

Olli Kortekangas:

“It’s not art’s job to say who is right and who is wrong.”

*Olli Kortekangas has a catalogue of some 150 works. One of its major categories is vocal music, from choral works and solo songs to operas. His latest opera, *Veljeni vartija* (My Brother’s Keeper), awaits its premiere in February 2018.*

way away. I always get enthused about all kinds of things, so I got enthused about this suggestion, too, and began turning it over in my mind. I did, however, have reservations about the Civil War, because it seemed a huge subject. Just as with my opera *Daddy’s Girl*, I began not with the big picture but with a little one and the big feelings of a little person. Starting with the little, the idea began to work.

– Even if the topic is tragic and serious, an opera should have some light relief. Parkkinen is a wonderful satirist. He’s written plays about big topics, Jesus, death and love, but by means of satire. Right from the beginning in doing *My Brother’s Keeper*, we debated ways of showing different aspects of the subject. We didn’t want to make it a farce, but in addition to being gloomy, it had to have some grotesque, satirical elements. **Monica Groop** once said to me that if you want to write a really tragic scene, it’s a good idea to put something truly hilarious before or after it. That’s one of the many things I’ve learnt from singers.

A hundred years may be a suitable time to deal with a subject as traumatic as a civil war. The way historians approach the subject has also changed in a century.

– The 1918 war is still a delicate subject even now. Along the way I’ve realised there are people who weren’t even born then but for whom it’s painful because the families haven’t processed it. I’ve also noticed that most of the people I’ve talked to at some point start telling me their own family’s experience of the Civil War.

– There’s a story in my own family that reflects both tragedy and national healing. A certain farmer was murdered by the Reds in an extremely brutal way. As a consequence, there was a lot of bitterness about them. Then years later, the farm got a daughter-in-law from the Red side, and she was accepted as part of the family.

– Tampere, what’s more, has a special position as the scene of events in the Civil War. *My Brother’s Keeper* is to be performed only a few hundred

metres from where the worst fighting took place.

The opera’s music also harks back a hundred years.

– It was an opportunity too good to miss! On the “engine-room side”, the harmonic, melodic and motivic structure is really strict, but at surface level there’s all sorts of things – fair ground music, cake-walk and other such things. The music also has what I call its Tammerkoski, alluding to the fast-flowing river through Tampere. It’s a lengthwise, endless flow right through the work.

One of the finest things in the process of making an opera is, according to Kortekangas, the joining of idea and practice. The music is born in the composer’s study, but he can collaborate with the people who will put it into practice all along the way. As in his other operas, he was able to have his say about the casting, and it’s a good combination of old and new hands.

– As you get to know the characters in the opera and hang out with them, they become real people, until finally you have to get away from them. For me, it’s important for a character, regardless of whether they’re good or bad, to have something I can relate to. At least the main characters must undergo some kind of development, and that will in turn affect the singing. For example, the way the female lead in the opera, Amanda Rossi, grows deeper and more serious is expressed in the music. **Tuuli Takala**, who sings the part, told me that for her, it’s easier on the voice if the coloraturas are towards the beginning, and it just so happened that the idea fully coincides with the character’s development.

So can anything be learnt from history?

– I hope so. We can’t undo that period in time, but talking about it can, I believe, have a therapeutic effect. *My Brother’s Keeper* is not, however, a historical cavalcade, and its job is not to say who was right and who was wrong. That’s not art’s job at all. This opera’s job is simply to tell the story of these little people in this setting, and hence something crucial about the period itself. I wanted to compose a powerful work but to let people draw their own conclusions about it.

LOTTA EMANUELSSON

Footnote

Veljeni vartija (My Brother’s Keeper)

World premiere: 16.2.2018, Tampere Opera, Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Santtu-Matias Rouvali, sol. Tuuli Takala, Ville Rusanen, Tuomas Katajala, Juha Kotilainen, Päivi Nisula, Virpi Räisänen etc., dir. Tuomas Parkkinen. Other performances: 18.2., 21.2., 24.2., 1.3. & 3.3.



As a child, I played the piano and cello. When I was 13 or 14, I began writing little miniatures of my own. I attended the Espoo Music Institute and Tapiola Secondary School. No one really pressed me to compose, but I got terrific encouragement.

– I arrived at the Sibelius Academy via Candomino. **Einojuhani Rautavaara** was writing a work for the choir, and the leader, **Tauno Satomaa**, asked him if a certain 17-year-old could come and show him his compositions. Rautavaara took me on as a pupil, first privately and then at the Academy. At that time, the Academy was still conservative, but Einojuhani wasn’t at all. For him, every pupil was special and he helped them do whatever they wanted. Only later have I grasped many of the things he taught. They stuck in my mind but weren’t realised until years later.

– I read a lot even as a child, and we often went to the theatre as a family. With my choral background, I’ve also been interested in words, language and the human voice. Text and language are part of my own vocal music, not only at the level of narrative and semantics, but also of colour, as a musical element.

– Stylistically, I regard myself as a successor of Modernism. Though my music has elements taken from here and there in the history of music, it’s enough for me that, quality-wise, they are intrinsically the best I can do, and each work follows its own agenda. The most important thing is the ability to communicate: if you can’t communicate, the music won’t take place in the listener’s head.

Olli Kortekangas’s latest opera, *My Brother’s Keeper*, is a commission from the Tampere Hall. The libretto is by **Tuomas Parkkinen**, and the opera will be premiered in Tampere with **Santtu-Matias Rouvali** conducting in February 2018.

– I got a call from Tampere nearly ten years ago asking whether I’d be interested in doing an opera about Finland’s Civil War. I didn’t know Tuomas Parkkinen then, and 2018 sounded a really long