most explicitly in Kompus's stagings of Wagner's operas. In Kompus's interpretation, Wagner's operas were abstract, non-realistic and full of pathos in tone, as opposed to veristic opera and a realistic staging approach. In a realistic production, what is happening on the stage should be experienced as naturally and as closely to real life as possible. In Kompus's vision, realistic scenography had to respond to the work of art's milieu in its elaborate detail – as in everyday life where one is surrounded by numerous different minute details.

In Kompus's writings on theatre, as in his writings on art architecture, the concepts of "style" and "stylistic unity" often emerge, allowing us to infer that being sensitive to style was the essence of his being. As an opera director, he always proceeded from the score and the music, because for him the staging had to respond to the style of the opera and the music. Everything that was in a contradiction

with or fell outside this he considered superfluous. Hence the main question of this paper: how does Kompus's style sensitivity exhibit itself in operas representing different styles?

In analyzing the stage productions, it became clear that *Tristan und Isolde* was the considerably more abstract and stylized production of the two. Aleksander Tuurand's abstracted scenography (e.g. no sea-themed details on Tristan's ship), the preference given to clean/empty large surfaces and clear simple forms, as well as the lighting directed towards connotative communication, were paramount in mediating this sense. Kompus's directing was obviously quite static, thus leaving the music, heavy with symbolism, a more expressive space. Furthermore, the characters were depicted as grandiose and sublime/majestic – in their statuesque poses, they had an effect of superhuman heroes rather than actual people.

Kompus's *Tristan* relates to the more innovative approaches towards the staging tradition of Wagner's operas at that time around the world. Concerning the defining role of lighting and scenography in creating a psychological atmosphere that corresponds to the content of a scene (Act II and Act III in Kompus's *Tristan*), there are similarities to be found with Gustav Mahler's and Alfred Roller's approach to *Tristan* in 1903. The singers' movements and mighty poses, as well as the sail imagery of Act I, are also reminiscent of Vsevolod Meierhold's 1909 *Tristan und Isolde* at the Mariinsky Theatre of St. Petersburg.

Despite its artistic success, Kompus's *Tristan und Isolde* did not become popular with the audience. The local opera-goers found Wagner's massive music drama to be foreign and distant. Another reason for the limited public success could have been Kompus's stylized directing strategy, which did not synchronize with the realism favoured in theatre and art in Estonia in the 1930s. Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* suited the mainstream of the era far better.

In *Eugene Onegin*, Kompus's intention was to convey a realistic drama. The scenery, characteristic of the historic era as designed by Albert Vahtramäe, and the costumes fashioned by Natalie Mei in the style of the 19th century, were the means of creating an authentic atmosphere. The singers likewise attempted to create authentic characters and to engage the audience in the action. In *Eugene Onegin*, several vocalists in supporting roles or even smaller parts were noticed for their exceptionally strong performances. This attests to the director's effort to bring all the characters to life – as credibly and equally as possible. The scenography and mise-en-scène also took account of the emotional tone of the "lyrical scenes".

Based on the analysis of the "Estonia" stagings of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Eugene Onegin*, it could be asserted that stylistically they are different kinds of production. For the musically, mythologically and symbolically massive *Tristan und Isolde* Kompus devised a grandiose, abstracted and timeless staging; in the case of the realistic and rather intimate *Eugene Onegin* he created a staging that delivers a sense of authenticity in historical atmosphere as well as in the acting. This confirms the hypothesis made at the beginning of this paper: Hanno Kompus was capable of creating stagings that conformed to the style of the art work and its music.