

Opera

Festival of the Aegean, Syros

By DAVID BLEWITT

While chatting about the island of Syros with my opera-loving accountant, Yiórgos Harkoftákis, he astonished me when he revealed that the capital Ermoúpolis had a theatre, a copy of La Scala in Milan, which “once presented a regular Italian opera season.” The Internet further revealed that the **Festival of the Aegean**, of which I had never heard (nor apparently other opera cognoscenti), had been staging opera in it since 2005. Thanks to Opera, I was able last year to check out the island, opera house and Festival.

In *The Flight of Ikaros*, which Patrick Leigh Fermor calls “one of the great and lasting books about Greece,” Kevin Andrews characterises the island’s capital, Ermoúpolis, with a rare evocative precision:

“It was the central harbour of the Cyclades and looked like a stage-set, with its cobbled embankment and its pink- and green-washed house fronts, and the two steep, church-topped hills, one Orthodox, one Roman Catholic. The second was a relic of the Venetian maritime empire of the Aegean, a relic of the Fourth Crusade and the subjugation of Byzantine Greece to the Crusading Powers of Western Europe two and a half centuries before any Turks appeared on the horizon. The grocers’ shops and coffee-houses and restaurants around the harbour here, each one named after some island of the archipelago..., conjured up a moment in the country’s later history when Hermoúpolis (‘Town of Hermes’, god of commerce) was nearly chosen over Aigina and Corinth for the capital of independent Greece, before Piraeus existed or the rubble of a village by the name of Athens was even considered. Through the nineteenth century and up till 1922 Hermoúpolis was Greece’s busiest port, and there was a big migration here when people left their farms on the other dry, infertile islands, to set up shops and mercantile ventures in the new country’s promising emporium.”

The migrants, mostly war refugees from Kassos, Chios and Psara, the majority sailors and merchants who brought with them their wealth and business ability, rapidly rendered Ermoúpolis, with its natural harbour, “the ‘warehouse’ of the new state for cotton from Egypt and spices from the East, and the central coaling station for the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Ermoúpolis dominated the Greek economy for almost 50 years after the declaration of Greek independence (1821), until oil began to replace coal in the 1890s. It spent a fortune on schools, mansions, and public buildings. And a theatre. The amenities made it a favourite port of call for Italians en route to the Far East, who happily spent the summer months attending the opera and, later, plays and musical recitals. Herman Melville, visiting the capital in 1856, may have found the shops full of “fez-caps, swords, tobacco, shawls, pistols and orient finery”, but anyone visiting the capital today cannot help but be impressed by the town’s Italianate feel and style. The Town Hall’s resemblance to the Teatro Massimo in Palermo is unnerving.

Nor is the Teatro Apollon idly called La Piccola Scala. The theatre grew out of a need for more permanent theatrical accommodation; since 1826, when Syros was still a refugee settlement, performances had taken place in a wooden hut. The municipal architect P. Sampo designed a miniature La Scala, a two storey building seating an audience of 350, with delightful ceiling paintings and fine wooden boxes extending down the sides. Work was begun in 1862 and completed in 1864. However, in 1944 it suffered severe bomb damage, while two decades later the philistine Greek military junta which oppressed Greece from 1967-74 stripped the Apollon of its paintings, original boxes and galleries in an attempt to eradicate all foreign influence. Happily, reconstruction work began in 1980. When the theatre re-opened in 2000, the velvet seats and the impressive ceiling paintings (of Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini,

Mozart, Dante, Euripides and Homer) were back. Four levels of boxes now overlook the wooden stage, 9 metres deep and 18 metres wide. The compact pit will house an orchestra of modest proportions. The acoustics are excellent. Only the original theatre front comprising a glass roof supported on metal struts has been reworked.

The Apollon houses a small theatre museum enshrining its performance history, though the operatic evidence is thin on the ground. The theatre opened with a performance of Donizetti's *La Favorita* (2 October, 1864)—I have found no record of the performers. Regular seasons ensued, works performed including *Tosca*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Bohème*. On one wall hangs an 1888/9 poster for *Rigoletto* with an all-Greek cast. The Apollon also staged plays, both Greek and foreign, performed by a range of companies. The theatre flourished until 1902, when it was converted into a movie theatre. Upon its closure in 1962, it lay abandoned for almost 40 years until renovation began in preparation for its re-opening in 2000. However, it was not until July 14th, 2005, that opera returned to La Piccola Scala, when Peter Tiboris conducted performances of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* as part of the launch of the Festival of the Aegean on Syros—the first performance of an opera at the Apollon for over a hundred years.

An alcove in the museum sports a cluster of posters featuring a tenor, Zanni Kambani (1908-1992), but no information about him. They record appearances in *Cavalleria Rusticana* at the Rome Opera (8 April, 1944) amidst distinguished company—Maria Caniglia, Myriam Pirazinni, the conductor Oliviero Fabritiis; in Verdi's *Aida* (19 May, 1944), and in *Madama Butterfly* at Monte Carlo (29 March, 1947). What little I have managed to dig up about him points to a distinguished career. He was born in Ermoúpolis, but the family moved to Piraeus in 1914. He studied with Maria Crivella at the National Conservatoire, from which he graduated with 1st Prize in 1938. No surprise, therefore, to find him partnering Maria Callas (then still Marianna Kalogeropoulos) in her first public appearance on 11 April, 1938, at the Parnassos Hall in Athens, singing Cavaradossi to her Tosca – the particular duet is not named. The concert featured students of Maria Trivelli. In October he made his first appearance as Canio at the Teatro Olympia. The following year, on 22 May, he again partnered Callas, in 'O terra addio' from *Aida*. Twice he won Athens Municipality scholarships to go to Rome. During the first occasion (1940) La Scala invited him to become a soloist with the company; on the second (1943), he enrolled at the Academia di Santa Cecilia. While there he replaced Gigli in a performance of *Aida* at the Teatro Reale. Shortly afterwards his Italian career

took off and his international career followed fast. He joined the Greek National Opera (at the Lyriki Skini in Athens) in 1948. He seems to have had a special affection for Spain, spending much of 1958 there. He toured the States with the Metropolitan Opera, New York, twice: in 1952, and in 1959 when he gave his final performance, in Tosca.

It would be interesting to see if there is any recorded evidence of his voice. The bare facts indicate an artist of considerable talent, whose favourite operas were *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni much admired his Turridu), *Pagliacci*, *Tosca*, *Aida*, *Fedora*, *La Forza del Destino* and *L'Amico Fritz*. One Greek commentator writes that “the prime characteristic of a voice remarkable for its range and volume was the complete interpretative balance between lyrical cantilena, passionate impetuosity and the power of dramatic outbursts, which resulted in perfectly studied dramatic creations.” He was also a fine songwriter. It might be fun for the Festival to find a like-sounding tenor to give a recital representing Kambani's repertoire, including some of his songs. The American, Todd Geer, who sang there last year, would be an excellent choice.

The Greek-American conductor **Peter Tiboris** is the driving force behind the still fledgling Festival, though he believes that in 2007 “it went from adolescence to young adulthood.” All involved are undoubtedly still feeling their way, but doing so sensibly without over-parting themselves. “You do as well as you can in the year that you're doing it and then look forward,” Tiboris remarks. He foresees “half the concerts being in the Plateia Miaouli—open-air in front of the Town Hall. I've a vision of a stage and a huge audience watching opera under a full moon”. He warmly praises the Mayor of Syros and the municipality. Together “we have set out our plans and ideas for the next 10 years. Personally, I dream of the Festival becoming a Salzburg of the Aegean, with an international appeal which at the same time fulfils the artistic needs of the people of Syros, as also those of the whole of the Cyclades.”

The Festival has also staged *Don Giovanni* (2006) and a rare Mascagni, *Zanetto* (2007). In addition it offers concerts, theatre, jazz and traditional music—the famous rembétika composer Márkos Vamvakáris hails from Ermoúpolis. If at present the Festival's aims are modest, the future promises well under Tiboris impassioned guidance.