



LA MAR DE MÚSICAS

Jan Fairley dips her toes into the Sea of Music at Cartagena

“Si! Yes, She has it all,” shouted out a woman in the audience, as Estrella Morente finished her second song in an amphitheatre open to the moon and stars in Cartagena, Spain, last July. “She’s an abomination,” shouted back the man sitting in front of me. “The daughter of the devil. What were her parents doing the night she was conceived?” Far from being insulting, this last *piropo* – a shout of encouragement to drive a flamenco artist on as they perform – was actually the public seal of approval from a knowledgeable fan who had travelled far to see this 20-year-old flamenco princess. What more could one ask for? Amazing music, a staggeringly beautiful open-air venue, a hot night. The three-week Cartagena festival has it all.

The Turkish singer Zülfü Livaneli has called the Mediterranean ‘the sixth continent’, pointing out how the sea connects rather than separates those who live around it. Thus they live at the centre

rather than the edges of Europe. So an historic Mediterranean port seems the ideal location for La Mar de Músicas – literally ‘The Sea Of Music’ – a festival which embraces the sounds of the whole world and seeks to highlight links between them. From tentative beginnings seven years ago, *marde músicas* (the Spanish roll the three words into one) has become one of the most interesting music festivals in the world, setting the best of Spain in a global context.

Mar de Músicas is unlike festivals such as WOMAD or Belgium’s Sfinx, where you experience a musical kaleidoscope of between 50 and 100 groups in just three days. The pace in Cartagena is more relaxed, very Spanish and family-friendly. Walk into the old town mid-evening and you are inevitably drawn into a pavement café for a drink and tapas, maybe bumping into some of the musicians.

Whenever you surface after a night of music, you should stagger to a nearby bar for brunch. Go for the one by the beach, and a good swim, followed by an afternoon siesta, will help set you up for the ensuing evening’s entertainment.

You’re spoilt for choice for venues. Hundreds of twisting stone steps lead to the new amphitheatre, past the excavation of the old one built several thousand years ago, and past the restored ruins of the oldest cathedral in Spain. There’s a concert each night of the week in downtown venues such as the Patio de Armas and the Plaza

San Francisco. Over the weekends, there are at least three groups each night in the hilltop Parque Torres amphitheatre and on the terrace of the Arab castle. Late night groups and DJs have you dancing here past dawn, or simply chilling out on the walls watching the sun rise over the bay below.

Festival director Paco Martín says unashamedly that one of his objectives is to get people identifying this hitherto forgotten part of Spain as the place for a sublime music holiday. Mar de Músicas is a product of the city’s reinvention of itself as an archaeological heritage site and interesting place to visit. It may not yet feature in many guidebooks to Spain, but it will soon. “The economy became very depressed here in the 80s,” says Martín. “Basically this is an ancient city that got eclipsed.”

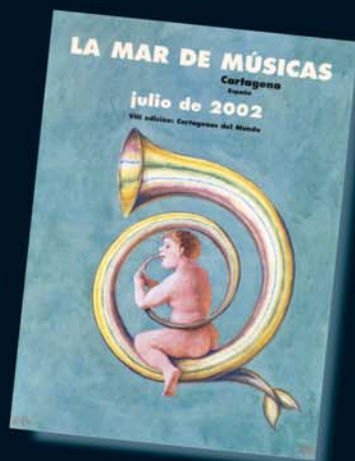
Cartagena was one of the key Roman ports. Like Rome, it has seven hills, and its natural port is deep and well-protected. The Romans called it ‘New Carthage’, made it their Iberian Imperial capital, and it became very wealthy with amazing architecture and a vibrant culture.

In the 19th century, Cartagena developed a reputation as a rebel canton – it seceded from the rest of the country and asserted its independence by coining its own money. Encircled, it was soon overcome, but the region was always considered ‘red’, and Franco was determined to crush that spirit. He turned Cartagena into a powerful military base, and in common with the rest of Spain, its culture became straitjacketed and censored, totally narrow.



LEFT: Lucrecia with Oscar D'Leon

LEFT: *Parque Torres amphitheatre*
 RIGHT: *Habib Koité and Bamada*
 BELOW RIGHT: *Anouar Brahem Trio in the Catedral Antigua*



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Now, Martín says, "Cartagena has had to consciously revitalise itself. With European funding for the recovery of its archaeological sites and money for urban restoration, it has used its imagination and dug into its past to create its future."

"It's the ugliest city I've seen in a long time," said Andy Kershaw after driving in from the airport. But that was before he'd walked through the old city, seen its archaeological sites, its baroque and neoclassical buildings with their wonderful balconies and, more importantly, been to his first gig.

Each year the festival has a theme; it highlights the new and innovative music of Spain and peppers the nights with other leading world musicians. Last year's festival featured the music of Mali, while this year the focus shifts to music from all the Cartagenas in the world.

"Cartagena has been used round the world as a place name," explains Martín. "There are 136 places in the world called either Cartagena or Cartagos. We've got an exhibition of photographs taken in 47 of them, but we can't represent all the countries musically. That would be too much! We'll start with Chile, Peru, Jamaica, with guests from Mexico and Colombia. We'll do special focuses on Mexico and USA in the future as they have huge musical traditions to draw on."

This year 'Especial Cartagenas' artists include Tunisia's Amina, Cuba's Orishas, Jamaica's Rita Marley, Chile's Inti Illimani, Mexico's Los de Abajo and Lila Downs, Peru's Tania Libertad, Susana Baca and Pelo Madueño, Colombia's Petrona Martínez, Totó La Momposina and Joe Arroyo, and from the USA, Kronos Quartet and US3. There is also a link to Cartagena Jamaica with Gilberto Gil



and his Bob Marley Project, and there are visits from Guinea's Mory Kanté, Ethiopia's Gigi, Ivory Coast's Alpha Blondy, Mali's Issa Bagayogo and more.

So while there may be little left to see of the original Carthage in Tunisia, Cartagena Spain looks set to sail on a sea of music which stretches across the world. ■

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