

The Australian

Constantine Koukias finds his 'own world' in Hobart

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Opera composer Constantine Koukias celebrates the 21st birthday of his company IHOS this month. Picture: Roger Lovell

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IN Constantine Koukias's new opera *The Barbarians*, the audience at Hobart's cavernous City Hall will face each other "as at a tennis court", looking across a stage area covered in six tonnes of salt and pebbles.

The libretto, based on the work of Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy, is in modern Greek with bilingual narration, and the band of nine instruments includes "very unusual" hand percussion, a contrabassoon and a range of keyboards - harpsichord, celeste, Hammond organ - all amplified.

The musical language from the five principal singers, says composer and director Koukias, "is written extremely lyrically, and is non-synchronous, meaning they sing with tapes or effects and are not synched with the musicians. That gives them another world of possibilities, of dramatic tension."

Credits for *The Barbarians* include a pyrotechnician and "fire bowl design". In other words, the opera is about as far away from *La Boheme* as you can get.

This month Koukias's company, IHOS (Greek for sound), which he established with Werner Ihlenfeld, celebrates its 21st birthday. For any performing arts company that's to be commended; for a contemporary opera company based in Hobart, which has run performances everywhere from the pillars of the Tasman Bridge to quarries, factories and supermarkets, it verges on the miraculous.

In those 21 years the highly prolific Koukias has created and presented five full scale operas - *The Barbarians* will be his sixth - and nine music-theatre works. He has commissioned 29 works for his IHOS Young Singers Laboratory Program, as well as writing works for various solo instruments, instrumental and choral ensembles.

Brian Ritchie, director of the music and arts festival MONA FOMA which is featuring *The Barbarians*, likens the survival of the company, which has been doing "very daring, world-class stuff" to "a flower growing up between the cracks in the footpath".

At times, says Koukias, it has been very difficult "and we've nearly folded, but then luckily a commission has come along, or people have made donations when we've really needed them". The company collaborates with industry on community work, and purposely designs its sets to be easily transportable so works can find as broad an audience as possible. IHOS gets some help from the state government, and Koukias teaches as well - he's going to Amsterdam for three months mid-year "to pay the bills".

He gets to The Netherlands to teach about once a year. "It has everything I want: the best musicians, the best singers, the best venues, ticket prices a third of ours, audiences that come to complex and challenging works. You're sitting in an audience of nine-year-olds watching a Ligeti opera and loving it. It's another world."

Over the years his instrumental and choral works have been performed in Europe, Asia and the US; he has been commissioned by international ensembles and operas and other pieces have featured at festivals around Australia. He has hopes *The Barbarians* will find an audience in Sydney and Melbourne.

While he has been tempted to base himself elsewhere, Koukias stays in Tasmania to care for his older brother, Harry, who has a chronic illness. "There are choices in life you don't have sometimes," he says. "It is what it is, and that's the way it goes."

Soon after he moved back to Hobart from Sydney, he wrote his first opera, *Days and Nights with Christ* (1990), based on the theme of schizophrenia. Sydney Festival bought it, requiring Koukias to form a company, something he expected to be a short-term enterprise. He also directed the piece, which he continues to do with his work, but remembers that first attempt as "a nightmare - you're thrown into the fire, you make mistakes and you learn pretty quickly". In 1992 a reviewer from *The Bulletin* described the opera as "an unforgettable experience for the open-hearted".

One benefit of working in Tasmania, says Koukias, is that the state has no traditional opera company, allowing him to play with the form in a way that may not be possible otherwise. For one "progressive" production, for instance, audience members were blindfolded between acts and sent off to the next venue in taxis. As well, he says, old buildings large enough to accommodate his work haven't all been demolished or converted into apartments. "I almost consider Princes Wharf Shed, right on the waterfront in the middle of Hobart, as my opera house."

As far as Ritchie goes, it wouldn't matter where Koukias was based. "He's one of those people you know would be creative whether he was in Tasmania or in an igloo in Alaska - he'd always have ideas." Subjects Koukias has tackled in his work have been as diverse as the development of electricity, immigration and the Lithuanian-Australian conservationist and nature photographer Olegas Truchanas. The common thread, he says, "is that it's opera for today, for everyone -- it's stuff that matters".

MONA FOMA has helped nurture IHOS by featuring it in three of its four festivals - mini-operas on the first two occasions and, this year, "with a full budget and a brief to do a full-length work". Ritchie introduced Koukias to Cavafy's poetry.

"I was somewhat surprised he didn't already know it because in many ways, they're both products of the Greek diaspora," he says. "Cavafy was in Alexandria but identified strongly with Greece and had a sense of being an outsider. He worked between classical Greek and a more modern language - so much was similar to what Con was already doing, I thought it would be a good fit."

The work is based on Cavafy's 1904 poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which Koukias says "still resonates today. It's that sense of otherness, of patriotism, of fear of others. In our political environment, it's poignant." As with virtually all Koukias's work, it has a strong spiritual element.

"Being Greek, you're born Orthodox Greek and that's that - you can't shake it." He names Olivier Messiaen, whose works are also highly spiritual, as a composer he has always loved. Other favourites include American minimalists, as well as Prokofiev, Ravel and Debussy. He also listens to many types of folk music, and Byzantine chants "which I use a lot in my work".

Even though Koukias was born in Sydney, Greek was his first language until after he'd left primary school. "I remember very distinctly having to stop thinking in Greek in high school because I was struggling with English so much - I was told I wouldn't get through school otherwise."

His parents were Greek. His father came out to work on the Tasmanian hydroelectric schemes in the 1950s; his mother migrated to Sydney and the couple had "a traditional Greek arranged marriage". The family moved to Tasmania when Koukias was seven, and about three years later his mother asked him if he would like to learn a musical instrument. "I said I didn't mind - we were passing an op shop at the time, and there was a flute in the window. She bought it and that was that."

For most of his teenage years Koukias planned to be a professional flautist, but then, at around 17, started having composition lessons with "the very inspiring" composer Keith Humble, who had studied in Paris with Schoenberg expert Rene Leibowitz. The first piece Koukias composed under him was a setting, for soprano voice, of Oscar Wilde's *Requiescat*, which was selected to be recorded. "My interest in the voice goes all the way back there," he says. "It's something about the breath; it's so transporting, and has such a lot of depth and dramatic tension and expression."

He studied composition at Sydney Conservatorium with Ross Edwards in the 80s, at the same time developing an interest in performance art by "hanging out at a lot of warehouse parties. I had a lot of friends who were visual artists, and installation art always interested me." It was at that time, too, that he thought about the possibilities of using non-traditional designers for performance pieces - jewellery designers for costume, for instance, or, in the case of *The Barbarians* and some earlier works, architects Peta Heffernan and Elvio Brianese for production design. "It's great having that left-of-centre approach. To me, they usually have a very fresh way of looking at things."

It's the way Koukias approaches everything. "I like playing with the fusion of so many different styles and elements," he says when asked why he's so difficult to pigeonhole. As Ritchie puts it: "He's not really following any particular trend, he's off in his own world."

Next month, Koukias is starting work on an opera about memory and dementia. He can't say much about it yet, but one certainty is that it will be as idiosyncratic as all his previous work.

"I wouldn't know how to write anything commercial," he says, and laughs. "That's another kettle of fish - I take my hat off to people who can, but I wouldn't know how to, I wouldn't have a clue."

The Barbarians, Hobart, January 18-22.
