

Review of Festival of the Aegean, Kathimerini Athens July 30, 2015

Festival of the Aegean

The island of Syros is a very important destination for music lovers. The center for many performances is the "Apollo" Theater in Hermoupolis. It opened in 1864 and it is a small exotic treasure in the world of opera, as is the "Angela Peralta" Theater in Mazatlan, Mexico or the Manoel Theater in Malta. Since 2005, it has been the home of the Festival of the Aegean, which is organized by the Greek-American conductor Peter Tiboris with his wife, soprano Eilana Lappalainen, and is focused on opera. The auditorium, of approximately 350 seats, has beautiful acoustics and, of course, does not need very big voices. This year's big production of the Festival was *Medea* by Cherubini, but we managed to be there for the second week's performances only.

On Tuesday, July 21, the evening started with a recital of German Song given by the young artists of the Greek Opera Studio, the educational part of the Festival. Thirteen young singers interpreted 14 songs by Schubert, Schumann and Mahler, while on the piano, the lecturer of the Vienna Hochschule, Pantelis Polychronidis, coached and accompanied them. His role was obvious in the stylistic unity and correctness of the interpretations, while on the piano, he accompanied very carefully and with great sensitivity. The small size of the theater allowed for all the voices to sound clean, clear and beautifully articulated.

On the second half, we watched "Mediterra" a performance of music from the Mediterranean by the ZZ Trio: Soprano Myrsini Margariti, flutist Natalia Gerakis, and pianist Zoe Zeniodi, three really exceptional musicians. We heard some famous songs, but also others that deserve to be heard more, such as "Corsica" by the contemporary songwriter Petru Guelfucci, or the traditional Turkish a cappella song "Yagmur yagar tas üstüne," freely interpreted as a song of a girl who sings about love while watching the rain. From the pieces for flute and piano, we should single out "Memories" and "Hard Day" by Abdalla El-Masri (b. 1962), inspired by the civil war in Lebanon.

We also heard a two-part program on Wednesday, 22 July 2015. During the first half, soprano Lydia Zervanos interpreted songs by Manolis Kalomiris, Theodoros Spathis, Georgios Labelet, and Theofrastos Sakellaridis. Watching Lydia, we were reminded of her mother and teacher, Martha Arapi, who had sung in the Olympia Theater. The similarities include the vocal technique and control, the complete expression and stage presence, and the light conservatory-type interpretation, that totally fit songs like "Lagiarni" (c.1925) by Spathis, a short scene inspired by the pastoral life. The singer interpreted the very demanding and complex vocal writing with a phenomenal technique and grand rhetoric—the total opposite of the very beautiful approach by Myrsini Margariti, who, during the previous evening, had sung the lullaby from Smyrna by Kalomiris, with a simplicity of a folk-like inspiration. The soprano Marilena Striftobola interpreted two songs by Spyros Samaras, "Spring" and "I love you," and one by Sakellaridis, with a wonderful diction, drawing kudos from the audience. Pantelis Polychronidis was on the piano.

During the second half, the artists of the Greek Opera Studio, took part in the semi-staged one-act opera "Suor Angelica" (New York, 1918), by Giacomo Puccini, a unique drama that takes place in a convent. The artistic direction was by Eilana Lappalainen, the music direction was by Zoe Zeniodi, and the pianist was Graham Cox. Kathryn Wieckhorst as Suor Angelica and Fotini Athanasaki as a princess gave a great dramatic intensity to the conflict between the two women. The most important advantage though was the presence of so many and so perfectly tuned and balanced voices, so that the hearing result was honestly angelic.

On Thursday, July 23, Christos Papageorgiou on the piano, on stage, and Theodoros Kerkezos on the saxophone, backstage, greeted us with Ave Maria by Gounod, and then continued with works by: Errikos Vaios, Astor Piazzolla, Gershwin, Manos Hadjidakis, and Christos Papageorgiou: Tango, and three of the "Stylistic Variations on a song by Mikis Theodorakis" for solo piano. The playing by the pianist highlighted the Iberian roots of the impressionistic "Piece en forma de Habanera" by Ravel, while the perfect technique of both was fully shown in "Scaramouche" by Darius Milhaud and in "Czardas" by the Spanish Pedro Iturralde.

The Festival though remains focused on opera and on Friday, July 24, it closed with the Gala by the Greek Opera Studio. The Gala included a semi-staged performance with arias and scenes from famous operas by Mozart, Offenbach and others, but also rarer pieces such as Hindemith's "Hin und Zurück" (Baden Baden, 1927). The pacing of the performance was good and the interpretations of a generally good level. In the interest of saving time here, let us mention the "Mad Scene" from Lucia di Lammermoor which was well interpreted and well-paced by the Australian soprano Jessica Boyd, the beautiful Mozartean song sung by the Belgian Lisa Meyvis, the easy and comfortable voice of the German baritone Andreas Post, and the boyish Cherubino by the extremely young Christina Tsourounaki.

Until we return to the Festival of the Aegean in 2016, summer in Syros continues with classical music, "eikastika" art, and other events.