

Tikka's opera presents Luther both as a reformer and controversial individual

In composing his opera Luther, Kari Tikka sought to do for music what Martin Luther had done for the Bible: to translate it into the language of the people. During 15 years this popular work has been performed numerous times in Finland, in English in Minneapolis and in German in Berlin and Wittenberg.

Few people have made such a lasting impact on the ideological history of Europe as the German priest and father of the Reformation, **Martin Luther** (1483–1546). The 95 Theses he published in autumn 1517 set in motion a wave of theological disputes that would draw a clear spiritual dividing line through Europe and would influence the way people thought and felt in many ways.

Considering the dominance of Luther's ideas in Finland, the fact that **Kari Tikka** (b. 1946) chose the great Reformer as the topic of an opera is not altogether surprising. Tikka has been conducting for many years at, among others, the Finnish National Opera, and has composed three operas of his own. They all have a strong spiritual dimension, and he has also written other religious music.

Luther and his opponents

Tikka completed *Luther* in 2000, the "crazy year" that saw the premiere of 17 new Finnish operas. *Luther* was premiered in Helsinki on 8 December 2000 and has since been performed in several other Finnish cities, in English in Minneapolis and in German in Berlin and in the Reformer's own church in Wittenberg.

The opera presents Martin Luther both as a reformer and as an individual wrestling with his own faith. It is in seven big scenes tracing his life. His biggest opponent is Satan, who appears in different disguises in the various scenes – sometimes as Death, at others as one of the most learned theologians of his day, **Erasmus of Rotterdam**, or again as the Pope himself. In the first of the two Acts, the disputes raised by the Reformation take the leading role; in the second, Luther's wife **Katharina von Bora** makes her appearance.

The events take place at an interesting juncture in European culture, at the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. As one of his themes Tikka chose the Dance of Death of

humankind. The dancers are Satan, Sin, Law, Death and Hell, given human appearance in keeping with the medieval theatre tradition.

Music in the vernacular

Before the opera was premiered, Tikka said he had sought to do for music what Luther had done for the Bible; in other words, to translate it into the language of the people. At no point is there any Modernist monkish Latin; instead, the music could be described as neo-tonal, in an idiom often consciously archaic. The repetition of motifs and the persistence of the dance-like rhythms are evocative of Minimalism. The Stravinsky of his Neo-classical period, from *Pulcinella* right up to the *Symphony of Psalms*, and the choral works of **Carl Orff** also appear to have left their mark. Stirring crowd scenes alternate with quieter, meditative ones and discussion.



Eeva-Liisa Saarinen and Esa Ruuttunen in *Luther*



Photo: Britti Nurro

Kari Tikka

The keys chosen by Tikka for the opera carry strong symbolic significance. The key of death is B-flat minor, and that of mortal fear A minor; the latter is, he says, literally a step down from death. Life, by contrast, is tonally as far removed from death as possible, a tritone away in E minor or major.

The archaic-sounding Minimalism and the beat of the Dance of Death are well suited to the early 16th-century ambiance. Tikka underlines this by using a smallish orchestra with no clarinets or French horns. The chorus occupies a central role, and the audience can also join in singing the unison hymns between the scenes, thereby generating a community spirit. The one diversion from the general archaic soundscape is the *Armolaulu* (Grace Song), a popular religious song composed by Tikka in 1976.

Despite telling the story of a religious reformer and being a strongly denominational work, *Luther* can also be interpreted at a more general, non-religious level, as the story of the path travelled by anyone with firm faith in a particular cause. It also raises questions; the dance with which the opera begins, painting late-medieval visions of death, reappears in the closing scene. Like all true art, it not only believes; it also doubts.

Kimmo Korhonen