

Review of Festival of the Aegean

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The Festival of the Aegean brings us annually to always charming Syros. Since we began attending the festival in 2005, we have witnessed exquisite programs of music attended by a loving public of residents and visitors. Founder and Artistic Director of the Festival is the Greek-American conductor Peter Tiboris. At his side is his valuable collaborator, his wife, the soprano Eilana Lappalainen. The Festival has featured famous soloists, composers, performers and artists, as well as emerging young musicians. And it is to Tiboris' credit that in such a difficult period for Greece, he can offer a large number of quality musical events. Over the years, such international stars as John Rutter, Olympia Dukakis, Dimitris Sgouros, Keith Ikaia-Purdy, Dimitri Kavrakos and Mary-Ellen Nesi have brightened the Festival.

This year the Festival opened on July 12 and ended on 24 of the same month. We watched the program on two days, 15 and 16/7.

On the first night at the historic Apollo Theater we heard the Pan-European Philharmonia under the direction of Tiboris. The orchestra is based in Warsaw and consists mainly of young musicians. The program opened with Overture to Rosamunde, written as incidental music for the play by Helmina von Chézy and composed by Franz Schubert. The history of this piece is somewhat complicated: the score saw the light of day in 1890, several decades after the composer's death (1828) and included an introduction older than the one heard during the first performance of the work in 1823. In fact, the introduction came from a work the composer had composed in 1820 for an opera, *Die Zauberharfe*. Maestro Tiboris' reading was imaginative. It is worth mentioning the excellent and highly expressive contribution of woodwind instruments.

Immediately after we heard the Concerto for violin, cello and piano, Op. 56, known as the "Triple Concerto" of Ludwig van Beethoven. The work, created in 1803, received a vigorous interpretation. The solo parts were played by the youthful Trio 92, which has its headquarters in Vienna (Maciej Skarbak, piano, Nadja Kalmykova, violin, and Lucia Loulaki, cello). The three soloists, all enthusiastic and very capable musicians, dived into the depths of the amazing Beethoven score to bring forth all the vigor of the Allegro, volume of the Rondo alla polacca, and the lyrical romanticism of the Largo. It's really gratifying to see young people playing with such musicality and impeccable technical precision.

Maestro Tiboris, both here and in the following work, Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, Op. 68, known as the "Pastorale" (1808), guided the orchestra with inspiration and attention. He encouraged the musicians of the orchestra to emphasize the descriptive nature of the work and to highlight the many wonderful solo passages. During the performance of the Beethoven symphony, the lighting of the room was dimmed in order to reveal the colors of the lights which were projected on stage, which were designed by Stella Kaltsou.

During afternoon of the second day (16/7) of our visit, in the same wonderful theater, we heard Trio 92 again, performing an educational concert of chamber music, consisting of Haydn's Trio No. 39, Hob. XV / 25, known as "Gypsy;" and Dvořák's Piano Trio No. 4, Op. 90 B. 166, known as "Dumky."

In the first work, written in 1795, the three young artists revealed the essence of this bright work, especially the motivic development. I wish they will add other works by the composer in their repertoire. The School of Haydn is rarely explored by any musician, yet he was a teacher and an inexhaustible source of knowledge for many, among whom were the equally important Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven.

In the second part of the concert, which followed without intermission, the Trio delivered an interpretation full of majesty and expressive certainty of Dvořák's masterpiece. Specifically, in each of the six parts, the Trio were able to penetrate the structure and the required emotional world. The narrative-epic strength of the players (let's not forget that this is essentially six ballads or six "dumky") illuminated the work with meaning and atmosphere.

Every year since its inception, the Festival has presented a major work of the lyric operatic repertoire. We note that in previous years, the Festival has presented such popular operas as: *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Gioachino Rossini), *Don Giovanni* (Mozart), *Carmen* (Georges Bizet), *La traviata* (Giuseppe Verdi), *Salome* (Richard Strauss), *Così fan tutte* (Mozart), and *Rigoletto* (Verdi). The same evening (16/7) we watched *Medea* by Luigi Cherubini.

The Italian Cherubini (1760-1842) is one of the most important composers of opera, religious music and chamber music. His contemporary Beethoven (1770-1827), argued that he was the greatest composer of the age.

Having already composed a large number of projects intended for the stage, Cherubini probably completed in 1797 his most famous work: the opera "*Medea*" (*Medée*), to a libretto by François-Benoît Hoffmann, based on the tragedy by Euripides and Pierre Corneille. The world premiere was given on March 13, 1797, in Paris (Théâtre Feydeau). Initially, the public reaction was not very enthusiastic; however, when the opera was translated from the French to the Italian, it was soon recognized as one of the masterpieces of world operatic repertoire. The premiere of the abridged Italian version took place in Vienna in 1809. After the death of Cherubini, there were new treatments: in 1855 the German version of Franz Lachner; 1865 the first presentation in London on June 6, adding recitative written by Luigi Arditi; and in 1909 the Italian premiere at La Scala of the Italian translation of the version of Lachner, curated by Carlo Zangari.

During the twentieth century, the most famous production (Italian version of the score, 1909), presented in 1953, in Florence, starred Maria Callas and conductor Vittorio Gui.

The legend is familiar. The action takes place in Corinth. During the first act, the Greek princess, Glauce, daughter of King Creonte is planning to marry Giasone, leader of the Argonauts, who with the support of Medea, the princess of Colchis, managed to steal the Golden Fleece. Medea had left her homeland behind and gave birth to two children with Giasone. In the opera, Giasone has abandoned Medea and the children in order to marry Giasone. When he refuses to return to Medea, Medea decides to seek revenge. In the second act Creonte commands Medea to leave town. Medea asks to stay in Corinth with her children for one more day and has Neris take two gifts to Glauce: a crown and a mantle. During the third and last act, Medea embraces her children. Plaintive voices are heard within the palace, and we soon learn that Glauce has been poisoned by the gifts of Medea. The people are angry. Medea, Neris and the children are hidden in the temple. Soon Giasone learns the truth. Surprised and unable to intervene, he faces Medea who is holding a knife full of blood. She has killed her two children. The temple and palace are wrapped in flames.

For the performance in Syros, the Italian version of the opera was chosen. The director Dirk Schattner, partnering with Jens Huebner (set and lighting design) and Eva Sefradiou (costumes), created a neoclassical set and costumes. We believe that this option complemented perfectly the elegant architecture and decoration of the theater.

The Finnish soprano Eilana Lappalainen portrayed the leading role with expert knowledge and aural comfort, offering a tragic and dynamic heroine. Her mature dramatic voice, expressive in the high range, gave an integrated musical interpretation.

Beside her, as Giasone, stood Ukrainian tenor Konstantin Andreiev, winner of many international operatic competitions and numerous appearances at renowned opera houses. He interpreted the role with attention to the formation of phrases, expressive directness and, where necessary, drama.

The young soprano Lydia Zervanos, in the important and quite extensive role Glauce, showed distinct musicality and acting prowess. She sang with respect for the style of the time, immediacy and taste, while her movement was always well aligned with the desired plot.

The bass Vassilis Kostopoulos, interpreting the role of Creonte, summoned a beautiful, deep voice and an imposing stature. This is a new artist with really special vocal qualities, which hopefully he will continue to cultivate and evolve.

A pleasant surprise was the participation of mezzo Fotini Athanasaki (Neris): her very first phrase stood out with a pithy, well-rested and a warm voice. She performed the role meaningfully and with attention. We'd like to hear her in German and French operatic repertoire. Maybe someday she will become an excellent Charlotte (Jules Massenet, Werther). The large-scale timbre of her voice, combined with expressiveness, would fit perfectly the Lieder of Robert Schumann and, especially, Gustav Mahler, as in *Mélodies* of Claude Debussy and Henri Duparc. We will remember the name.

In the remaining roles were Marilena Striftobola and Jaina Elgueta (Prima Ancella and Seconda Ancella), and Jonathan Boudevin (Un capo della Guardia).

The choir performed its parts consistently, while the orchestra (Pan-European Philharmonia), offered a convincing and fine accompaniment.

Maestro Tiboris led the score with knowledge and respect for the musical text. He supported the singers with real interest and aimed at an interpretation where the dramatic feeling was singled out and held the public's interest undiminished until the end.

We look forward to many more successes at the Aegean Festival in the coming years!