

Classical music sans frontières

The concept behind Greek-Canadian composer Christos Hatzis's new work is an ambitious one: the survival of the human species.

Adam Sweeting reports

Canadian critics have hailed the project with volleys of euphoric phrase-making ("impossible to resist", "a stunning theatrical triumph", etc). Happily, it's more than mere hype.

The Gryphon Trio will be bringing Christos Hatzis's extraordinary work Constantinople to the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio later this month, but first they staged the piece at Montreal's En Lumière festival, where I witnessed how its computerised lighting and video effects, eruptions of quadrophonic surround-sound and polyglot mix of musical styles could be moulded into a persuasive 90-minute whole.

When the trio first approached Hatzis about writing a new work in 1998, none of them envisaged the dimensions that the project would assume.

"Typically, that commission would have resulted in a 15-minute work which would have been bookended by trios by Haydn and Brahms," says ebullient cellist Roman Borys (a Ukrainian from Toronto), as we commandeer the rear of a friendly Portuguese restaurant in blizzard-blitzed Montreal. "But after a lot of conversations, we found we shared ideas about what excited all of us. We'd never done a piece with an electronic component, and we wanted to try that, and to somehow integrate that with visual elements."

Hatzis, who left his native Greece for Toronto in 1982, began to envisage a large-scale piece in which he could explore his preoccupation with "cultural convergence", a notion about how diverse historical and cultural experiences can be used to unite "our modern and severely fragmented world" (bolder readers can study his 23-page dissertation on the topic at www.hatzis.com).

Constantinople (now Istanbul), a city balanced between East and West, and the tipping point between Islam and Christianity, rang the appropriate metaphorical bells. The work's eight musical sections dart between Greek folk music, Arabic scales, tangos and classical chamber writing, using texts from medieval Egypt, ancient Byzantium (which became Constantinople), and Greek and Latin masses.

Singers Maryem Hassan Tollar and Patricia O'Callaghan sometimes blend their voices seamlessly, but elsewhere Hatzis's writing exploits the contrast between Tollar's raw, Eastern-sounding microtones and O'Callaghan's sculpted phrases from the Western diatonic tradition.

"It doesn't sound like East meets West, with the Eastern singer improvising while the other sings Western music," says Hatzis. "There's all sorts of bridging and interfacing of the traditions using all the tools available."

"It's not monolithic, it's very layered," adds Jacques Collin, production designer and computer specialist. "It will always be a musical piece - it's not film and it doesn't have a storyline. There is a continuity and pieces play against each other, but it's presented more as a painting than a video clip or a movie."

It's Collin's mosaic of naturalistic and emblematic imagery, projected on a series of mesh screens, that helps to wreath Constantinople in an aura of myth and folk-memory. The fact that the work has been evolving over almost a decade has proved a particular boon from Collin's point of view, since developments in digital technology have transformed virtually every aspect of the staging.

A smart and flexible software program, Dataton's Watchout, controls the sound and vision computers, while the Gryphon Trio are ecstatic about their FreeHand MusicPad tablets, which use illuminated electronic touch-screens instead of old-fashioned music stands loaded with manuscript paper. Page-turning becomes virtually automatic, while the musicians no longer need extra lighting to read their music.

The joy of Constantinople is the way Hatzis has assembled it from simple but powerful musical themes, which develop and sprout variations and overtones as the piece progresses. However complex the staging may be, the music is always eloquent and emotionally direct.

Talking about the piece outside the theatre can prove less satisfactory, since Hatzis's culture-blending aspirations can end up sounding like the pop group Blue Mink in 1969 - "What we need is a great big melting pot/ Big enough to take the world and all it's got." It's not a precise enough tool for examining, for instance, Britain's recent crises with the doctrine of multiculturalism.

"If by multiculturalism you mean a city that has 10 different cultural ghettos, that's not my idea of multiculturalism," says the composer. "In Canada, particularly Toronto, multiculturalism has created in the past 30 years a new urban identity. It's not different isolated perspectives living in splendid isolation, when they fester inwards and become aggressive. I may be a little bit too idealistic about this, but for me this whole concept is key to the survival of the species on this planet."

And if he had to devise a one-line summary of what he wants to say in Constantinople, what would it be?

Hatzis scratches his beard thoughtfully. "Anything I can think of right now will come out as a platitude, but I think something like 'talking across frontiers' might be an interesting subtitle."

'Constantinople' is at the Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) from March 21-25.