

London Orchestra

Watching Juntunen

Andrew Mellor

On 15 August 2007 the Finnish soprano Helena Juntunen introduced herself to a UK concert audience for the first time. She bounded wide-eyed onto the stage, readied herself in the no-nonsense manner of an athlete, and promptly delivered a performance of Sibelius's *Höstkväll* that sent a stunned shiver through the packed Royal Albert Hall. The night – despite the Lahti Symphony Orchestra's penetrative performance of Sibelius's Seventh Symphony – belonged to Juntunen.

But it was all over so quickly. And it was, apparently, a one off. The only way to hear this silvery, agile voice in the near future – to see it offered up with such natural and disarming conviction – was to head north. I set off for Finland on 11 January 2008, the day after my four years on the London Philharmonic Orchestra staff came to an end, to hear Juntunen sing Mimi in the Finnish National Opera's *La Bohème*.

In Helsinki's gleaming-white opera house, Juntunen embodied the role physically and vocally. Her voice, every bit as focussed and malleable as it had been in *Höstkväll*, found contrast and character in the troubled heroine's journey. Her dramatic conception was acutely moving: from a delicate hesitation her Mimi showed flickers of immense joy and overwhelming pain. It was a performance whose humility commanded the stage.

It's Juntunen as an artist, more than simply as a singer, who fascinates. Her voice is steely, clear and focussed in its light vibrato. It's delicate but direct and very human. Those assets alone wouldn't place her in the pantheon of great singers; other sopranos might boast greater lyrical power or more pyrotechnic coloratura. That's not the point though. In Juntunen's delivery of song, you get humanity and honest conviction – she somehow communicates the physiology of her technique when she sings. Perhaps it's a Finnish thing. There, music is sacred; it's delivered with reverence, not ego.

It seems distinctly against the zeitgeist to champion a singer who doesn't come with a film-star aura, a rags-to-riches sob story or a major record contract. And there's always the chance – when Juntunen sings Sibelius songs (including *Höstkväll*) with the London Philharmonic Orchestra on 30 January and 3 February 2010 – that you'll disagree; that you'll find her perfectly adequate but no more. So be it. But I'd urge you to see her. And if you find

yourself captivated by her unique presence and talent, don't say you weren't warned.

Andrew Mellor is a journalist with a special interest in vocal music and the culture, music and language of Finland.