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★★★★★

Manga Opera: Theatre on the Nature of War

Hotel Pro Forma's Japanese-inspired War Sum Up combines the brutality and agony of war with beauty of sound and stage images

by Vibeke Wern

There is a disturbing, quivering force and deeply moving beauty of sound in the voices of the 12 singer from the Latvian Radio Choir who are on stage in Hotel Pro Forma's new, image-rich performance *War Sum Up*. Hotel Pro Forma itself refers to the performance as a Manga Opera on the Nature of War. But one could also call Kirsten Dehlholm and Willie Flindt's Japanese-inspired performance an eternally valid and unsentimental - in fact, almost distant - oratorio on the cruelty of war and the tragic fate of those caught up in it.

The texts have been taken from Japanese Noh theatre and, highly suitably, are sung throughout in Japanese, with Danish supratexts provided. 'Like leaves on a perennial plant, hatred is here for ever' is one of the poetic texts near the beginning, where the Game Master, alias the beautiful soprano Ieva Ezerite, wearing a yellow two-piece suit and holding a music-box, sets the never-ending war-game in motion.

In turn, we hear about the Soldier, the Warrior and the Spy, who step forward as soloists among the total of 11 cartoon-like figures of the choir, dressed in Henrik Vibskov's sophisticated sand-coloured costumes with a Japanese cut. The singers and their narratives blend well with projections of manga drawings and war machines as well as Jesper Kongshaug's magical lighting design.

The music, created by the British group The Irrepressibles, together with the Latvian composer Santa Ratniece and the French sound-artist Gilbert Nouno, fascinates the listener with its sheer variety of expression, ranging from small Asian melodies and close-knit ethereal choral sounds to minimalist rhythms, techno-pop and electronica.

With its simple, rigorous architectural staging and its at times minimalist mode of expression, *War Sum Up* makes

one think of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's opera *Einstein on the Beach*, but also of Hotel Pro Forma's own image-opera *Operation: Orfeo*. *War Sum Up* belongs to the very best Hotel Pro Forma productions this reviewer has seen for a long time.