

Olympic Games

GOIN' BACK TO ITS ROOTS! THE OLYMPIC ANTHEM IN SYDNEY

The flame which burned so brightly in Sydney is no more ... And as President Samaranch made the traditional call to “gather four years from now in Athens, the birthplace of Olympism, to celebrate the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad”, the giant scoreboard flashed a message ‘Welcome Home Olympics, Athens 2004’, the High Priestess from the temple of Hera and her retinue received the Olympic flag for Athens. The close bonds between the Olympic city of the new millennium and the first Olympic hosts had already been strongly demonstrated in the Opening Ceremony, with a rare performance in Greek of the Olympic Anthem composed by Spiridion Samara and the original lyrics of the poet Costis Palamas¹.

by Philip Barker



It was highly appropriate. Australia has the largest Greek community outside the Hellenic islands. When planning for the Opening Ceremony began in earnest in 1998 the Archbishop Stylianos, the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia sug-

gested that the Olympic Anthem should be performed in the vernacular. This was readily agreed by Director of Ceremonies, Ric Birch. It was also decided that the choir should be composed of Australians of Greek Ancestry. “This task was easier said than done,” recalls Father Steven Scoutas, Chairman of the Greek Orthodox Church Millennium Commission, “because the Greek Orthodox Church does not generally use massed choirs in its celebrations”. The race was on to find a choir, A nationwide advertising campaign produced an enthusiastic response and after extensive auditions a group of 200 was assembled for the main choir. Then the organizers had a similar quest to choose a conductor.



The musicians of the Sydney Opening Ceremony.

Olympic Games



The Olympic Anthem interpreted by the Millennium Children's Choir of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia.

Eventually the search led to George Ellis, Head of Music at the Wesley Institute. His parents emigrated from Greece in the fifties, the last time the Olympics had been in Australia, but Ellis was born 'down under'. He was enthusiastic about the project at once, but recalled the cautionary words of the Director of Music Max Lambert. "We were made aware of the size of audience that would be watching. We had ten months to rehearse a three minute performance, much more time than we would normally have to prepare, so we went through the piece "bar by bar" to make it the best performance it could possibly be. I had not known too much about Samara's work before this but now I hope to get the chance to perform more of his work".

The rehearsals took place in the appropriately named St Spiridon's Church in the Sydney suburb of Kingsford. The choir made its public debut in May 2000 at the Sydney Opera House but the big night to end

all big nights, 15 September drew ever nearer. "It was the performance of our lives," recalls Ellis.

The singing of the Anthem is always a deeply moving moment, the hoisting of the five rings confirmed that for the Olympic period, Sydney was no longer part of New South Wales but became Olympia. The Anthem a paen to 'give life to Noble games'.

It was a fitting prelude to the lighting of the Cauldron, a moment the conductor cherished. "This was the most positive professional experience of my life...throughout the rehearsals I encountered nothing but goodwill and the amount of time we had made it very fulfilling as I was able to try a lot of things I'd been taught when I was a student". There was to be another bonus. "We were thrilled that the performance, recorded with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, should be chosen for an album of music from the Opening Ceremony which went platinum in its first week of sales."

It was perhaps a modern day reaction

equivalent to that of the crowd in 1896 which heard the Anthem performed in the Panatheneic Stadium for the first time. The Official Report of 1896 details how "frenetic applause resounded from every part of the stadium at the conclusion of this hymn, its repetition was unanimously demanded, and the King himself expressed his warm approval".

The Greek community had one further gift to offer to the Ceremonies. The traditional ceremony of the flags salutes the original hosts, the present and future. But with Greece set for the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad in 2004 the ritual was changed and two Greek flags were raised as the Hellenic national anthem was movingly performed by the Millennium Children's Choir, The children then joined in the rendition of the Australian anthem "Advance Australia Fair". For Father Steven Scoutas "it represented the end of a fulfilling journey". In four years from now the Games will open in Athens in the Spiridon Louis Stadium. Would it not be wonderful if the choristers who honed their performances in the Sydney church of St Spiridon could be there too?

¹ Since the restoration of Samara's Olympic Anthem to official protocol in 1958, the lyrics have often been translated into the native language of the host nation, notably at Los Angeles in 1984, an English version subsequently used at the Centennial Games in Atlanta in 1996 and at the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney Games in 2000 where the operatic soloist Yvonne Kenny sang the English version. However, Montreal (1976) formed a choir to perform the hymn in Greek, an example followed by Moscow and Calgary, amongst others.