

The Australian

Barbarians ravish in sumptuous score

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Opera composer and director Constantine Koukias. Picture: Roger Lovell

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- **The Barbarians**
IHOS Opera. City Hall, Hobart, January 22.

CONSTANTINE Cavafy's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904) is a cracker of a poem.

Why are the senators in session but are not passing laws?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

Why should the senators make laws any more?

The barbarians will make the laws when they get here. (Richard Lattimore's translation.)

And then there's the real stinger at the end:

... some people have come in from the frontier

and say that there aren't any more barbarians.

What are we going to do now without the barbarians?

In a way, those people were a solution."

In short, those in power need an enemy; it's how they keep the populace in check. You can also read the poem as being about the "other", and the fear of those who are different, or perhaps more precisely the use of that fear as a weapon to keep people in line.

Hobart's lively and challenging MONA FOMA festival commissioned Hobart composer Constantine Koukias to write an opera for this year's event (just finished), and Cavafy's poem was brought to his attention. *The Barbarians* is the result, an hour-long piece that was not entirely successful in all its production choices (Koukias directed) but is a ravishing piece of music. It's really more oratorio than opera, and would have been all the better for embracing even more of oratorio's austerity in presentation.

The text is Cavafy's poem, delivered in Greek and in English in a translation by Athanasia Houndalas in a rather more ornate version than Lattimore's. With audience members facing one another in semi-darkness on either side of a long, narrow, open rectangle, emblematic characters sang and danced to Koukias's luscious score while Houndalas circled, reading in Greek and English. Koukias is never far from his Greek ancestry - think Byzantium rather than bouzouki - and the musical language is rich and harmonious if with a contemporary feel: amplification and recorded sound are prominent in the mix.

On stage, under Donald Bates's authoritative baton, there was shimmering percussion, the unearthly sound of the celeste, gorgeous bright trumpet cutting through and - highly effectively - full-bodied bassoon and contra bassoon. Koukias's choice of bass baritone (Nicholas Dinopoulos), boy alto (Ayrton Rose, astonishingly poised for one so young) and soprano (Grace Ovens) for the voices - all singing in Greek - added more intriguing textures to a work ripe for development.
