

Reigning dynasties of the royal opera



Compared with large European capitals, Stockholm is small and more than convenient for the traveler with all most important places of interests located within walking distance. The starting point is the royal palace located in Gamla Stan (Old Town) sprawled on three islets. This is the place of origin of the town of Stockholm. Before the beginning of the 1980s, this part of the Swedish capital was officially called "the Town between the Bridges," as it is linked with the shore by nine bridges.

The bridge near the royal place is thrown precisely to the North across a river between Lake Malaren and the sea. It is called Norrbro (Northern Bridge) and leads to Gustav Adolfs Torg (Square) with an equestrian statue of the imposing monarch, Gustav IV Adolf, in the middle. There are two buildings facing each other on the opposite sides of the square: the Foreign Ministry and the Royal Opera House, the country's main opera and ballet stage of 240 years standing.

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Music, painting and theatre had always been the "soft power" the rulers used in order to gain the glorious reputation of the enlightened, something they could never have with the power of weapons. For Gustav however, art was also a hobby and passion to which he wholly devoted himself, lionizing creative people. He was a true lover and appreciator of arts. Under his rule, the cultural life of the kingdom flowered to unprecedented heights. But theatre was the monarch's special passion. Because of that, he was called "the Theatre King."

Perceptive people might see some mystic origin in it while others would call it a mere coincidence. One way or another, the Euterpe temple set sort of a frame for the reign of Gustav III: it was at the Paris Opera that he heard the news about his father's death which paved the way to the throne for him, and it was at the Stockholm Opera House that an assassin shot him dead during a masquerade. Sixty-seven years later, Verdi based his opera *Masked Ball* on this tragedy.

The monarch did not merely love ballet and opera. He helped stage them, from the idea to production. It was Gustav III who ordered the royal bandmaster, Italian composer Francesco Antonio Uttini to produce *Thetis et Pelee*, the first Swedish opera, sketching the key points of the libretto for poet Johan Wellander. The first night took place on January 18, 1773, which is the birthdate of Swedish opera.

Swedish ballet was born in the same year. As early as the 18th century, the Royal Swedish Ballet

was one of the leading companies in Europe. It initially comprised 30 actors, but their number quickly increased to 71. The Parisian, Copenhagen and Petersburg companies were the only three older collectives.

Thetis et Pelee ran in the 17th century (Stora Bollhuset) which literary means "Ball House," intended for ball sports and theatre performances. Located just a few steps away from the southern facade of the royal palace, it is still used as the modern stadiums, for performances and concerts for all social groups.

... After ascending the throne, a theatre-loving Gustav could afford wholly devoting himself to his hobby. Aside from Stora Bollhuset, he had at his disposal three more theatres at the countryside residences in Ulriksdal, Gripsholm and Drottningholm.

The Drottningholm Palace Theatre, one of Europe's best preserved old theatres, still runs 18th century ballets and operas using original contraptions, such as wind and thunder machines and mechanisms for waves, changing decorations and lifting the curtain. Performances are not given in the cold season for the sake of tradition: Gustav III used it as a summer residence and the theater was only open in the summer months.

As the king began to revamp the Ball House into a full-fledged theatre in earnest, he quickly saw the shortcomings of the building: a small hall, no backstage, and no space to accommodate workshops or store decorations and props. Architect Carl Fredrik Adelcrantz who designed the new Drottningholm palace to replace the old one that had burnt down, was ordered to start working on sketches of the new building. The construction finished in 1782, and the theatre moved there in

the same year. A French ballet company which Gustav had ordered long before the moving-in was accommodated in the vacated Ball House.

The first Stockholm Opera House was built under Gustav III and therefore went down in history as Gustavian. The building lasted 110 years until 1892, when Oscar II decided to replace it with a new one (Oscarian). It is the Oscarian Opera House that you see when crossing the bridge across the Strommen from the royal palace to Gustav Adolf Square.

Incidentally, the Gustavian Opera could have fallen into oblivion far sooner. In 1806, Gustav III's son Adolf banned performances and masked balls there while a year later, in 1807, which marked the 15th anniversary of his father's death, ordered to pull it down. The opera evoked sad memories in him and required high maintenance costs.

Luckily, the king's demolishing order was never carried through. In 1808, Gustav Adolf focused on more important matters as a war with Russia broke out, and the opera house stood intact. After the signing of the peace treaty under which Sweden ceded Finland to Russia, the opera house resumed performances.

Technically, the Gustavian Opera House was tops. It had a very deep stage with seven rows of side-scenes, which allowed for quick change of decorations. It lent dynamism and general effectiveness to the performances. Hatches were fitted into the stage for quick appearances of actors, and technicians controlled suspension equipment from a special balcony above the stage. The auditorium was lighted by a 40-candle crystal chandelier. By the middle of the 19th cen-

tury, the opera house had begun to use oil lamps instead of candles, and later oil lamps were replaced with gas brackets. As electricity was discovered, the theatre had light bulbs installed, but only in the auditorium: the stage and side scenes were never electrically lighted for reasons unknown to the author. As the old opera house be-

Along the beautifully carved heavy entrance doors, when swinging, fill you with awe before this temple of arts or whatever you might see behind the curtain. The theatre has royal opera interior. As spectators walk an impressive marble staircase and enter a gold foyer, they see a truly fire-bird interior – there is no other way to put it – with

do not have to rummage in books in search for old pictures or photos. If you are facing the Opera, make a U-turn to see the Foreign Ministry and visualize the area without the structures on your sides as it was 120 years ago. Then you will see a mirror image of the old Opera in the crown prince palace built by Gustav III's sister Sophia Albertina after the theatre project was completed. The small three-storey building does not look significant at all, yet this is where diplomats have been setting the country's foreign policy course since early last century.

There they stand facing each other – the twin house of the Old Opera and the stately building of the New Opera, full of academism. A theatre is not merely a structure, no matter how beautiful it looks, but a plethora of playwrights, composers, ballet

masters, singers, dances, painters and choreographers, who are a source of true fame. There are many such names on record of the Royal Opera. The list should open with Charles Louis Didelot, an outstanding dancer, choreographer, and Gustav III's favorite. Born in Stockholm to a family of French ballet dancers, he showed talent in his early years to win the monarch's attention. Amazed by his skills, the monarch sent him to Paris to study. Upon returning to Stockholm, the king appointed the young artist "the leading demi-character genre dancer" of the royal ballet and the latter himself staged several divertissements. Later, the king again sent him to France "on creative assignment."

Didelot never returned to Sweden. After working at the Paris Opera and a contract in London, he was invited by Prince Yusupov, director of Petersburg's imperial theatres, to lead the city's ballet company. As head of the company, Didelot overhauled the art entrusted to him. He made the dancers' uniforms much lighter cancelling heavy costumes, buckle boots, wigs and chignons.



came hopelessly obsolete and too small for the enlightened public, it was pulled down.

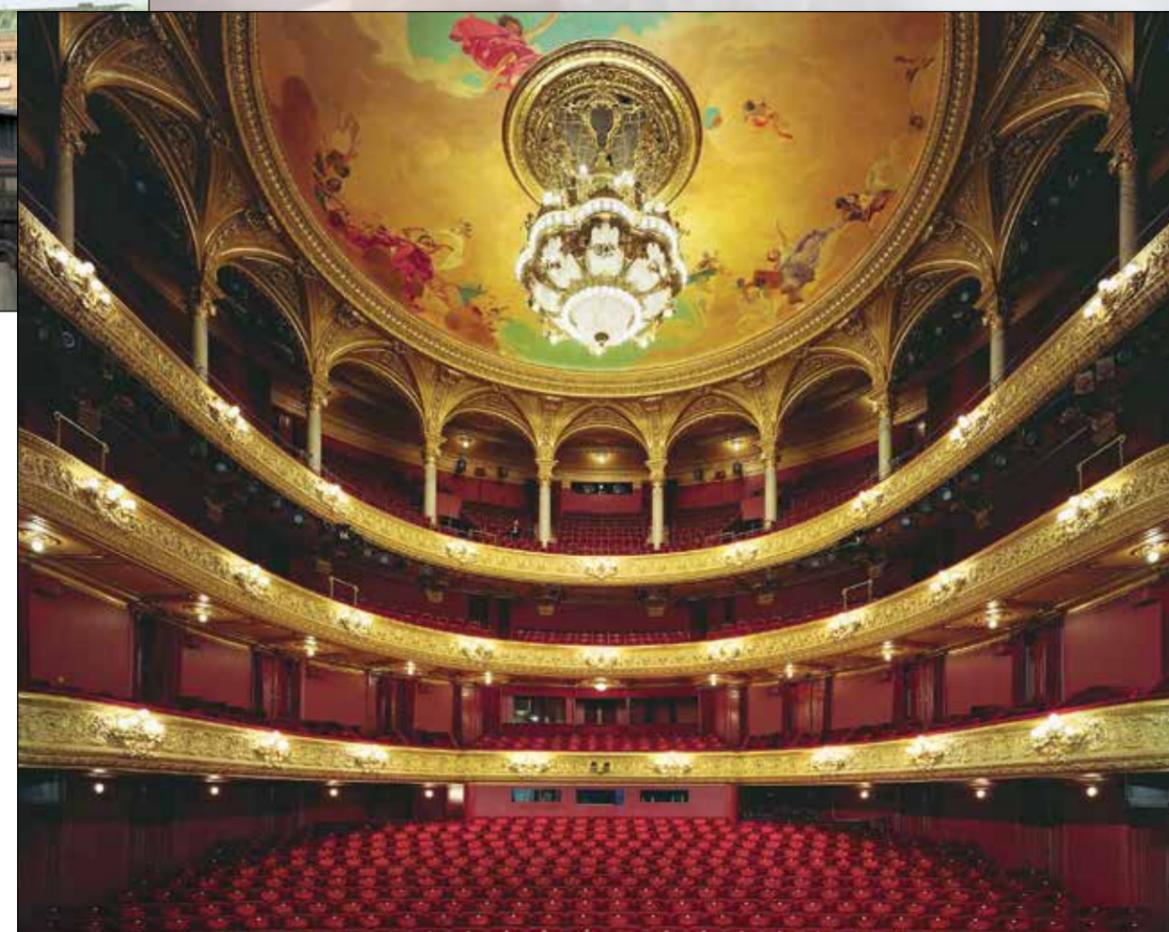
The building of the new Oscanian Opera House was designed by architect Axel Anderberg, who had it patterned after neo baroque. The new opera harmonized with the royal palace on the opposite side of the stream and looked as part of the architectural ensemble: same lines, same color of fronts, same mood.

When the construction was over, quite a few criticized the result. The most merciless critics called the building "a pile of cigar boxes" hinting at numerous regular-shaped massive elements which seemed to grow out of each other. But time works wonders, and over its century-odd existence the Oscanian opera became an integral part of Stockholm and one of its places of interest.

dazzling gold, mirrors, glittering chandeliers, exquisite dome lights, wall decorations and an Oscar II portrait right in the middle.

The opera house does not look big either inside or outside. Far larger theatres can be found in the world. But when you learn that there are 13 storeys and over 1,000 rooms in it you cannot help wondering. How can you cram it all into this space? As for the size of stage and side scenes, they match the dimensions of those in the old opera house. It is practical: the new theatre inherited from its predecessor decorations to the plays which were still on, and the architects' project had taken it into account.

Perhaps, the traveler might wonder what the Gustavian opera looked like before it was replaced by the Oscanian one. In order to get an idea, you



Shedding an extra load enabled the artists to feel a previously unthinkable freedom of movement and do new pas that changed dance patterns. One of the effective innovations was making dancers' fly over the stage by using a system of hidden wires.

Didelot's fame in Russia is acknowledged in Alexander Pushkin's Eugene Onegin:

*"And there the caustic Shakhovskoy
Refreshed the stage with comic joy,
Didelot his crown of fame perfected.
There, too, beneath the theatre's tent,
My fleeting youthful days were spent."*

In the 19th century, well-known Danish choreographer August Bournonville worked with the royal ballet and produced several theatre pieces. His father was a Gustav III ballet dancer, and his mother was Swedish. In the middle of the 19th century, the incomparable soprano Jenny Lind, was a stage star. She was called "Swedish Nightingale" during her guest performances in America, and the name stuck through the rest of her life. She was famous on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and all the leading theaters dreamt of having her to perform on their stage.

They say it is to Jenny Lind that Hans Christian Andersen devoted his fairy tale "Nightingale." Sweden's 50-kronas banknote carries Lind's portrait as a token of respect for her creative work and her generosity with which she spent her large fees on charity.

In the early 20th century, famous Mikhail Fokine blazed across the royal opera stage. He was chief choreographer of Dyagilev's Russian Ballet in Paris, and their relations grew tense as the latter began to actively promote his favorite Vaslav Nijinsky to Fokine's detriment. After trading accusations, Fokine left the company and travelled to Stockholm in early 1913 to head a ballet school.

He produced two ballets at the Opera within a tight timeframe – "Les Sylphides" and "Cleopatra." He danced in "Cleopatra" together with his wife who performed the title role. In 1914, Fokine returned to Stockholm. Both visits hardly lasted a couple of months. Yet his appearance turned on the Swedish ballet giving it a powerful impulse which enabled a number of artists to win international recognition.

Fokine's next visit to Stockholm took place in 1918, after he and his wife emigrated from

Russia. During this "Stockholm period," the great Russian ballet master produced Stravinsky's Petrushka. In 1919, he went to the USA on an invitation where he stayed till the end of his life.

Well-known dancer and choreographer Birgit Cullberg, with her special views on dance, was another historical benchmark for the ballet. She introduced many new elements into dancing, creating a unique pattern and style.

Cullberg produced the first modern Swedish dance drama: the one-act ballet Miss Julie after eponymous play by August Strindberg. It had a resounding success, and she was invited to the royal opera together with the performance. In actual fact, it went against the unspoken rule, as the theatre pieces whose first night had taken place elsewhere could not be run on the Opera stage. The stage was also off limits to the actors trained at other theatres.

In the 1960s, Cullberg set up her own company. Very soon, the Cullberg ballet became famous in many countries. When Cullberg retired at a venerable age, her son Mats Ek took over. He still manages the Cullberg Ballet. Several years ago, he was invited to the Opera to stage a scene in Hades, the ballet part of Orpheus and Eurydice. His work drew universal admiration and it was a wager which was better: the opera part or the Hades scene.

This year, the royal ballet presented Ek's Romeo and Juliet. Not the well-known version by Sergei Prokofyev but one to the music by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Despite the staggering difference from the well-known show, it made a remarkably powerful impression. Inimitable expression and nuances in interpreting the ageless story, and the actors' play which was a combination of grave tragedy and light irony delighted the spectators and drew critics' praise.

Ek is known to take liberties with the original. On the 100th birthday of Chekhov, he produced the Cherry Orchard at the royal drama theatre, replacing part of the text with pantomime and dances. Gaev's famous monologue was pantomimed as well. Ek's wife Anna Laguna who played Charlotta Ivanovna's role never spoke a word on stage, expressing everything solely through dance.

In the late 1940s through the first half of the 1950s, the incomparable Birgit Nilsson sang at the Opera. It opened international career for her, but she kept returning to Sweden to perform new parts. In

December 2008, three years after the singer's death, it was announced that Birgit Nilsson had founded a prize to be awarded to a singer, a conductor or a production to classical music. The one-million-dollar prize is awarded by a jury of five. Placido Domingo became the first Birgit Nilsson Prize laureate in 2009.

"I can say without hesitation that this commendation from Birgit is one of the highest and emotional moments in my professional life," Domingo said.

"This is comparable to the Nobel Prize in music," he added, promising to use the money to support young singers, in the spirit of Birgit Nilsson.

Riccardo Muti became the second laureate in 2013. Performing on the Opera stage were Jussi Bjorling, Nikolai Gedda, Elisabeth Soderstrom and many other world famous singers.

Ingmar Bergman directed Stravinsky's the Rake's Progress at the Royal Swedish Opera.

In ballet and opera productions you can often see Russian artists' names. For example, the Eugene Onegin directed by head of Moscow's Helicon Opera Dmitry Bertman, discovered the talent of Syktyvkar native Maria Fontosh, an amazingly beautiful, strong and highly lyrical soprano. She created a furore at the first night which brought her international fame and paved the way to the world's leading stages. At the Royal Swedish Opera, she sang the main parts in La traviata and La Boheme.

Bertman, a tireless seeker of new interpretations, directed Andre Chenier and the Queen of Spades, winning the admiration of the public and the critics well versed in experimental versions.

As for ballet, the wish to have Russian performers at the theatre is quite understandable. Of course, hiring A-listers and even co-stars might be problematic as they are needed both at home and

other leading theatres all over the world. Yet the names of unmistakably Russian origin are ever present on the list of performers.

New Royal Opera artistic director Johannes Ohman invited Stuttgart ballet star Friedemann Vogel for the first night of Tchaikovsky's ballet "The Sleeping Beauty." Daniil Simkin, a native of Russia and American ballet theatre star, danced in the first Sleeping Beauty this year. It was Simkin who was hailed by the national mass media for making the

whole Swedish ballet glamorous again.

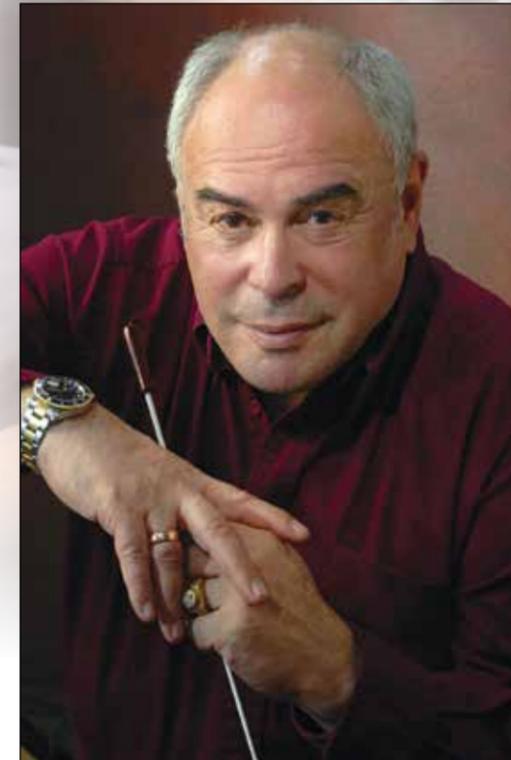
Johannes Ohman came to the Royal Opera from the Goteborg ballet which he "put on its feet." After taking over the country's leading ballet stage, he announced his ambitious to make it leader in the European north, putting it on two feet as well, with one foot standing for modern ballet and the other for classical.

It will not be an overstatement to say that one of the distinctive features of the Royal Opera is its openness and being ready for experiments, even risky ones, as well as the absence of academism though the word "royal" is part of the name. It is of venerable

age, but its soul is young. Writing or telling about opera or ballet is not easy. Firstly, you cannot immediately produce the object of your description to the reader, such as a vocal part or a dance. Despite your eloquence, everything will eventually boil down to a list of names, dates and merits.

But these, too, are worth knowing as you stand before the monumental building of the Stockholm Royal Opera by the other end of the bridge thrown from the palace of the Swedish kings across the river Strommen.

Mikhail Busnyuk,
for Amber Bridge



Eri Klas, an Estonian conductor, a People's Artist of the USSR. He was chief conductor of the Royal Opera House in Stockholm in 1985-1989