

Review Aniara

Helsingin Sanomat

<https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006242842.html>

(biggest Finnish newspaper)

18.9.2019

Culture | Review, Theatre

It is not possible to set a genre on Klockriketeatern's Aniara, but it is definitely worth hearing.

In this dystopic choral piece we travel toward unknown constellations.

[Picture | caption says]

Aniara is not only a choral piece because besides singing the choir acts and moves in a way that is quite far from how a choir traditionally presents itself.

Liisamaija Hautsalo

Musical theatre

[List of cast and crew]

The contemporary entertainment industry continuously produces stories where a spaceship, carrying what is left of human civilization after an ecological crisis, heads toward the boundless depths of the cosmos.

Aniara, a co-production between Helsinki based Klockriketeatern and The Crossing Choir from the United States, also presents this dystopia, however this time the dystopia is based on Swedish Nobel laureate Harry Martinsons epic sci-fi poem with the same name from 1956. In the poem the spaceship Aniara, routinely travelling to Mars and Venus, is thrown off course and ends up en route out of our solarsystem toward unknown stars.

The piece, mainly in English, had its Finnish premiere in the National Opera's Almi hall on Tuesday after first premiering in the United States last June. Previously Aniara has been staged in 1959, when **Karl-Birger Blomdahl** composed an opera.

The Aniara on show now is hard to define in terms of genre. It is hardly an opera as it does not have the traditional dramatic plot that would develop through conflicts between characters. In its repetitiveness it refers to the minimalistic, ritualistic, operatic style of **Philip Glass** and **Michel van der Aa**. Their work can often be said to be driven emotionally by a sense of endless melancholy, which is true also of Aniara.

Aniara is not a choral piece either, at least not in the purest sense of the word, because in addition to singing the choir also acts and moves in a way that is quite far from how a choir traditionally performs, static and stationary. In terms of genre Aniara is something in between, but that does reduce this rich and touching piece of art.

Conducted by **Donald Nally** *Aniara* leaves the band with a somewhat modest part to play but composer **Robert Maggio** certainly knows how to write for the choir. And what he writes The Crossing Choir certainly knows how to put into practice. The choir sounds astonishingly well tuned and the singing is meticulous. The result is a sophisticated and coherent sound quality, and only a few moments slip over to the overly sweet, into the style of musical. In *Aniara* even sharp dissonant sounds sparkle. The Crossing is definitely one of the best choirs I have heard.

Dan Henriksson, who wrote the libretto and directed *Aniara*, has together with his creative team had a challenge in deciding what to keep and what to leave out of the original material. Although a lot of text has been left out and, which is true also of the music, is often repeated, the result works.

The mystery of the poem is Mima, an entertainment and comfort for those lost in space. Mima is a form of artificial intelligence which is also capable of kindness and compassion. Mima carries with it a load of guilt it has inherited from mankind and when the echo of the final destruction of the Earth reaches the ship, the humanized Mima loses all hope and dies. Humankind dies at the same time.

Henriksson's interpretation of Mima is surprising. Mima is not presented as an abstraction, as a divinelike object of worship, but is embodied by a kind of rough figure of a man brought in from Beijing opera that does not sing nor talk, only dance. The role is portrayed by Beijing opera specialist **Antti Silvennoinen**, who has also done the choreography.

Joonas Tikkanen has created a stylish visualization that focuses on the essential. The Almi hall has been rearranged so that the floor is a stage, to which lights and video is projected. The projections show waves, sand and ice breaking off. At times the singers carry bowls of glass containing soil as a memory of Earth. The sound design built by Paul Vazquez makes the space ship rumble in between the episodes like we were in a scifi movie to say the very least. Costume by Erika Turunen is minimalistic and light coloured, as though time would have sifted away all color.

That *Aniara* is performed at the Almi hall is a significant occasion and I hope experimental musical theatre is put on at the venue in the future as well. That there is no translation into Finnish is not a good thing. In all operas, regardless of language, a captioning device should be available in order to deepen the understanding of the piece.

END

(Translation C.Alm 09/19)