

A Very Different "Constantinople"

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NEW HAVEN, Conn. — In its ten-year existence, New Haven's International Festival of Arts and Ideas has been a freewheeling affair, and it reinforced that spirit of adventure by opening this year (on June 10) with "Constantinople" by the Greek-born Canadian composer Christos Hatzis. Western music with ties to the East has come in a multitude of shapes and sizes since Mozart ventured forth with his version of Turkish music. But Hatzis's bracing, multi-media work, first performed at the Banff Center last summer and mounted here Friday in the venerable Schubert Theater, demonstrates that new ground can still be broken when treating the East-meets-West theme, and with flair.

At heart, "Constantinople," scored for two women's voices, violin, cello and piano, is a chamber work. But the 85-minute creation in eight segments, also involves decor, projections, stage movement, costumes, choreography and lighting. In addition to embracing a multiplicity of musical styles, it incorporates Christian and Islamic texts. One had no trouble identifying the "Kyrie Eleison," "Dies Irae" and "Alleluia." Other texts (which turned out to be the Islamic ones) came and went without sparking recognition.

The singers too emphasized the split. Maryen Hassan Tollar let loose with a chesty, ecstatic wail of a cadenza in the concluding "Alleluia," while Patricia O'Callaghan used her classical soprano with more restraint. Yet much of the time their amplified voices united in an effective, often arresting blend when realizing the music's chant-like melodies.

Director Marie-Josée Chartier sometimes had the singers listen attentively to the instrumentalists, and vice versa. Her staging involved ritualized movement, such the repositioning of bowls filled with water, which presumably had some symbolic meaning. Jacques Collin's projections, cast mainly on an arched scrim, presented multifaceted glimpses of the work's namesake city, including panoramic views, religious mosaics and expressive photographs of its people. Bursts of fire accompanied the Day of Judgment of the "Dies Irae." Program notes indicated a philosophical dimension to "Constantinople" as well, which didn't necessarily pertain to the stage action and seemed a bit facile in their emphasis on the cultures' common ground.

Effective as the visual dimension of "Constantinople" was and without slighting the vocal contribution, which reached a frenzied peak with the insistent repetition of the "Alleluia," the opera is mostly striking for Hatzis's instrumental writing, both on its own and in tandem with the singers. It was brilliantly realized by the Gryphon Trio (Annalee Patiparanakoon, violin, Roman Borys, cello and Jamie Parker, piano), which played extended passages from memory.

The music is above all energetic and is rooted in an actively polyphonic, mildly modernistic style that requires considerable dexterity from the players. Hatzis is especially inventive in expounding on musical ideas, partaking not just of traditional developmental techniques but also of the methods of jazz and even rock to heighten rhythmic drive, though without debasing his material. A lilting tango supplies captivating variety, and Hatzis gives the piece unity by deftly bringing back certain themes.

The Gryphon Trio's can be sampled in more traditional fare today, when Brahms and Dvorak are on the program. The festival runs through June 25.