

OYO's Hot Greek Odyssey

Oakland Youth Orchestra: Bliss in Shades of Blue

By Barbara Stack

Oakland Youth Orchestra departed for its first-ever tour of Greece, leaving on Tuesday, June 19, and returning 11 days later on June 30.

We arrived at SF International early enough to deal with all the instruments and early enough for one family to return to the east bay for a forgotten retainer. Everybody remembered to bring passports! We lost ten hours as we flew east via the northern route—the sun never set that night and many OYO members never slept a wink. In Frankfurt we transferred to a flight to Athens with no apparent problems. In Athens we found Aegean Air initially unwilling to take our instruments to Crete and our fierce Tour Managers also engaged them in several rounds of seat reassignments so that in the end we flew over in three batches. We all made it, but a bass arrived with its neck unglued and our tuba didn't arrive at all.

• Thursday, June 21

On Thursday OYO toured the Palace of Knossos, known for its famed labyrinth, and really enjoyed our first tastes of Greek food, beginning with breakfast. That evening we played our opening concert at St. Marcus Basilica in Heraklion to a standing-room only crowd and to standing ovations from the wonderful, warm Greeks! This despite some severe jet lag, a tuba delayed in Frankfurt (though safe in its case loaned by the SF Symphony) and two bassists sharing one instrument. Our wonderful tour company ACIS arranged for a rented tuba, but as it did not play in tune in any key known to human kind, it could not be used. The kids, some of whom nodded off during the warmup, under Michael Morgan's fabulous direction just pulled through all their fatigue and played fabulously. Bravi to all! At this concert composer Elinor Armer also appeared to hear the performance of her wonderful "Call of the West," and to share in the ovations and great joy that OYO had made it over nearly intact and in great form.



Michael Morgan conducts the Oakland Youth Orchestra in its final concert on its tour in Greece this summer with a performance at the Arhaeo Odion in Patra on June 28.

• Friday, June 22

On Friday night we gave our second concert to a smaller, but appreciative audience at the outdoor cinema Theatro Kipou in Chania, and again the kids did a great job, especially on the film music that Michael so wisely programmed. This, after another day of sightseeing, including lectures on the bus while we drove through beautiful Crete and a visit to the Arkadi Monastery and walking tours of Rethymnon and Chania. The orchestra was lifted by the arrival of rented bass and tuba, so that, for the first time, everyone was playing. There was a reception for us after the concert with wonderful food in the elegant park pavilion (with the beautiful bathrooms) and we could walk back to our hotel in the warm evening.

• Saturday, June 23

After more sunny sightseeing we boarded the huge overnight ferry for the mainland on Saturday evening. The following morning we traveled to Delphi and gave another fabulous concert, (news of it had reached Athens when we arrived the next day). We had now reunited with our tuba and the bass rental for the remaining concerts was a very nice instrument.

Michael Morgan had by chance encountered the Philadelphia Boys Choir, which somehow had lost their venue and asked to alternate sets with us. The boys were adorable, and wonderful performers, as well as an enthusiastic part of our audience. The two conductors discovered that we had a common piece of repertoire: the same arrangement of "The Sound of Music." They decided to perform it without a rehearsal and it was simply incredible — a great pleasure for both the musicians and the audience.

The OYO kids got to hear MM sing along. This was a really hot concert. The audience started small, but once the concert was underway the town square filled up way beyond the chairs to those seated on the ground and on surrounding walls. There were several standing ovations.

OYO's performance was fabulous, especially because they had spent the noontime in 105 to 110 temperatures climbing up the hill to the site of the Oracle at Delphi. The mayor of Delphi welcomed us and wants us to send him photos of the concert.

• **Monday, June 25**

On Monday, June 25, we drove to Athens and enjoyed lectures on the bus about the Parthenon and Greek history. That afternoon we all ascended the Acropolis (131 degrees! They say "only Englishmen, mad dogs, and OYO..."), visited the Greek National Archeological Museum, then had a rehearsal at the hotel, another great meal at an outdoor restaurant with misters to keep us comfortable (nobody lost weight on this tour), and in the evening most people went out disco dancing. I hear OYO was once again pretty hot! Greece had by then declared a national emergency.

• **Tuesday, June 26**

On Tuesday we rode the Metro, had groups exploring more museums, shopping at the Plaka, and sleeping late. We returned to downtown Athens that afternoon, and presented our fourth concert in the evening mercifully having been moved to an indoor venue at the American College, which also invited us to a reception after the concert.

• **Wednesday, June 27**

On Wednesday we had the grand adventure of a Saronic Gulf cruise to the islands of Aegina, Poros and Hydra. OYO members danced on board, swam in the sea, jumped off cliffs into the water, rode burros, shopped for pistachios and shopped some more.

• **Thursday, June 28**

Thursday took us to Corinth and our first sight of the awesome

Corinth Canal. The next sights were the Rion-Antirion suspension bridge across the Corinth straight, the longest cable stayed bridge in the world, and then our wonderful Hotel Porto Rion, sporting both a huge pool and a location right next to the water. Have no doubts, OYO kids can swim.

That evening we gave our final concert at the amazing Arhaeo Odion. (We can now tell the difference between an amphitheater, theater, and odion.) Haghine Boloyan led the Armenian and Greek String Group through a hot performance of Arkadi Serper's arrangement of Greek tunes, and the crowd went wild.

• **Friday, June 29**

Friday brought a tour of ancient Corinth, a return to the canal and lunch beside an incredible descending bridge, and a visit to the magnificent Epidaurus Theater. The sun was still shining hot on OYO. Back in Athens, we very much enjoyed a farewell dinner at a Taverna in the Plaka, complete with traditional Greek music and dancing, presentation of an autographed shirt and cap to Ted Yuan on the occasion of his ninth and possibly last tour, original songs, and toasts all around.

How better to end the day but with a rooftop swim at our hotel, with a view of the illuminated Acropolis.

OYO impressed everyone as musicians and people. They impressed the Greeks and our chaperones and staff, who are to be credited for keeping OYO in such tip top shape (while pre-

serving each student's sense of freedom and dignity).

Each of the chaperones brought his or her individual style, skills, strengths, and point of view to their shepherding role, and it all worked. Michael Morgan was always inspiring and at each concert acted as our ambassador. And best of all, the members of OYO really took care of one another.

We flew home Saturday, June 30, all of us with the same passports with which we began the trip, with all our instruments, missing a couple of cameras, lighter by many euros, but oh, so happy.

And so ended Oakland Youth Orchestra's first trip to Greece.

Barbara Stack is the Executive Director of Oakland Youth Orchestra,