

Greek chorus

Paul Hamilos looks forward to the first opera on Syros in over a century

July 2, 2005

by PAUL HAMILOS

Maria Callas apart, Greece can't claim to have a great reputation in the world of opera. And when it comes to venues, nowhere in Greece can rival La Scala in Milan or pull in the crowds like the summer festival in Verona.

A visit to the Cycladic island of Syros this summer, however, should soon disabuse you of this impression. Here, from July 14-16, you'll find the Opera Aegean festival, so if you're planning to go island hopping, pack a little evening wear with your beachwear and you could add a refined night at the opera to those endless days on the beach.

Now in its third year, the festival was founded by the conductor and musical impresario **Peter Tiboris**. A second-generation Greek-American, Tiboris has made a name for himself as a conductor at Carnegie Hall in New York, and produced over 750 concerts around the world, working with some of the best orchestras.

The annual festival takes place at the Apollo Musical Theatre, aka La Piccola Scala (it was modelled on the Milanese landmark), in the main town of Hermoupolis. The building itself has a suitably operatic history; first

opened in 1864, it was to become a target for the military junta who took power in Greece a century later. With philistine zeal, they determined to eradicate any foreign influence, removing paintings, original boxes and galleries, leaving the theatre in a sorry state. Reconstruction work began in the 1980s and it was

reopened in July 2000: the velvet seats are back, and with them a sense of grandeur has returned.

Tiboris was keen to make the most of the renovated theatre, and this year sees Opera Aegean putting on its first full-scale opera, *The Barber Of Seville*; indeed, it will be the first opera on Syros in over a century. "We've

done scenes before, so this is a big step [but] I've got some wonderful, first-class Italian singers coming from Rome, Brescia, Paloma and Milan," says Tiboris. There will be two nights for full performances, with a night of aria highlights in between.

In New York, Tiboris has a reputation for putting on avant-garde work, but he wants to establish Opera Aegean's reputation with a few well-known classics (next year he's planning *Don Giovanni*) before trying anything more challenging. *The Barber Of Seville* has "lots of



Compose yourself ... The ceiling of the Apollo Musical Theatre is decorated with images of famous musicians—Mozart is bottom-right.

great melodies and arias. A Russian opera wouldn't work in Syros now, though once you get a following and people trust you, you can start to expand," he says.

Syros is probably not the first Greek island you would think of visiting; the administrative capital of the Cyclades, it is a working island and doesn't have the immediate attractions of Rhodes, Crete or Corfu. But that almost increases its appeal, for it is one of the most Greek, and the least tourist-centred of the islands.

Hermoupolis (named after Hermes, god of commerce) was Greece's key port in the 19th century and you get a real sense of its former glory as you pull into the old harbour by ferry, while the neoclassical mansions provide evidence of the money that was once made in shipping. Colonised by the Franks in 1207, Syros was a Catholic island until the arrival of Orthodox refugees from the Greek war of independence. The two communities still live in their respective quarters, with the Catholic settlement of Ano Syros and the Orthodox Vrodado occupying two hills overlooking Hermoupolis. This Latin-Greek mix gives Syros its own character and cultural heritage, and it is fitting that it will be the Rome Philharmonic Orchestra that accompanies Tiboris as he brings opera back to the island.

Hermoupolis can also claim to be one of the homes of Rembetika, the Greek underground music that was popular

in the early 20th century and has recently been championed by Alex Kapranos, lead singer of Franz Ferdinand. Markos Vamvakaris, the undisputed "father of Rembetika," was born in Ano Syros and his classic song Frankosyrianni is about a beautiful Catholic girl from the island.

There's a vibrancy throughout the town—within easy walking distance of the palm tree-lined main square, Plateia Miaouli, are numerous cafes, bars and ouzeries. Some have a less than salubrious appearance, appropriate given that Vamvakaris's songs were all about smoking hash, drinking and looking for love.

But for a truly classical Greek experience this summer, don't forget your opera glasses.

Around the island, you'll find that occasionally surreal but typically Greek mix of beaches, churches, traditional housing and bad modern development; the old and the new sit side by side, but aren't always the best of neighbours.

For those planning to stay on the island a few days, try Galissas on the west coast—once an agricultural village, it is now a resort/campsite with an array of places to sleep, and one of the best beaches. Or just grab a bike and head off to any one of the small beaches or villages—and remember to pick up some loukoumia (Turkish delight), as Syros is famed for the sugar-powdered sweets, and there are factories across the island.

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