

## A&E

# Opera a feat of confluence

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Classical Music

It's Istanbul, not Constantinople, insisted a pop song of decades past and so it is in today's bustling Turkey. Constantinople belongs to history, almost to the realm of dreams, just as it appeared on the sage of Harbourfront's Premiere Dance Theatre, when the Gryphon Trio presented the local premiere of Greek-born Toronto composer Christos Hatzis's eponymous, multi-media feast of the imagination.

Back in the year 2000, Hatzis's *Constantinople* began life as the commission for a 20-minute instrumental piece, performed by the Gryphon Trio for Music Toronto. Over the ensuing four years it has grown into a unique, intermissionless, 80-minute fabric of vocal as well as instrumental music, movement, projections and digital audio, woven into a multi-cultural celebration of life.

Premiered this summer at the Banff Centre and presented in a four-performance run this week by Tapestry New Opera Works, Music Toronto and the Gryphon Trio, the expanded *Constantinople* is a work unlike any other in the Canadian musical literature, still rooted in its chamber music origins yet outfitted aurally and visually as an exercise in cultural confluence.

Images of old and new Constantinople are projected on fabric screens framing the nocturnally lit stage but they are surrounded by others involving architectural elements, abstract designs, rising smoke. For the fabled city on the shores of this Bosphorus is used by Hatzis chiefly as a metaphor, a symbol for the coming together of different cultures, especially those of the Christian West and Muslim East.

The first voice heard belongs to Patricia O'Callaghan, a singer in the Western tradition, who intones a Credo based on the Greek Orthodox Easter chant, but she

is soon joined by Egyptian-born Maryem Hassan Tollar, a specialist in Arabic music, with the listener discovering how these voices from far apart can so easily come together in arabesques and harmony.

That seems to be Hatzis's subtext throughout the piece, much of it presented almost as a ritual of cleansing and uniting, with the two singers washing hands in and transporting glass bowls of water from near-chandeliers to the front of the stage.

Their movements, devised by director-choreographer, Marie-Josée Chartier, remain simple, simple enough to involve the participation of the three trio members, violinist Annalee Patipatanakoon, cellist Roman Borys and pianist Jamie Parker, who walk about when they are not themselves making music.

The music they make is certainly varied. In a section designated "Dance of the Dictators," Hatzis has them playing an Astor Piazzolla-like tango as white-uniformed figures strut ridiculously on the fabric screens.

In another section titled "Old Photographs" (which has become a favourite Gryphon repertory number), they accompany the projection of nostalgic photos of faces past with tunefully sentimental music bordering on the Palm Court genre.

Hatzis is nothing if not eclectic. *Constantinople* moves back and forth as much between the sacred and the secular as between the West and East. Its achievement is to make the journey seem natural and the various musical languages compatible.

Imaginatively staged, atmospherically lit and brilliantly performed, *Constantinople* defies categories. As the saying goes, it is in a class of its own.