



ON THE WATERFRONT:
Copenhagen's historic harbourside
is a popular evening draw



MUSIC TRAVEL

COPENHAGEN

Piers Ford samples Denmark's historic capital Copenhagen and the musical highlights on offer at the newly opened waterfront Opera House

With its discrete elegance and easy-going sophistication, Copenhagen is a cultural treasure trove that can hold its own against anything the rest of western Europe has to offer while it acts as a gateway to the more austere and contemplative traits of the north. It is, wrote the historian Ian C. Hannah in the 1920s, 'an epitome of Denmark herself, the prosperous metropolis of an extremely industrious and well ordered community that likes to be amused'.

It's a city for all seasons. Light and airy in the summer, Copenhagen's characteristic skyline of verdigris-dusted spires hovers above facades that betray a strong Hanseatic influence, ornate neo-Classical and neo-Renaissance buildings – the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek and the Royal Theatre, for example

– that house so many of the city's art treasures and cultural events, and the more recent, distinctively clean lines of modern Danish architecture. This is the backdrop to a life that spills onto pavements, squares and courtyards, lubricated, but rarely drowned, by excellent beer.

In winter, nothing defines the atmosphere as well as the Danish noun *hygge*, usually inadequately translated as 'cosiness', but more akin to a state of mind with well-being at its emotional core, that buffers the senses against the temporal, worldly trials outside. Popular attractions – the Little Mermaid, bustling Nyhavn, the Tivoli amusement park – are iconic elements of everyday life for the five million Danes rather than mere photo opportunities for tourists.

More than ever, music is at the heart of Copenhagen's cultural and architectural landscape. Poul Ruders heads a clutch of modern Danish composers including Hans Abrahamsen and Per Nørgård, who have staked out their territory with exquisitely lyrical work, accented by energetic optimism and sometimes shot-through with oblique Danish humour. Ruders' second opera, *The Handmaid's Tale*, first produced in 2000, cut an astringent swathe through the ENO's repertoire when it received its London debut in 2003. His latest work, *Katka's Trial*, was the jewel in the inaugural season of the new waterfront Opera House which opened its doors to the public in January.

The magnificent building, designed by Danish architect Henning Larsen and a gift

COPENHAGEN
THE KNOWLEDGE

FORTUNE AND FAME: the lavish new Opera House (above) and famous resident Hans Christian Andersen

to the city from the industrialist AP Møller, is now home to the Royal Danish Opera and Ballet companies although they continue to perform, as well, on the old and new stages of the Royal Theatre. The tiered auditorium seating 1,500 is clad like a giant nut kernel in gleaming maple wood, rising to a ceiling covered in 105,000 sheets of 24-carat gold leaf. From a stage that glides noiselessly out across the largest orchestra pit in northern Europe, apparently



Copenhagen orchestras will perform here regularly. The 60 daily standing-room tickets on sale will create a entirely new audience and I think we have a very young audience to attract in Denmark. Every seat was sold for the first six months, but the Old Stage at the Royal Theatre was still fully subscribed so it shows the potential new audience for this venue.'

Schönwandt acknowledges that Copenhagen society is event-driven. 'They demand a new type of repertoire from us,' he says. 'If we discern that revivals are less popular, we must create more interest from audiences by raising the proportion of new productions and we will do that through more collaborations and commissions.'

Elsewhere in the capital, the state Danish National Symphony Orchestra's regular Thursday night concerts at the Danish Radio Concert Hall have become a much-loved feature of the musical scene. The Danish Radio Sinfonietta, the country's only professional chamber orchestra, frequently performs in the city's smaller, intriguing venues. And the Tivoli Concert Hall, now under the direction of former pianist Nikolaj Koppel, presents a wide-ranging programme of national and international artists throughout the year.

In a year when the opening of an important new venue has coincided with the bicentenary of Andersen, Denmark's most venerated popular figure, it's a good time to visit a city that looks to its past and regards the future with an equanimity that is never smug. New works abound alongside treasured staples and, whatever the season, the visitor is spoiled for choice. ■

The auditorium is clad like a giant nut kernel, rising to a ceiling covered in sheets of gold leaf

on air, the performers' notes are burnished by acoustics that, according to musical director Michael Schönwandt, were created 'without compromise to be second to none so the sound will always be close to you, almost touching you physically'.

Suspended in rubber, 16m below, is a state-of-the-art rehearsal room – the first time the Royal Danish Orchestra has had such a dedicated space – so well insulated that 200 players can practise while a performance is going on above them. Another room, Takkeloftet, is a performance space for experimental productions and chamber concerts. Here, in 2006, Elvis Costello's opera inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's adoration of Jenny Lind, *The Secret Arias*, will be staged. Before that in October, the songs will be sung in concert on the main stage, with the soprano Gisela Stille.

'We need to create new waves in music,' says Schönwandt. 'But our job is not to monopolise the musical life of the city. Other



ADMIRAL HOTEL: converted waterfront warehouse

MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

At the Opera House (+45 33696969; www.operahus.dk), Elvis Costello's song cycle, *The Secret Arias*, 8-9 October, presaging a full-blown opera production in 2006, will be the talking point of the autumn. Next year, the Royal Danish Opera will perform Wagner's complete *Ring* cycle, 25 April-28 May 2006.

Danish Radio Sinfonietta presents JS Bach at the Royal Library (+45 35306338; www.dr.dk/drs), 15, 22 & 29 October. Programme includes violinists Christina Åstrand, Julie Eskær and Vilde Frang.

Thursday concerts by the Danish National Symphony Orchestra continue at the Danish Radio Concert Hall (+45 35203040; www.dr.dk/rso), itself a gem of 1940s architecture. 6 October Dvořák's Cello Concerto and Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5; 13 & 14 October Haydn and Carl Nielsen, conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner.

HOW TO GET THERE

SAS and BA fly direct from Heathrow. Easyjet flies three times daily from Stansted, with prices from £60 return. Trains are the quickest option from Kastrup airport to the city centre: around £5 return for the 10-minute journey. The Copenhagen and Danish tourist board can also help (www.visitcopenhagen.dk, www.visitdenmark.dk).

WHERE TO STAY

Copenhagen has many excellent hotels. Hotel Sct. Petri (Krystalgade 22; +45 33459100) is the epitome of formal luxury. Admiral Hotel (Tolbodgade; +45 33741414) is on the waterfront offering relaxed four-star comfort.

WHERE TO EAT

Khun Juk Oriental (Baron Boltens Gård; +45 33323050) offers the most delicate flavours in the city, each fragrant course created by the head chef, trained in Switzerland, Paris and Thailand. Peder Oxe (Gråbrødretorv; +45 33110077) is a fine restaurant offering French and Danish cuisine in elegant surroundings. In the winter, try smørrebrød – open sandwiches with delicious toppings – at Café Subgenera (Brolæggerstræde; +45 33115880).



LITTLE MERMAID: Denmark's battered symbol to the north of the city