

Kinan Azmeh on the concert 'Seven Syrian Composers'

When I was asked to curate the program of this concert celebrating my home city of Damascus I was incredibly excited and nervous. Excited because I had the opportunity to share my love for many musical works by Syrian composers, and nervous because I knew that if I included all of my favorite works this concert will not be enough!

Syria enjoys a very rich musical tradition that goes back for millennia. In fact, humanity's earliest evidence of musical notation was found in the ruins of the city of Ugarit in Syria. "Hurrian Hymn No. 6," dates back to 1400 BC and contains the notation of a hymn and instructions on how to play it on the Lyre. A city of trade and a crossroads for many civilizations, Arab, Armenian, Kurdish, Assyrian and Syriac musical vocabularies flourished in Damascus, a city that prides itself for being the oldest continuously inhabited capital city in the world. And these traditions continue to form the core of the music that is practiced in the country today.

Evidence of European classical music practice in Syria dates back to the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, and the earliest histories credit a Russian nobleman named Erhast Belling (dates unknown), who had been conductor of the Imperial Court of Russia in St. Petersburg until fleeing the Russian revolution in 1916. Belling took up residence in Damascus in the early 1930s and while there taught piano and violin privately. He also encouraged the formation of different chamber ensembles, many of which regularly performed at the Glass Hall of the Orient Palace Hotel in Damascus, as well as in private concerts. Baron Belling, as he is mostly known, left Damascus in 1954 for Beirut, leaving behind a number of prominent students, some of whom went on to become professional musicians in Syria. More importantly, he left behind a fascination for classical music among art lovers in the elite society of Damascus that he had carefully fostered during his stay.

From a systematically pedagogical perspective, European classical music in Syria is a relatively new phenomenon dating back only to the mid-1960s, when the first children's music school was founded in Damascus and named The Arab Conservatory, which was later to be renamed after its founder, Solhi al-Wadi who is considered to be the godfather of the Syrian classical music scene. This school endured and expanded through the Years under al-Wadi's guidance and gave birth to the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus in 1990, and later the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra in 1993.

The Higher Institute of Music in Damascus was pivotal in producing a generation of accomplished composers and performers who are active both in Syria today and on the world stages in a verity of genres.

Our concert tonight features composers and performers across several generations and musical vocabularies. Two works by the pioneers Solhi al-Wadi and Dia Succari,

more contemporary sounding works by Zaid Jabri and Kareem Roustom, and finishing with the compositions of three performers/composers Dima Orsho, Kinan Azmeh and Maias Yamani, which fuse improvisations (a commonly found practice in Syrian traditional music) with orchestral writing.

I believe that what all these pieces across generations and genres have in common is that they are all deeply inspired by a multitude of living Syrian traditions but by no means limited by them.

I invite you to discover and enjoy.

Kinan Azmeh, New York Nov 16 2018