

Jüri Reinvere’s opera *Puhdistus (Purge)*: Perspectives from cultural studies, theatre research and musicology

Kristel Pappel, Anneli Saro
(translated by Kaire Maimets-Volt)

In researching music theatre, the need to cross borders from one academic discipline to another for the purpose of finding new approaches and different research questions to pose has been increasingly recognized. This paper integrates three academic fields that methodologically and theoretically stand rather apart: cultural studies (with its ambition of being all-inclusive), theatre research and musicology. One of the aims of this paper is to consider the possibilities for research into musical stage productions to combine musicological analysis of the score and musical performance more closely with the principles of performance analysis, a sub-discipline of theatre studies. In addition, the musical stage production must be viewed from a broader perspective as an act of communication between its creators and recipients, as well as between the ideas, ideologies and aesthetic notions circling in a culture. To test these approaches, we turn to composer Jüri Reinvere’s opera *Puhdistus (Purge)* and its interpretation on the stage of the Finnish National Opera (2012).

The composer adapted the libretto for the opera himself from the dramatic play *Purge* (2007) and the novel (2008) of the same title by the Finnish author Sofi Oksanen. The first chapter of this paper („Sofi Oksanen’s *Purge*”) observes the influence of Oksanen’s ideas on the opera, discusses the opera performance itself as an act of communication, and opens up its many contexts in order better to understand the performance’s meaning for its immediate participants (the stage crew, the performers, the audience), as well as for those with indirect exposure to the experience (people with mediated knowledge of the performance).

Sofi Oksanen’s novel *Purge* and the discussions generated by this work have been the greatest influence on the creation and reception of Jüri Reinvere’s opera of the same name. *Purge* has been read, first and foremost, as a story of human trafficking, since the violent transportation of women from one country to another for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a widespread problem throughout the world. As a topic for discussion, the history of the Republic of Estonia has only come up in countries where similar events have taken place in the past, and even then the novel’s plot has encouraged the recall and analysis of people’s own local history rather than Estonia’s recent past (Oksanen, Rosma 2012). Nevertheless, although *Purge* emanates from particular historic circumstances, its ultimate intention has been to depict something universal, even eternal.

The next two chapters („Jüri Reinvere’s *Purge*” and „Tiina Puumalainen–Paul Mägi’s *Purge*”)¹ tackle performance analysis and its interpretations, proceeding from the notion of theatrical production as a chain of interpretation and a complex mechanism of representation.

The protagonist of Reinvere’s opera *Purge*, Aliide (soprano), is a collaborator of the Soviet occupying forces. The composer has emphasized that he only took the basic plot lines from Oksanen’s play and novel, and did not even re-read the works, so as to be free in his own creative work (Reinvere 2013). The action in his libretto does not pursue a linear course from 1939 (Republic of Estonia) to 1992 (Estonia’s regaining of independence after the era of Soviet occupation); instead, the author plays with shifts in time (the years 1939, 1948, 1952, 1980, 1992) and places (an Estonian village, Berlin, Vladivostok). At the Finnish National Opera, Aliide’s part was divided between two singers, one of whom performed the role of the old Aliide, the other the young one (however, Aliide’s part can also be performed by one singer only). Reinvere has mentioned that in creating his work he drew on Strauss, Wagner and 19th-century Russian opera (e.g., Mussorgsky) (Pappel 2012a). In a sense it could be said that Reinvere’s score of *Purge* is akin to a 21st-century composer’s idiosyncratic interpretation of the music of the early 1900s (Strauss’s proto-expressionism, Debussy’s impressionism, at times also Schoenberg’s atonality).

¹ Tiina Puumalainen directed the opera production in Helsinki and Paul Mägi was the conductor.

The fourth chapter („Shock waves of *Purge*“) is dedicated to the reception and to the wider socio-cultural impact of the opera *Purge*. The opera, as a so-called interpretational shock wave of Oksanen’s literary works, demonstrated independence, yet also took the audience into account. The climate of the première was one of intensive engagement. Theatre directors, critics and other the audience members present seemed to appreciate the work. In any case, Reinvere has already received a new commission to compose an opera – an interpretation of *Peer Gynt* for the Norwegian National Opera. The critical reviews of Reinvere’s opera were positive on both sides of the Gulf of Finland. *Purge* certainly made a splash in the mass media. In the case of the reviews one could not help but notice that the music critics (Pappel 2012b, 2012c; Kotta 2012; Rimmel, Lock 2012) used more superlatives than the somewhat more reserved theatre critics (Laasik 2012, Saro 2012), who proceeded from general cultural rather than musical standpoints. It seems that a better knowledge of reading and perceiving music makes for a more profound and multi-layered operatic experience. Another possibility is that Reinvere’s *Purge* and the opera’s performance at the Finnish National Opera were indeed more successful in musical terms as compared to the somewhat flat psychological or ideological attitudes afforded by the libretto.