

## Opera and operetta productions at the Estonia Theatre during the German occupation in 1941–1944: operation, repertoire and reception

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One of the most dramatic epochs in the history of Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the 1940s: the beginning of the Soviet occupation (1940) with its first repression, World War II reaching the territory of Estonia (summer 1941), the German occupation (summer 1941 to autumn 1944) and the continuation of the Soviet occupation (from autumn 1944 onwards) with its new repression. All these events significantly affected the cultural life of Estonia, including music and music theatre. However, the development of the musical culture of the period reached its climax at the beginning of the 1940s, with educational establishments, concert organisations, orchestras and music theatre and considerable musical forces at international level providing a strong professional structure to musical life.

Despite the hard war years, the cultural life of the period 1941–1944 remained vibrant – large numbers of fictional works, school textbooks, and practical manuals were printed, numerous exhibitions, concerts and theatrical performances were held, and a vast amount of art and music criticism was published.

The aim of the cultural policy of the Third Reich was the rapid restoration of cultural life in the occupied countries. This served as the starting point for the propagation of Nazi ideology as well as demonstrating the high level of artistic life in Nazi Germany. Surprising as it may seem, there were no strict and clear directives/instructions concerning musical policy in Nazi Germany. Much depended on individual people and personal relationships. The German authorities preferred the music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and conservative new music; performances of works, including many lesser known compositions by German composers, were supported. In addition, they loved operetta and Italian opera. The concert and opera repertoire did not differ greatly from that of the past, i.e. from the Weimar Republic.

In German-occupied territories, the primary function of the theatre was to offer an entertainment for both Germans and the local inhabitants. Theatre also played a significant role as a place where people could socialise with each other. This fact was also taken into consideration in occupied Estonia, and during the German occupation the Estonia Theatre was very active. Indeed, the theatre's operation was quickly re-established after the Soviet aerial bombardment of 9<sup>th</sup> March 1944, during which the theatre building was destroyed.

Since its foundation in 1906, the Estonia Theatre had been a multi-genre theatre for drama, opera, operetta and ballet. Initially, six to seven performances were given each week, and later even eight or nine. During the German occupation this busy schedule meant two performances on Sundays, with extra performances on Fridays, Saturdays or Mondays being added as required. In addition to operas, operettas, ballets and dramas, which were given in Estonian according to the traditions of the time, the Estonia Theatre was also obliged, on the demand of the German authorities, to perform operettas for the military in German. Additionally, evening entertainments known as Colourful Evenings (*Bunte Abende*) were organised, and guest performances with Colourful Evenings and music and drama productions were given outside Tallinn, as well as performances in hospitals.

Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* was the first production during the period of the German occupation, receiving a performance on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1941. The repertoire altogether included 12 operas (two different productions of *La Bohème* as well as *Tosca* and *Madam Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, *La Traviata* by Verdi, *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni, *Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo, *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, *Tannhäuser* by Richard Wagner, *The Barber of Seville* by Gioachino Rossini, *Tiefland* by Eugen d'Albert and *Vikerlased* by Evald Aav) and 7 operettas (*Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss, *The Merry Widow* and *Der Graf von Luxemburg* by Franz Lehár, *Der Vogelhändler* by Carl Zeller, *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* by Eduard Künneke and *The Girl without a Homeland* by Priit Ardna). The most popular opera according to number of performances was *La Traviata* and the most popular operetta *The Merry Widow*.

We can assume that during the period of the German occupation culture in Estonia was placed under strict control, though the German occupiers did not generally concern themselves with issues concerning local creative matters. Although the performances of works by politically and racially inappropriate

authors were forbidden, this did not affect the standard repertoire of the Estonia Theatre much. Additionally, the popularity of the classical repertoire had to be taken into consideration (e.g. Bizet's *Carmen*, Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*). Plays and literature were subject to greater controls, but by and large the German occupiers did not intervene in the activities of the Estonians, the latter being seen as a lower race.

Throughout the German occupation there were no significant differences in the repertoire of the Estonia Theatre compared to that of the preceding period, i.e. the Republic of Estonia. Essentially the cultural life of the Republic of Estonia continued largely unchanged until the great repressions of 1949. In general, the German authorities did not intervene in the choice of repertoire much and the theatre itself did not give them any reason to do so. The repertoire policy depended largely on individuals. The opera and operetta productions performed in the Estonia Theatre during the period 1941–1944 were based on the typical repertoire of the European theatres of the time; the Nazi-German ideological background played no significant role in the choice of repertoire. Ideological pressures meant that operettas were also performed in German after December 1941; on the other hand, the Estonia Theatre itself was interested in increasing audiences, and this was one way of doing so.

The Estonia Theatre itself and the high quality of the performances given there played an important role for the audience – such entertainments helped people to forget the troubles and fears of war. The lifestyle of German soldiers had already included visiting the theatre before the war, and during the war they continued to do so. Estonia's own theatre and the Estonian singers and actors who performed there formed a significant part of the identity of the Estonian people: in spite of being under foreign authority, Estonia's own culture remained.