

# Rocky Mountain **Outlook**

## *Constantinople* extraordinary

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Generally I am of the firm conviction that standing ovations should be reserved for either truly compelling performances or a farewell type of lifetime achievement recognition. The world of sports has this one down – hit a game winning home run or play the final game of an outstanding career and you'll get a standing ovation. The arts audience, being more polite and perhaps wishing to appear more "encouraging" seems to have a tendency to reward the merely competent with posterior displacement as a matter of form, continuing for a couple of curtain calls at which point the house lights come on and the audience dutifully shuffles off to the post-concert bistro of choice.

The problem that arises then is this – how the hell does an audience respond to a performance that is truly remarkable in every way and is deserving of multiple curtain calls, wolf whistles, rose showers, Canada Council grants (empty the bag Santa, whatever you can muster) as was the case last Thursday July 29<sup>th</sup> at Eric Harvie Theatre at The Banff Centre. This was my thinking as I uncharacteristically leapt to my feet after witnessing the world debut performance of Christos Hatzis' *Constantinople*, a multimedia extravaganza for piano trio, two vocalists, digital surround-sound effects and projected enhancements.

A work in eight movements with no intermission, lasting approximately 75 minutes, *Constantinople* weaves elements of middle-eastern music, jazz, pop, Baltic chants and tangos with Christian liturgy, Islamic creeds, Byzantine era folk poetry as well as Sufi poetry. Inspired by the pan-cultural "East meets West" city of Constantinople which was the centre of Eastern Christianity and Hellenism for the better part of a millennium, it is really "about" modern day urbanism with Toronto as the potential ideal for multicultural cooperation.

In principal I am an advocate of "fusion" music, in practice I am often horrified by pastiche efforts of Western artists as they appropriate the ideas and customs of other cultures instead of actually integrating them with ideas of their own. With *Constantinople*, the Greek-born Hatzis, who has lived and taught in Toronto for the past 20 years, navigates the potential pitfalls with ease, the result being a work of remarkable balance both in form and in content.

Central to *Constantinople* is the playing of the Gryphon Trio, featuring Roman Borys on cello, Jamie Parker on piano and Annalee Patipatanakoon on violin,

all of who teach at the University of Toronto. In fact, *Constantinople* came into existence as a result of Roman Borys approaching the composer, who also teaches at the University of Toronto, in 1998 with the idea of writing something "different" for the Gryphon Trio. Hatzis soon came to realize that they were on the same page in that the world did not need another 20-minute chamber music piece, and the road towards the completion of *Constantinople* was born. Last Thursday they performed with the energy of a rock ensemble and the virtuosity of a classical one – no small feat.

As if often the case, however, and in no way detracting from the audacious ability that the trio displayed, the singers – mezzo-soprano Patricia O'Callaghan and alto and Arabic singing specialist Maryem Tollar – supplied the spine tingling moments, especially Tollar whose ecstatic wails and mastery of the Arabic quarter tones turned the sixth movement, *On Death and Dying*, into the evening's tour de force, a powerful reading of a Byzantine era folk poem, *The Death of Dighenis* which Hatzis was reminded of as his father battled cancer. The song is the first instance in the piece where the two singers actually sing together at the same time, and the piece eventually morphs from Byzantine micro tones to 60's jazz-pop complete with a lead guitar-like violin solo.

Visually the work is stunning. A diaphanous scrim that divides into three vertical sections about halfway down provides a screen for visual projections at roughly halfway upstage. Throughout the performance there are scenes from the city of Constantinople, the people of the city, or, when the singing turns liturgical, the image projected suggests the proscenium arch of a cathedral. The singers are gracefully choreographed, at times moving bowls of water (representing elemental life? – just a guess) from low-hanging chandelier-like objects to the middle and eventually the front of the stage.

The surround-sound digital music and effects worked perfectly and in complete harmony with the rest of the performance, and this was an aspect that I found surprising. Most often such additions are jarring and out of place, juxtaposed as a jagged counterpart against a graceful melody.

I have often wondered about the future of classical music, whether it was mostly destined for the green/gray drudgery of difficult atonality. As I stood wildly clapping my hands and shouting exhortations at the end of the performance on Thursday, I began to come to the conclusion that perhaps "classical" music is already an artefact, and that works such as *Constantinople* readily defy categorization.