

RICK JONES

MUSIC IS THE MYSTERY

Einojuhani Rautavaara is today's leading Finnish composer and his work, featured at a major festival in London, is notable for its spiritual depth. Our critic met him in Helsinki

It has been 50 years since Jean Sibelius' death, a milestone commemorated this autumn at London's major concert venues in the Sibelius & Beyond festival (various venues, to 5 December; <http://www.sibeliusandbeyond.com>). Contemporary Finnish composers find themselves still living in Sibelius' shadow, however, as I discovered when I met their senior representative Einojuhani Rautavaara at his apartment overlooking the Baltic ferries in Helsinki harbour.

"Whenever a piece of mine is performed, critics write either that it sounds like Sibelius or that it doesn't," says the 79-year-old in a voice that after recent serious illness is frail and faltering. "We cannot escape. Sibelius is a towering symbol. He shaped the nation during the struggle for independence and so cannot be imitated. For an artist is the product of his time and his place. My time was not Sibelius', but the golden age of the 1950s."

Sibelius in a sense, anointed him a successor as Elijah did Elisha. "I was a student in 1952 when Sibelius, then aged 87, asked me if I would be willing to accept a scholarship in his name. It was of course a great honour. He had chosen me, I suppose, because he had heard a few performances of my music on the radio. By this time he only listened to the radio and never went to concerts. He had become a recluse. I was 25 years old when I went to meet him at Ainola [Sibelius' house among the pines some distance from the city]. No one ever did that. He was a legendary person. I expressed my gratitude but was too young and too shy to talk to him properly."

Rautavaara's relationship with Sibelius was never as teacher to pupil. "I had a car and sometimes took visitors to meet him. There was the violinist Palmgren, who came and played the chaconne from Bach's Violin Partita No. 2. Sibelius grew very excited and called for more coffee and cognac. He had tears in his eyes from the playing. I remember too a visit by some Russian composers, one of them, Khrennikov [who died last month], whom Stalin had recently appointed to be head of the Composers' Union. They presented scores and speeches standing in the middle of the

living room. It was all very stiff and reminded me of Hitler meeting General Mannerheim [who led the Finnish Army's resistance to Soviet invasion during the Second World War] in the centre of Helsinki."

Rautavaara's own eyes have the smoky appearance of the aged visionary, as if he had spent too long gazing through the everyday into the infinite beyond. His music covers all genres – symphonic, opera, chamber, vocal – but is imbued throughout with a sense of mystery, a relentless searching, and not just in his religious works which include settings of the Magnificat, Ave Maria and Lord's Prayer, a 12-

cannot. That is where talent lies. The source of melody is the mystical in music."

The festival includes a performance of Rautavaara's *Pelimannit* or *The Fiddlers*, a suite for strings based on folk melodies from Ostrobothnia, the region of north-west Finland from which the composer's family comes. "Ah," he exclaims, "my Opus One! As a student of piano I found this book of tunes and arranged them. Some people criticised it, saying that folk tunes are for kids." We agree that folk melody is the most mystical of all as it has no author and simply comes out of the ground, the heart of the people, as it were.

I ask Rautavaara what he is currently working on and he brightens at the opportunity to talk about his music. "I am a donkey between two haystacks. One haystack is an opera on the life of Federico García Lorca, the other a percussion concerto for Colin Currie. Which to bite from each morning?" he shrugs. "The opera is in Spanish. I cannot speak Spanish but I can compose in it."

Lorca follows Rautavaara's opera *Rasputin*, premiered in 2002. The score is typical of Rautavaara's late style as it conjures the seething decadence of the 1916 Russian state in long dark waves of sound, abrasive dissonance and exotic instrumentation.

The mystic priest's assassins are accompanied by a wailing ondes martenot, an electronic instrument, as they sing their plotting to a strangely Sibelian melody which suggests there is an influence of the older composer on the younger, after all. Rautavaara's mind is on other things, however, and he already seems to have decided what to work at after the interview.

"Now, the concerto ..." he says, frowning his brow. "Tell me, how is a flexatone to be notated?"

I confess that I am no percussionist and cannot say. I do, however, look forward to hearing a work with so eerie, perhaps mystical, an instrument. I ask him to sign my score of his *Autumn Gardens*, the premiere of which I heard at the Proms in 1999. In it he likens composers to gardeners. Who knows where the life in a tiny seed comes from? Who can say whence music? He autographs it and greatly increases its value.



Einojuhani Rautavaara

tone mass, and *Vigilia*, an all-night vigil for John the Baptist.

"People ask me if I'm religious and I quote the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher: 'Religiosität ist Sinn und Geschmack der Unendliche'. Religion is a sense of, and taste for, the eternal. I have no religion, although officially I am Lutheran; I have only a sense of depth and mystery."

It is no surprise that his favourite religious text is Psalm 130, "De Profundis" or "Out of the depths", which he has set to a haunting score. "To me, music itself is the mystery," he says. "Where does it come from? When I started to compose, I would create a piano piece or a song without knowing how to. So I concluded that the music must have always existed and that I had simply picked it up deep within me. Later I understood that although harmony and rhythm can be taught, melody

THEATRE

Word of a witness

Parade

DONMAR WAREHOUSE, LONDON

Although musical theatre still has the reputation of being light relief from serious drama, the song-and-dance show has always accommodated heavy material. The most celebrated shows of John Kander and Fred Ebb – *Cabaret* and *Chicago* – deal respectively with Nazism and murder. Stephen Sondheim has written words and music for would-be presidential killers (*Assassins*) and the development of pointillism in French art (*Sunday in the Park with George*).

These previous examples of tough stuff that can be sung have clearly inspired songwriter Jason Robert Brown and playwright Alfred Uhry (best known for *Driving Miss Daisy*) in the creation of *Parade* (Donmar Warehouse, London) which, though it never matches the extraordinary score of *Cabaret*, has some claim to be the most morally serious Broadway musical since that show.

The piece is driven by events from history that would make an extraordinary narrative in any form. In 1913, Leo Frank, a pencil factory supervisor in Atlanta, Georgia, was accused of strangling a 13-year-old female employee who had last been seen entering his office for her pay cheque. In a way which seemed unusual at the time – but certainly doesn't 94



Bertie Carvel as Leo Frank and Lara Pulver as Lucille Frank in *Parade*. Photo: Johan Persson

years later – the popular press printed a torrent of innuendo and alleged witnesses, encouraging the trial and conviction of Frank.

As the defendant was Jewish but the main prosecution witness was black, the affair had unusual racial complications.

By accepting the word of the poor African-American accuser, the public and jurors challenged the reputation of the American South for racism while simultaneously, through sending Frank to the electric chair, encouraging suspicion of the region's anti-Semitism. Inclining to the latter view, the *New York Times* campaigned for Frank's acquittal, supported by leading Jewish industrialists. Their influence on the appeals process unseated a governor of Georgia and led to racial unrest in Atlanta, climaxing in an act of vio-

lence which it would be unfair to theatregoers to reveal.

There would be meat enough here for a play by Arthur Miller: the depiction of the press' manipulation of justice, with obvious echoes of the McCann case, had some journalists in the audience literally hanging their heads on the opening night. But it works impressively well as a musical. It would be a great surprise if Jason Robert Brown doesn't have some Weill and Sondheim on his iPod, but his songs have an impressive range from the large-scale – an anthem of community bigotry called "Where Will You Stand When the Flood Comes?" – to the intimate: Frank's ballad, "It's Hard to Speak my Heart".

There's a potential dramatic problem in the fact that Frank (Bertie Carvel) is a blank: both in this show and in non-fiction accounts of the case, his innocence remains a matter of opinion. But the musical – directed and choreographed by Rob Ashford with a scale and energy remarkable on the tiny Donmar stage – employs a clever device by which the character acts out the accounts of his action as the witnesses describe them, so that he exists in multiple versions. As a result, the ambiguity of the action becomes a strength, forcing us, with extreme topicality, to reflect on how easily we become armchair barristers and jurors, turned by the last thing we heard.

Parade won a Tony Award on Broadway, but failed to draw the crowds and has taken nine years to reach London. Now that it has, this tense, upsetting, constantly inventive show deserves a long stay here. **Mark Lawson**

RADIO

Love conquers all

Guilty Pleasures

BBC RADIO 4

Rather more than half a lifetime ago, in the depths of a university vacation long on time but short on funds, I sat down and wrote the first page or two of a projected Mills & Boon novelette. Trying to remember what it was about, I can recall only a description of the heroine's father, found dead in his library with "a tired, sweet smile playing about the corners of his mouth". Shown to a college friend who claimed to have some experience of the genre, this experiment was loudly disparaged on the grounds that it "lacked conviction".

This, it turned out, was the message of *Guilty Pleasures* (Radio 4, 27 September), the comedienne Lucy Porter's guilelessly entertaining foray into the world of a British institution gearing up for its centenary. In fact, the founding family had sold Mills & Boon to a Canadian conglomerate 30 years ago, but this didn't lessen the impact of Porter's trip around the – I was going to say "factory", but clearly "editorial HQ" is the better phrase at Richmond, Surrey, or the constant lectures

to tyros on the need to believe in what you wrote. "Some people can do it and others can't," one veteran of the industry soberly declared.

The statistics, of course, are terrifying. The company's annual worldwide sale is 200 million units to a consumer base put at 50 million readers. Its best-selling author, Penny Jordan, has knocked up lifetime sales of 84 million copies. Inevitably, behind the eternal gavottes of sneering alpha males and their "feisty" yet ultimately deferential prey lay a commercial operation of dazzling astuteness.

Several of Porter's interviewees – mostly Mills & Boon writers or aficionados – were anxious to deny that the books are formulaic. Others were equally keen to determine what the formula was. Most agreed that it consists of boy (initially aloof to the point of contemptuousness) meets girl to set up an emotional conflict which eventually resolves itself when his less abrasive side wins through. Quite as fascinating was the reflected sociology. In 1939-45, when hundreds of thousands of women were coopted into the war effort, the books featured munitions workers and land girls. Come the 1950s and the era of foreign travel, air hostesses and exotic locales began to make their presence felt. In the Sixties the firm discovered sex – discreetly framed and between married couples – and in the Seventies its extramarital variant. There were memorable excerpts from an interview given in 1970 by the

legendary best-seller Violet Winspear in which she railed against the debasing influence of Harold Robbins and his ilk.

Porter, avid to try her hand, attended a workshop for aspiring practitioners. Her try-out – about a disfigured female stand-up and a moody surgeon – was, alas, rejected out of hand by the firm's editorial team with a strong hint that she hadn't been paying attention. The programme ended with a series of predictable complaints. The novelist Celia Brayfield suggested that the books were aimed at "people who can barely read". A rather joyless-sounding professor of women's studies thought that they made women "dependent", lowered their self-esteem and, taken collectively, operated as "a literature of unhappiness".

Nonsense, countered the fans. Readers knew the difference between reality and escapism: to read about saturnine Dr Blackadder catching sight of Nurse Golightly's auburn curls above the operating table was the literary equivalent of a scented bath. It was proof of everyone's enthusiasm that I found myself siding with the readers. Books, after all, have a life of their own; in the end, whatever the sociological underpinning, readers respond to them individually. Dealing with what, ultimately, is an exercise in pure form, this response is never going to be clear-cut. Irony, it can't be too often said, is appreciated by ordinary people as much as literary critics. **D.J. Taylor**



Alice Cooté as Carmen in the ENO production

OPERA

Heroine through a distorted lens

Carmen

LONDON COLISEUM

Judging by the selective applause, English National Opera is succeeding in its aim to bring “new audiences” to its shows. Former “new audiences” have included people who like soppy films (for Anthony Minghella’s flaccid *Madama Butterfly*) and rubbishy musicals (the fearful *Kismet*).

Future “new audiences” will include fans of passé couture (*Aida*, dressed by Zandra Rhodes). The “new audience” for tango-filmster Sally Potter’s first shot at opera-directing is, not surprisingly, those who like tango. It’s all great, isn’t it? Unless you happen to like *opera*, that is.

If you wonder at the frequency with which silly ideas which should have been ditched at the first rehearsal make it on to the opera stage, the simple reason is the lack of proper producers in our subsidised houses: there is simply nobody with the theatrical know-how to nip fatuities in the bud. It would be an act of kindness to first-time directors, of course. Instead, what happens is that fatuities are nodded through – “yes, that sounds very new and challenging” – until little else remains.

Potter’s most challenging idea – forget the tango, which is merely tacked on to substitute for stagecraft and fill in space, no doubt on the spurious logic that the dance is, like *Carmen* (let’s say) “about” sex and death – is that the story of *Carmen* is itself fatuous and clichéd: all that stamping flamenco, castanets and smouldering gypsies! To set it in any way literally would be a cop-out. Let us instead find the “hidden architecture” of the piece and present it in a new way, slice through the tourist-board nonsense and

reveal the heart of this piece, what it’s really talking about.

I’m not arguing: *Carmen* is not about all that Spanish frippery. But there may have been a reason for Prosper Mérimée and then Bizet to choose this particular vehicle to air their concerns; and is there any reason why transporting the exotic tale to a London car park and substituting neo-colonial soldiers and cigarette-girls with security guards and “sex-workers” would do the job as well?

We’ll never know, because Potter throws out the baby with the bathwater, as well as the bath itself. The opposite of “cliché” is dramaturgical incoherence – plus just about every actual operatic cliché of the past 20 years. Potter’s one idea, represented by surveillance and CCTV, vanishes after Act 1, and we still, somehow, wind up at a bullfight in Spain at the end. The dialogue is cut and the show lurches from number to unexplained number without motivation or direction – then grinds to a halt as the infernal dancers do their Madonna-backing routine behind Alice Cooté’s gloomy Carmen.

There is something hilariously misconceived about the casting of this wonderful singer, who devotes the interiority and detail of a Schubert song to the role. Sexy and dangerous she isn’t, though, despite a kind of psychotic intensity that should send the chaps running for the door. Updated words by Christopher Cowell turn the free spirit of Mérimée into a regular, tawdry commitment-phobe – without even any apparent joy in her appetites.

But it is beautifully sung, quiet and highly wrought, and reeking – sometimes a bit too much – of artistry. Musically, this show is something of a wonder, thanks to the conducting of Edward Gardner, ENO’s young music director. The outrageous exuberance of the overture gives way to something entirely reinvented – a true removal of clichés – the ping-pong lines and translucent textures of a miraculous score cleaned up and presented as new, details of single-instrument comments too numerous to name, a variety of tone and affect I’d forgotten this orchestra could muster.

Julian Gavin’s José was properly passionate, the “Flower Song” a hallucinating web of emotional enchantment; Katie Van Kooten was wasted as Micaela, a beautifully clear, cultured and mature voice shunted on and off stage as though the character were an embarrassment. The women, uncomfortable in opera-cliché underwear, sang their cigarette-free smoking chorus with a woozy loveliness.

I know plenty of woefully neglected, *real* opera directors who should have been offered this job. Do they get government money to direct films? Of course not. ENO’s present policy is an outrage, as everyone is finally beginning to acknowledge. And this is the inevitable result: a void of a production whose theatrical ineptitude is justified with empty shibboleths of “new audiences” and “challenge”. Conductor, singers, chorus and orchestra deserve better; and so does the *real* audience.

Robert Thickness

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TELEVISION

Soft in tooth and claw

The Nature of Britain

BBC1

Patriotism is all the rage. In his recent speech to the Labour Party Conference, Gordon Brown used the words "Britain" or "British" no fewer than 80 times in attempting to interest a sceptical country in national institutions and values. Now here comes Alan Titchmarsh, inviting us to glory in *The Nature of Britain* (10 October).

It has to be said that Titchmarsh has the easier job. Convincing people to rally round abstractions is a lot trickier than reminding them what they like about a country's flora and fauna. But Titchmarsh goes further than that. He wants to convince us that "there is something truly special about our wildlife and our countryside". Don't all patriots feel that, whichever benighted patch of earth they happen to inhabit? Maybe, but Titchmarsh musters a few arguments to bolster our natural prejudice that British is best, at least when it comes to variety of species and habitat.

For a start, not many countries – or archipelagos, Britain consisting of 6,000 islands – stretch from chilly north (the Shetland Isles are nearer to the Arctic Circle than they are to London) to balmy south. Titchmarsh seems determined to cover the entire territory in this first episode, intended as a

taster for what is to come. One minute he is being dive-bombed by Arctic skuas, the next he is walking on a warm southern beach, or looking at basking lizards and exotic moths. Britain also has an unusual range of species, thanks to the habit of continental invaders of bringing their animals with them. Who knew, for instance, that the hare was introduced by the Romans? "For the brown hares, there's love in the air, but the girls are playing hard to get," he tells us, introducing some appealing footage of mad March hares first boxing and then mating. That's the authentic Titchmarsh note: anthropomorphic, matey, bland.

How you respond to these programmes will depend very much on your tolerance for Titchmarsh himself, because he seems to be all you are going to get. This is not one of those science-led nature documentaries, casting new light on behaviour or taking us to places never previously accessible to human eye. Instead you get a sort of Wildlife's Greatest Hits, introduced by a man more notable for his enthusiasm than his specialist expertise.

This is comfort television, careful to avoid controversy. Titchmarsh manages to talk about the Gulf Stream without mentioning that it might be threatened by climate change. He tells us that the seas around Britain are among the most productive in the world: not one word about the danger of over-fishing. And an extended sequence on badgers – "British badgers are special" –



Comfort television: BBC's *The Nature of Britain*

manages to avoid mentioning that most farmers blame them for spreading TB and would like to see them culled.

Nor is there much evidence of nature being red in tooth and claw. True, there is a bloody and rather shocking punch-up between male seals competing for mates, and we see some unfortunate puffins being snatched in the air by hungry gulls. But for the most part nature behaves benignly and looks beautiful, with sumptuous photography enhanced by all the soaring, plunging, slowing-down and speeding-up at the BBC's command, while orchestral strings saw away in the background.

It may not be challenging television, but it will certainly cheer up an autumnal Wednesday evening.

John Morrish

CINEMA

Border skirmish

Manufacturing Dissent

DIRECTOR: DEBBIE MELNYK

The 2003 Oscars were marked by two unusual spectacles: the prosthetic nose that helped Nicole Kidman to the Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Virginia Woolf in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*; and the sight of famously dishevelled film-maker Michael Moore stepping out of a black limo in a pressed and shimmering tuxedo on his way to winning the Best Documentary award for his anti-gun polemic, *Bowling for Columbine*.

The Columbine Oscar marked the beginning of the big time for Moore, and so it is not surprising that Debbie Melnyk makes it the starting point for *Manufacturing Dissent* (12A), a film portrait that attempts to do for Moore what his 2004 movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* did for George Bush. Melnyk runs through all the now-familiar strikes against Moore, notably his highly selective editing of news footage, his manipulation of unwary

interviewees, and what Christopher Hitchens – the only Briton among the film's many contributors – calls "chronology issues": his re-ordering of events so as to suggest a clear progression of cause-and-effect.

She makes a convincing case against Moore on all three counts, although none of the distortions she highlights amounts to actual deception: about the worst is Moore's failure to note that an apparently crass quip from Bush was delivered at a Catholic fundraising dinner where such flippancy has long been traditional. Melnyk goes in for a bit of mud-slinging of her own, but none of it sticks. Her attempts to show that Moore is indiscriminate in his share-buying are inept, as are her jibes that he doesn't like criticism (who does?) or being doorstepped by pushy women like her (ditto).

Melnyk is Canadian and at times *Manufacturing Dissent* seems like a border skirmish in the cultural war with America. She doesn't neglect to remind viewers that Moore's only big-screen flop was a feature entitled *Canadian Bacon* (1995), about a US president who picks a fight with his northern neighbours to boost his ratings back home. Outsiders were baffled by the "in" jokes, most Canadians were simply offended.

Moore's jabbered "You know I always love talking to Canadians" when ambushed by Melnyk is hardly likely to help matters, nor is the bear hug with which he smothers her at a later, equally unscheduled meeting. "Being Canadian," Melnyk notes drily, "we don't hug at the drop of a hat."

I don't think that Moore will lose too much sleep over Melnyk's film. She is a lot nicer to him than he ever was to George Bush; plenty of friends pop up to celebrate his largesse and likeability. What we see of Moore himself confirms that, like most firebrands, he is motivated as much by vanity as by principle, but his commitment to that most incendiary of political weapons – the ballot box – is wholly admirable, even if he does share a delusion beloved of so many on the Left: that they would surely be in power if only more people bothered to vote.

It is a measure of Moore's current standing that *Manufacturing Dissent* is being rushed out to (just) pre-empt the release of his next film, *Sicko*, a withering attack on – of all unpromising subjects – America's health system. If there is a British film-maker who can make a documentary about the NHS and sell it to the Americans, then give the man a Bafta.

Crispin Jackson