

Notes from a small island

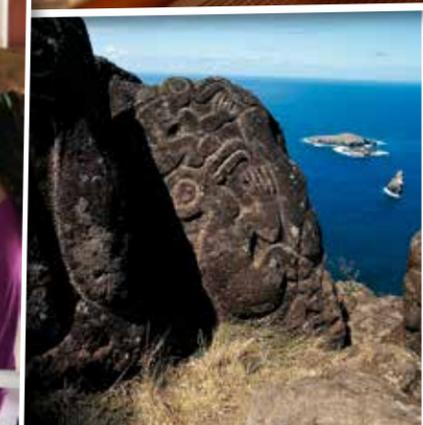
Nestled at the heart of the south Pacific, the tiny Easter Island is one of the most remote places on Earth. Now, after years of dreaming, it's building its very own music school, as *Gabriel O'Rorke* discovers



NEW HORIZONS: the famous mo'ai statues of Easter Island; (right) a nine-year-old islander receives violin tuition; (far right) a petroglyph rock carving depicts the Birdman Cult



RETURN OF THE NATIVE: pianist Mahani Teave is creating a music centre for future generations



If you have a ukulele in the house or a guitar, I assure you that your six year-old will have a go, trying to get some notes out – it's so natural for us,' says Mahani Teave, who grew up on Easter Island and now travels the world as a concert pianist. 'Children on the island just love music.'

Before meeting Mahani, we set out on a small red moped to explore her home. A place unlike any other, Easter Island is an open-air archaeological site, known primarily by most for its mo'ai (statues) scattered across its volcanic shores – there are almost 1,000 in all. Although 2,300 miles off the coast (five hours by plane), and with a Polynesian culture and people, Easter Island is part of the long

thin country of Chile. Setting out for the spot where those iconic stone figures were created, we race along the narrow road from the main town of Hanga Roa to Rano Raraku, known as the 'mo'ai factory'. It takes just half an hour to get from one end of the island to the other, and that's aboard a small scooter that whines like a washing machine on wheels.

Two volcanoes rise from either end of the island; one of which, Rano Raraku, is the quarry from which the entire race of mo'ai was carved. From the 12th to 14th centuries, the island's Neolithic inhabitants carved figures from the volcanic rock, chipping away with basalt stone picks until they mimicked the features of their ancestors. Today, the

quarry stands frozen in time, with more than 400 monolith statues, in various toppled positions, littering the nearby grassy hillside. A short distance away on the coast below, a row of 15 mo'ai stand gazing inland near the water's edge. This is the largest platform, and it's known as Ahu Tongariki.

Only 30 of the island's 1,000 mo'ai have been re-erected after every last one was pushed over during inter-tribal wars when society turned to a new ideology, the Birdman Cult. Historians believe the change to a set of beliefs based on virility coincided with the struggle of a dense population of 20,000 people to survive with few resources on this 64-square-mile island.

The centre of the Birdman Cult can still be seen on the top of Volcano Orongo with its round stone constructions and petroglyphs. Rather than dedicating their time to carving, the islanders started to train for an annual contest, the winner of which became the chief of the island for a year. The race involved scrambling down the cliff edge, swimming out to a small island just offshore, fetching an egg and returning with it intact.

Today, the Birdman Cult has also ground to a halt, and although the petrified giants attract 50,000 visitors each year, life for the Rapa Nui (the Polynesian name for the islanders) revolves more around music and dance than ancestor worship. 'Whatever class

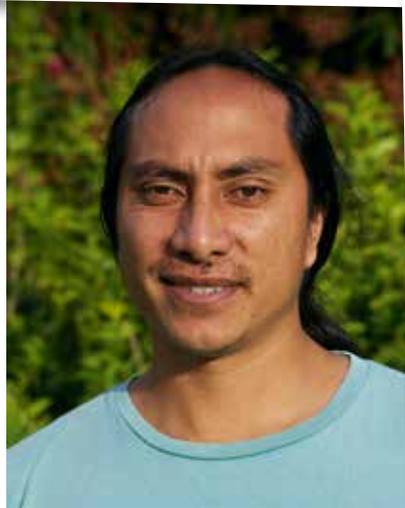
'Children here are very curious. I began the piano out of curiosity'

started, I would join,' remembers Mahani Teave of her childhood on Easter Island, 'whether it was Polynesian dance, Chilean dance, ballet or piano. The children here are all very curious. I began learning the piano out of curiosity.'

Mahani took up piano lessons when she was nine years old following the arrival of a

German piano teacher. 'Six months later a Chilean pianist visited the island,' she says. 'He heard me play and was very impressed.' Unfortunately, it turned out to be impossible to persuade any teacher to stay longer than a season on the island, a place that counts itself among the most remote in the world. So a few months later the piano teacher went away, taking with her Easter Island's one and only piano.

'My mother thought it was very unfair because teachers would come, all the children would get very enthusiastic, and then they would leave,' says Mahani. 'Also, at that time the education on Easter Island was the worst in Chile. Several things added up, so my



GRAND DESIGNS: (above) the plans for the Easter Island School of Music & Arts; (top left) a student practising the violin; (far left) Enrique Icka, the school's co-founder; (left) pianist Mahani Teave with Ximena Cabello, her music teacher from her time in Chile

mother thought she would take us girls to the mainland and give us a chance.'

When Mahani was nine she moved to Valdivia in the south of Chile where she lived until she was 19. She then headed north to Cleveland. 'It was in the US that I learnt why you should spend hours practising, and discovered the magic of music and the incredible sounds that would come from an instrument.'

Her studies ended with postgraduate music lessons in Berlin, but Easter Island was always on her mind. 'All these years I would come back for the summers and see that so many things were changing here, and not for the good. Then I realised it was because materialism and capitalism had arrived on the island and people were starting to think just of themselves and not of the community.'

A slither of hope came in 2008 when Mahani mentioned the lack of pianos on her native island in an interview, and suddenly two pianos were donated. It was an act of charity that came like a thunderbolt for Easter Island's only concert pianist and it opened up

'I imagined a school where children could develop all their talents'

a world of possibility in her mind, sparking an idea that has shaped the past few years of her life. 'I started asking why I'd had the opportunity when all the other children who were just as talented – or even more talented – didn't have the chance,' she says. 'And I just thought, imagine a school where children could develop all their talents: painting, dancing, music, everything.'

At first it was just a dream, but the idea followed her around the world as she toured.

'I thought that while I was giving joy to people by performing, I wasn't doing anything for my people,' she says. It wasn't until she met Enrique Icka, a fellow Rapa Nui, that the idea developed. The couple ended up founding the Toki Rapanui NGO together, and they are now building the manifestation of their dreams: the Easter Island School of Music & Arts (pictured above).

As we sit drinking tea on their front patio, surrounded by tropical plants, crowing cockerels and the distant melody of a neighbour practising *The Pink Panther* on a saxophone, 60 volunteers are making their way from all corners of the globe to help build the school. With the help of eco architect

Michael Reynolds of Earthship Biotechnology, the pair are creating a sustainable centre made from recycled materials from the local dump. The plan is to give future generations of Rapa Nui children free music lessons.

From Mahani and Enrique's house, you can see the sea reaching out towards the skyline, a line of mo'ai standing in a line along the coast below. And the horizons for this project spread beyond the music itself. 'The school is the start of a much larger project,' explains Mahani, 'which is to protect all the best parts of our culture. From the cello to new technologies, this place can serve as an example of sustainability, social and culture rescue, a place where we can develop as complete human beings.'

Building began in November 2014, but music lessons have been in full swing since

2012. What's more, from piano to violin, cello and ukulele, all classes are free of charge thanks to the funding drive by this tireless Polynesian pair, who work non-stop winning funding awards and hosting benefits.

One of the two music teachers currently involved in the project is Ximena Cabello, Mahani's teacher from her years in Valdivia. 'It's been very hard to install an idea in the children that they should practise,' says Caballo. 'The Rapa Nui have a culture in which they don't study out of school hours, but these classical instruments are not easy to learn. You have to practise to be good at them.' Mahani agrees: 'It's very different here; people aren't even used to being inside four walls. We get claustrophobic and just want to be outside, and that's why, for example, the regular educational system doesn't work here.'

This marriage of classical music with Polynesian culture may seem to be at odds. The former is structured, formal and requires work and dedication which is a stark contrast to the island's own tradition, as Jorge Hotu (the father of one of the local piano students,

The centre is made from recycled materials from the local dump

Miru) points out: 'Originally musical instruments here were stones being tapped against each other and voices.'

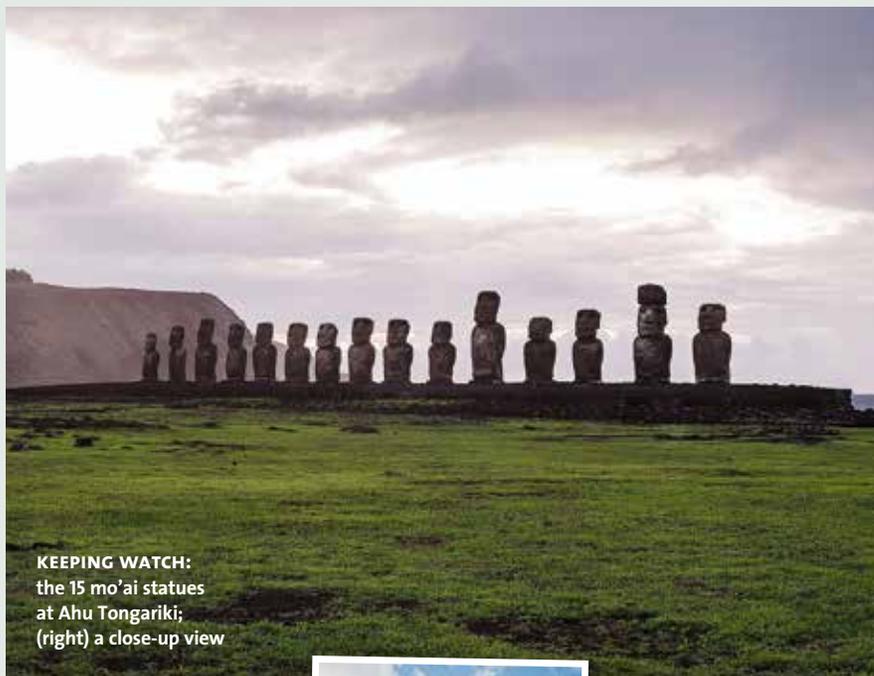
However, Mahani's energy can only inspire the students. 'What's so amazing is that through music you can just teach everything,' she says. 'This includes perseverance, teamwork and respect for yourself, the teacher and your classmates. Through music you can give people new horizons and a positive projection of their own future.'

After centuries of dedicating themselves to strong beliefs and traditions, the Rapa Nui people have been suffering a loss of identity over the last few decades. 'We're losing our culture and language, drugs are coming to the island and our elders – who used to be the most respected people because they are wise – are just being left aside,' says Mahani.

When outside influences arrive in a place as isolated as Easter Island, there's no surprise that a clash of ideals occurs. Historically, visits from outsiders came sporadically – the Europeans arrived in the early 18th century, with a Dutch boat landing in 1722 and a Spanish one 50 years later – but generations could pass without any seafaring vessels appearing. Before the 1700s, Rapa Nui legend

THE MYSTERIOUS MO'AI

How did the Easter Island statues get where they are?



KEEPING WATCH:
the 15 mo'ai statues
at Ahu Tongariki;
(right) a close-up view

HISTORIANS TODAY ARE still puzzled by how the island's statues were moved into place. Divided into clans, different groups inhabited different parts of the island – those who lived on the opposite end of Easter Island presumably had to heave their statues from the quarry to their village before erecting them. No one, however, is entirely sure how this was done. Some say they rolled them on logs, although it's thought the heads might have snapped off due to their disproportionate weight.



A few alternative theories have been proposed, such as aliens helping to move the mo'ai, a tribal chief ordering them to march into place, or the erupting volcano catapulting them into position. But a recent theory, put forward by scientists at University of Hawaii and California State University Long Beach, suggests that the statues may have been 'walked' around the island using an ingenious system of ropes tied around the statues' heads.

had it that the gods had grown angry with all mankind, pushing all the separate landmasses under the sea, but somehow forgetting Easter Island. They thought they were the only people on Earth.

Nowadays flights arrive daily from Santiago, bringing goods, supplies and tourists. The challenge being undertaken by Mahani and Enrique is how to be part of this new age without sacrificing their ancient traditions and culture in the process. A close-knit society that worked on a basis of neighbours helping one another is not easily married with the ideals of capitalism that come with the burgeoning tourism trade.

However, this is the situation in hand, and once people have tasted the goods of

capitalism it takes more than the Pied Piper to draw them away. Mahani's aim is not to ignore or deny present day reality, but to make sure that language, culture and traditions are not forgotten.

It's yet to be seen if Easter Island will produce more professional musicians. But as the young Rapa Nui work their way from Rossini's *William Tell* Overture to 'Ka Neva Nei Au', an ancient island song that describes the habits and culture of the Rapa Nui, a wonderful marriage is being made between two cultures. Who would have thought that classical music might be the tool of choice, to help save the indigenous songs and culture of a Polynesian Island, famous for its giant stone statues? ■