

United States

Houghton

Just a few weeks after its premiere in Nivala, Finland, Jukka Linkola's *Rockland* came to Michigan for its first 'New World' performance on July 15 at the ROZSA CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS. A full-length opera based on the miners' strike in Upper Michigan in 1906, it tells the stories of Finnish immigrants who came to this country to find work. In this case the streets were paved not with gold but with copper, and the mining owners lived in far-off Boston, with little connection to the community in which their fortunes were made. An eyewitness account was written by Alfred Laakso of the events of 31 July 1906, when some 100 striking Finnish miners approached the Michigan Mine and the sheriff's men opened fire, killing two. Nearly 100 years later, his grandson, Andy Hill, read his grandfather's account and thought it might be the basis for a musical play. In 1996, Jukka Linkola, a visiting Finnish composer, declared his interest in writing an opera. And just over a decade later that became a real possibility when the PINE MOUNTAIN MUSIC FESTIVAL agreed to commission and produce the opera; with the librettist Jussi Tapola on board, the historical narrative was fleshed out with scenes of local life and fictional romance. Collaboration between Joshua Major, PMMF's artistic director, and the baritone Esa Ruuttunen, the director of the Jokilaakso Music Foundation in Nivala, brought about the premiere production.

Named after the town where the events took place, *Rockland* lasts about two hours and 40 minutes with one interval. The score is lush, and quite elastic in rhythm and timbre—although in the first act it seems restrained, only hinting at the huge events to come. The choral writing, in particular, is eloquent, and sets the scene in 1960 as a bus-load of the miners' descendants arrive in Rockland in search of their roots. Leading the tour is Laakso, the eyewitness, now 80, sung magnificently by Ruuttunen, the only cast member carried over from the Finnish premiere.

The opera then moves to 1906, Tom Burch's fluid, rough-hewn set suggesting, never too literally, a rustic mining community. It is July 4, and Pastor Rantanen (the baritone Peter Halverson, lending dignity to the part) introduces a union organizer, Polkki (Christopher Temporelli, bass), whose speech mixes patriotism with a call for a strike. The ensuing scenes develop subplots until a mining accident leaves Otto's wife, Rauha (touchingly played by the mezzo Jennifer Trombley), a widow; the foreman, Puna Pekka (Red Pete) grieves (a strong performance by Mark Walters of the opera's most heroic role). With the help of his wife, Johanna (earnest and earthy thanks to the firm-voiced soprano Barbara Shirvis), he gives up

■ *Peter Halverson (centre) as Pastor Rantanen in the first US performance of Linkola's 'Rockland'*



drinking. The act ends with the funeral of Otto (Benjamin Sieverding, bass), where the pastor seeks a ruse to allow his widow to keep the company house by ‘marrying’ her brother, John (Kyle Tomlin, tenor), who also works in the mines. He consents, though he loves Hilja (played wistfully by the soprano Heather Youngquist).

Act 2 begins in the tavern, where talk of the strike is hot and heavy, and features a semi-comic aria reminiscent of 19th-century opera, given to the town’s barber Pete Casavino (the tenor Paul Truckey, singing with aplomb). Things move swiftly as the mine superintendent wheedles out the names of the strike leaders from William Jackson (William Joyner, tenor): Jackson gives him Red Pete’s name, in part because he has a hankering for Johanna. On the Sunday before the strike, two church services, Methodist and Lutheran, are adroitly juxtaposed, with the former appealing to God to move the strikers to ‘abandon their foolish ways’ while the latter (one of several times when Finnish is sung) shows the congregation praying ‘that this protest would make life better to the hard-working miners and their families’. When the strike begins, Red Pete and another are killed. The 1906 action ends with partings; then, as the chorus of 1960 repeats the opening lines, Alfred sings of the bittersweet reunion with his past and ends on a note of hope.

The conductor Craig Johnson brought out the darkness in the music, kept the score and the singers well balanced, and made the musical climaxes pay off. He also played the piano accompaniment. Staged by the librettist Jussi Tapola himself, the crowd scenes were full of excitement. Tapola evoked a turn-of-the-century mining community superbly and gave the contemporary scenes vitality. His libretto seems to belong to the period and teems with durable characters, and his own inventions—the pair of romances—are woven seamlessly into the plot.

MICHAEL MARGOLIN

Marco Tutino

SENSO

Conductor: **ANDRÉ SIBELIUS**
 Director and Set Designer: **ENZO DE MAMA**
 Choreographer: **LEVI DI NERI**

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