



How well is Swedish opera doing internationally these days? Very well, claims Kjerstin Dellert, one of Sweden's most important and respected primadonnas. Having spent 30 years of hard work in the Royal Opera House, she met with Swedish Bulletin to discuss the past and future of Swedish opera.

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The girl of the *golden age*

KJERSTIN DELLERT HAS always wanted to sing. Nurturing that wish in the 1940's was difficult, not to mention frowned upon. But before television, before pop music, and before the musicals, the opera was where the superstars would truly shine.

- If you wanted to be on stage and sing, the opera was it, Dellert says while greeting us at her remarkably well preserved and tastefully renovated Ulriksdal's Castle Theatre Confidencen, north of Stockholm.

- At that time, the opera stars were real stars, on the covers of newspapers and magazines all over the world. And I had loved the opera since I was a child – the magic thing about opera is that it can do things that no other art form can.

The strength of her dream along with true consistency (or stubbornness) led Dellert to see her applications

to the Opera Academy magically return in the shape of rejections thrice before she decided to pursue her career elsewhere. After a brief period of confusion and a luck-seeking journey to the United States, she got the lead part in *La Belle Hélène* in Gothenburg. This rather successful period served as both her training academy and a confidence-boost for several years, until she finally passed the test at the Royal Opera in Stockholm in 1952, and landed her first part. But why was Stockholm so important for a talent with the world at her feet?

- Well, first of all, Stockholm had the only real opera house at the time. Nowadays, Gothenburg also has a remarkable opera house. But I am a real Stockholm girl; I have always wanted to come back here, for different reasons. And at that time I just knew I had to get back to the Stockholm Opera.

STARLIT JOURNEY

Once accepted in Stockholm, a lifelong career could evolve. The young, talented and often provocatively sensual Dellert starred in *Tosca*, *Figaro's Wedding*, *Pajazzo* and *Tannhäuser*, much to the delight of the young Wagner-fan that she was. Together with stars such as Jussi Björling and Birgit Nilsson; young talents as Elisabeth Söderström, Erik Sædén, Margareta Hallin, Per Grundén and Kerstin Meyer, and with executives like Sixten Ehrling and Göran Gentele pulling the strings, Kjerstin Dellert took part in forming the "new wave" of opera in Sweden in the 1950's. This was a kind of opera that began to experiment, and also integrate increasingly complex acting and vocal skills into the genre ("and we finally learned that the vocalist's belly fat didn't give resonance to the voice. It was just fat.").

The music travelled the world in the name of Swedish art, and the group became important ambassadors of Sweden. They were often looking down on the world from the front pages of papers like *The New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*, just to put the era's amazing impact into perspective. And Kjerstin Dellert is quick to admit that she started her career in the golden age of opera. But how are things today? Have we lost the ability to nurture such stardom in Sweden?

- Do we have any great Swedish superstars left in opera today?, Kjerstin Dellert asks rhetorically.

- I would say the answer is YES, of course we do! I still believe there is something special with "Swedish steel". But media seem completely oblivious to those success stories – people like Katarina Dalayman, Camilla Tilling, Nina Stemme, Erika Sunnegårdh, Katarina Karnéus, Annalena Persson and Emma Wetter are literally travelling around the world doing shows every single night, making big money and gaining international appreciation. But if you ask any Swede on the street, he couldn't name one of them. Apparently it's all about sports stars these days.

Why has that happened?

- It's the media!, Dellert exclaims without hesitation. But then there is silence. Even she does not know exactly why opera is treated by the Swedish media as elitist remains from an ancient time, while the art form seems thriving abroad.

- But the Opera House must also learn to market their stars better and to reduce the ticket price, Dellert says, having run her own independent, mainly sponsorship-funded stage for almost thirty years now. She profoundly believes in music as a unifying and positive energy, not something to divide classes and cultures by.

- Music and art should be building bridges, not burn them.

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL VETERAN

In 1972, Kjerstin Dellert and Elisabeth Söderström presented the show *Prima Primadonnor* on Swedish television, producing six shows where the two primadonnas introduced new, interesting music, discussed

related topics with invited guests and, of course, sang together. She once dedicated the song *Carl Gustaf* to the Swedish king on his birthday, and the song was immediately – and surprisingly – a nationwide hit, making it to the Swedish charts for eleven weeks. Dellert is proud of the concept's initiative, and she clearly sees the project as an honest attempt to widen the audience's musical horizons, loosening the public tension towards opera music. Now, with her own theatre, she still feeds open minds with music on a daily basis, in natural and historical surroundings, and in her own way.

A person that has always stood by her side, supportive and wise, is the famous ballet dancer (and later head of the Ballet at the Royal Opera in Stockholm) Nils-Åke Häggbom, her husband for 40 years. Workaholics as they were, they met at the Opera House during rehearsals for *Tannhäuser*, in which Häggbom was a young dancer. The initial heat was, however, swiftly shaken off, much due to the fact that the opera primadonna was thirty-three years old. Her courtesan was sixteen.

A COLOURFUL CAREER

Leading a working life intense and hectic in the beautiful premises of the Opera House, many anecdotes and stories have passed through the late renaissance-decorated walls, and through Dellert's 82-year-young sharp and witty persona. Once, for example, she was nearly killed on stage.

- I have had many bruises and blisters, I almost had a large tin jug thrown at my face; I have been "stabbed" with many theatre knives, bruising me profusely, and once I was doing a scene with Ragnar Ulfung, an incredibly passionate Norwegian tenor. He was supposed to be mad at me with jealousy, and he played the part only slightly too well. He swung a large chair at my head, and only missed because I was fast. I was just lucky to be alive!

Dellert now laughs at memories like these, but a career choice full of accompanying pressure, criticism and an immaculate discipline at all times is naturally demanding and challenging for anyone. Different directors meant different sets of rules to live by. Kjerstin Dellert remembers her first working encounter with late Ingmar Bergman, a perfectionist in every sense:

- As soon as he entered the Opera House, there was a swoosh throughout the corridors, and people whispered: "the master is here". He was extremely disciplined; everyone was to leave their personal attributes and accessories before rehearsing, and he dressed us all in black, so that we could fully enter the roles he gave us. He even locked the room so that no one would disturb him.

If you are to spot Dellert in the audience at a performance in the Royal Opera House, she has her favourite seat on the right hand side, slightly above the stage level.

- Those are the best seats. Plus, I don't feel comfortable in the middle of people. I need to sit by the wall somehow.

Such is the paradox of the primadonna.