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Santorini

Ramona Stout becomes entranced by the sound of Greek bagpipe music which has found a home in an ancient watchtower in the village of Akrotiri

The island of Santorini is a jagged crescent of rock, the remains of one of the largest volcanic eruptions in history. High on its southwestern tip is the village of Akrotiri. Modern buildings house the fair-weather tavernas that shutter their doors in winter. The old village spirals upwards, closed to traffic and unchanging with the passing of seasons. I wander up to find, at its peak, a 13th century watchtower, La Ponta, pockmarked by time and earthquakes.

I am here at the invitation of Yannis Pantazis, who plays and makes the traditional Greek bagpipe, the *tsabouna*. He is also a man much favoured by fortune as this tower is his workshop.

Just a few years ago he coveted the building from afar, imagining working and maybe even living here one day. A few months later his partner, Argy Kakissis, rescued a chicken stuck in a tree. The chicken's owner invited her in for coffee. They got talking and the owner's son, Nektarios, unearthed a battered *tsabouna* that he longed to learn to play. Nektarios and Yannis soon became friends, then colleagues, and he offered to help Argy out. She had grown tired of her clean laundry drying alongside stinking goatskins. He said he had a place Yannis could use as a workshop, his family seat in Akrotiri, a place to hang his skins. It turned out to be this tower. Nektarios and his father also raise goats, making this arrangement quite the package deal. Yannis got the workshop of his dreams, and then some.

His passion for the instrument combined with Argy's organisational zeal has brought the building from semi-ruin to exhibition space in under a year. They hosted hundreds of *tsabouna* players last September as part of the Pan-Cycladic *Tsabouna* Festival and, in May of this year, hosted the Greek portion of the Folk Music in Museums project. Today



Tsabouna maker Dimitris Tsafos from Naxos arrives at La Ponta, (top); the tsabouna being played and hanging to dry (left)

the space is lined with glass cases displaying pipes gifted from almost every Cycladic island and the music is coming from one of the bamboo double-flutes Yannis is currently experimenting with. It drenches the almost bare space in melancholy, and then quickly goes out of tune. "They're a work in progress," he says.

Argy tells me the exhibition space is all about the life of the *tsabouna* and the culture of communal celebration that goes with it. Tatty photographs in fancy frames reveal the faces of the champion players Santorini has long since lost, but the chatter among the other guests is of the up-and-coming players.

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Teenagers from other villages, an eight-year-old prodigy from the neighbouring island of Anafi, "...even women are playing," they say.

Yannis plays the *tsabouna* a little, rocking to the rhythm of his foot tapping, a tune halfway between arid pastures and central Istanbul and nothing like the bagpipe I know. This instrument is drone-less and raw and looks like a dismembered and decapitated goat – yet it has soul.

Yannis tells me that the playwright Aristophanes was the first to write about the instrument, comparing it to the sound of bees. It certainly has some of that frenzy about it, yet it also has the plaintive tone of shepherd's music the world over, that high-lonesome sound. He says some players are still shepherds, or the great-grandchildren of shepherds, but many now have jobs far from the fields. He and Argy seem to have made it their job to represent them and the tradition as a whole.

The restoration of La Ponta, named by its Venetian architects, is far from complete, but the plan is to return the building to its pre-earthquake grandeur. For now they use the cavernous main hall to introduce people to the look and sound of the *tsabouna*, offering them small *toubakis* to beat in time with its wail. Performances are held on a small platform on the terrace, buffeted by dry winds and fast moving clouds, and with a view that stretches all the way to Santorini's northern tip.

My visit stretches into the night. By candlelight the other guests, many of them friends and musicians, banter between music. They sing *rebetika*, experiment with polyphony and eventually cede to the magnificent *tsabouna*, with which the tower truly comes to life. **M**