




AFAC Arabic-Baltic Music Concerts at the Esterházy Palace Spring Festival 2012



أفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون – أفاق



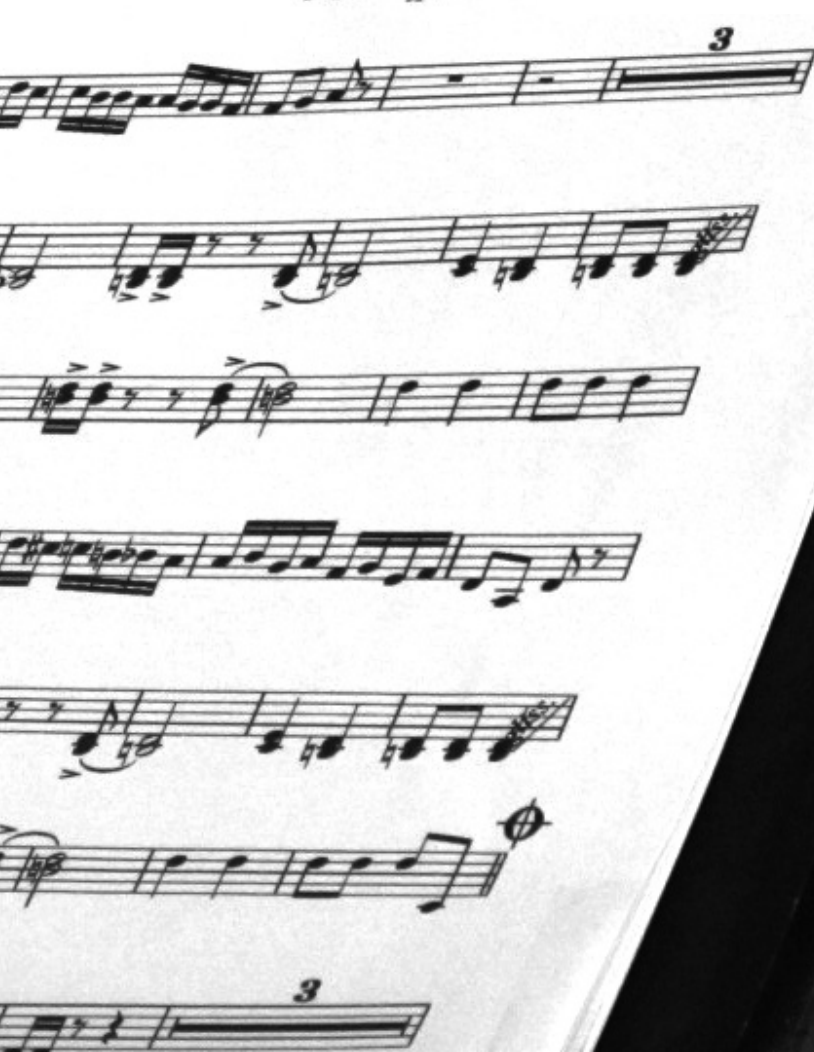
Facilitating cross-cultural events that give Arab artists greater visibility, recognition and exposure to new avenues of creativity is one of AFAC's main mandates. So we invited a selection of

Introduction

composers and musicians to fly to Austria, the historic capital of classical music, and to perform with the most accomplished violinist in the world today, Maestro Gidon Kremer, and his Grammy-Award winning Kremerata Baltica chamber orchestra. Hosting us both, the Arab and the Baltic musicians, including guest musicians from Armenia and Italy, is the Esterházy Foundation located in Eisenstadt, 40 km from Vienna. The Esterházy Palace's musical hall, the Haydnsaal, is named after renowned classical composer Joseph Haydn who worked and lived at the Esterházy court for most of his life. Alongside its classical and baroque architecture, dating back to the 16th and 18th century, the Haydnsaal is recognized as one of the world's most acoustically perfect spaces and many musicians aspire to perform in its walls.

The program was going to be intense and diverse, with a wide variety of compositions selected. These include pieces by the medieval Gregor Von Narek and the classical Antonio Vivaldi, as well as pieces by contemporary composers like Arvo Pärt, Joelle Khoury, Zaid Jabri, Stevan Kovacs Tickmayer, Ali Osman Alhaj, Georgs Pelecis, MAias Alyamani, Mahmoud Turkmani and Giovanni Sollima. AFAC also invited vocalist Fadia El-Hage to perform Joelle's compositions, oud player Mustafa Said as soloist for Vivaldi and percussionist Mohammad Taha to add the distinctive Arab beat to the various pieces presented. Arriving to Eisenstadt just four days before the concert dates set for May 3rd and 4th, enthusiasm was running high in anticipation of rehearsals.

Longa Nahawa

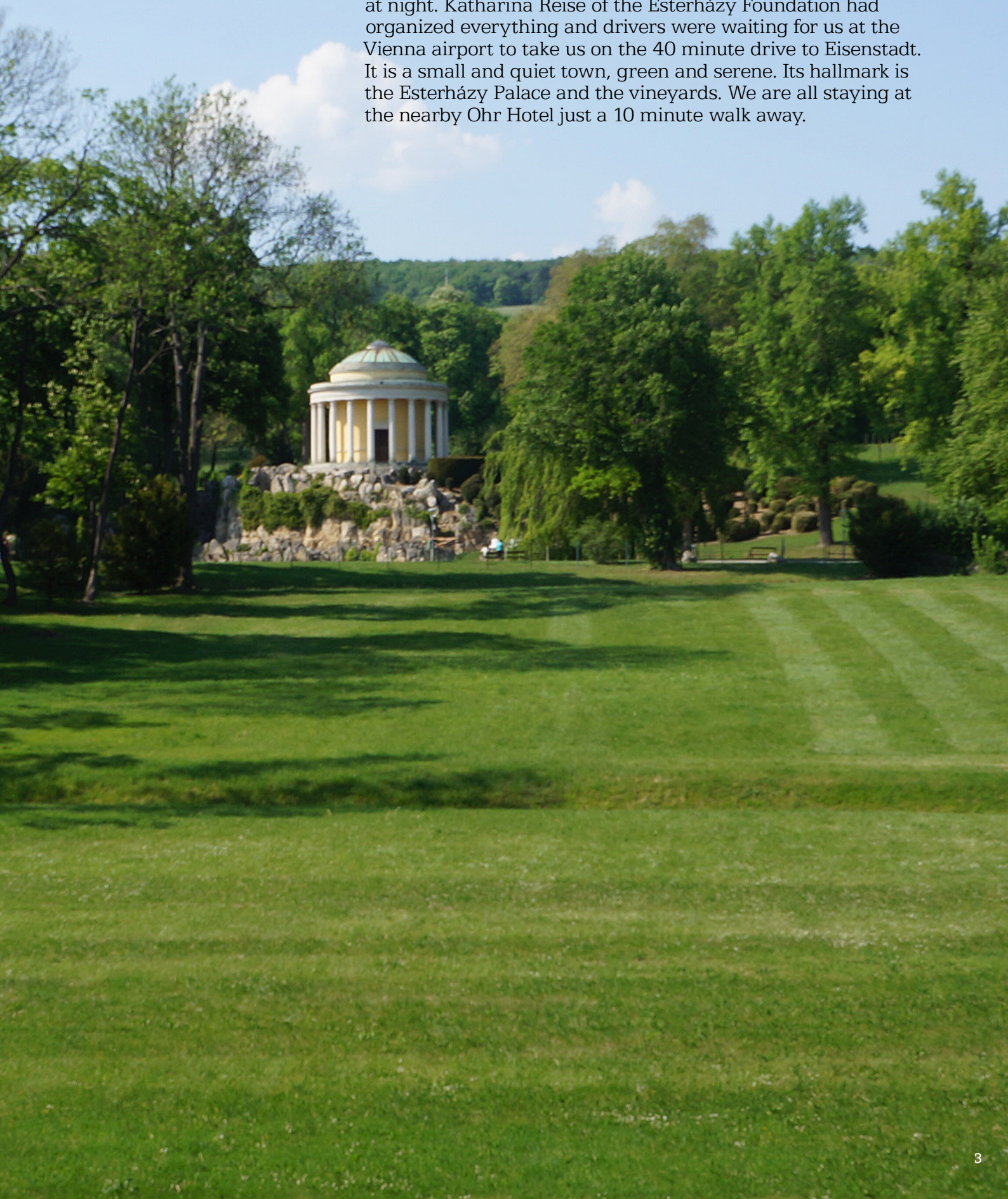


We begin to arrive: Syrian violinist MAias Alyamani coming in from Qatar, followed by composer Joelle Khoury, vocalist Fadia El-Hage, and fellow participant duduk-player Zakar

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Keshishian coming in from Lebanon after flight delays, then Mohammad Taha in

the evening coming in from Jordan and myself arriving late at night. Katharina Reise of the Esterházy Foundation had organized everything and drivers were waiting for us at the Vienna airport to take us on the 40 minute drive to Eisenstadt. It is a small and quiet town, green and serene. Its hallmark is the Esterházy Palace and the vineyards. We are all staying at the nearby Ohr Hotel just a 10 minute walk away.





The first morning, our musicians are up bright and early for breakfast at 8:00 am. We greet Maestro Gidon at the table and he smiles good morning. The Maestro has dedicated much

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of his career to supporting young composers and affording recognition to their work. Though a celebrity virtuoso, his aura is humble and unpretentious. At the next table, Joelle is very nervous, while Zakar and Fadia are more relaxed. To ease the tension, they exchange funny stories about last minute arrivals, airport delays and unrehearsed performances. Mohammad is quick to share a laugh and MAias is eager to learn what everyone is up to. MAias comments on the significance of this opportunity to perform with Maestro Gidon Kremer. "He is one of a kind. Not only the best violinist today, but the best the world will see in a long long time."

We took the slightly uphill walk from our hotel to the Esterhazy palace, enjoying the spring grass and clear skies along the way. Joelle commented on the difference between being a composer and being a musician. "I have the sounds in my head and I can notate them on paper" she said, "but then hearing them performed live is a whole other thing." MAias wondered about the scope of Arab musicians participating, wishing that there could be a wider representation of people from the Arab region. I explained that we had originally invited also Tunisian and Bahraini composers, but due to conflicts of schedule, they could not attend. Meanwhile, Mustafa Said from Egypt and the Swiss-based Lebanese composer Mahmoud Turkmani are set to arrive the following day.

From the sunny outdoors we entered into the coolness of the palace stone walls and walked up the marble stairway following the sound of string instruments tuning. The first scheduled rehearsal was Joelle Khoury's composition, "Variations on Imaginary Folk Dances," a composition commissioned especially for this festival. The conductor, Maestro Andris Veismanis, a friendly man with a carefree rag of grey and dark hair, introduced himself to us and introduced Joelle to the members of the Kremerata Baltica chamber orchestra before beginning.

"Do you prefer piano or mezzo piano for bar 3?" he would ask her. "Softer for 1st and 2nd violin on bar 27, ok?" Joelle nodded her head and explained she wanted to start soft to lead up to a big crescendo. "There are three rhythms happening at the same time, so they need to be accentuated," she explained for a certain portion. They try again. More staccato and crisp. "Like that?" She nods her head, "yeah, yeah." Fadia sang her parts beautifully and skillfully in Arabic sounds that surely none of the orchestra members, mostly Russian and Baltic, had heard before. It was eccentric and new.

The rehearsal for Zaid Jabri's piece, "Song without Words" spurred a Russian conversation among the orchestra players and they asked if Zaid would be coming to rehearsals to make sure they were playing his piece as he envisions the sounds to be. His composition is tense and eerie, with gliding bits that sound like jet





planes and haunting church bells reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals.

Then it was the turn for MAias Alyamani's pieces, "Sea Waves" and "Nahawanda Longa." He is both composer and performing violinist. MAias reworks familiar melodies from Arabic songs and jazes them up with charismatic energy and skill. Maestro Gidon Kremer would be playing second violin to his first in "Nahawanda Longa."

The national Austrian tv, OTV, arrived to film scenes of the rehearsal. A duet between MAias and Maestro Gidon Kremer was underway. Maestro Kremer gives a nod to the orchestra violinists, indicating to give their sound more intensity alongside MAias's sometimes furious and sometimes gentle first violin. The Maestro nods his head in acknowledgement and appreciation of the young Syrian composer's work while MAias beams at the opportunity to perform with such a legend. They looked over the scores together, discussing tempo and volume. Again, the rehearsal continues, "Colleagues, shall we play again from G.?" says the conductor.

After the morning sessions, the national tv interviewed Maestro Gidon, MAias Alyamani, Joelle Khoury and myself, asking about the significance of the program, both in terms of music and in terms of collaboration. The interview is to be aired nation-wide on prime time TV, just before the news broadcast, over the next couple of days.

For lunch, Mr. Robert Tannenbaum, New York-born cultural director of the Esterházy Foundation, invited us to Hernrici, a fine restaurant famous for its fish. Fadia said, "It is great that we are living in a time where we are moving towards more cultural openness and understanding." Her comment lead us into an interesting discussion where Robert revealed some of the hidden challenges behind the pristine scene of Eisenstadt. "This part of Austria still lives in the last century," he explained "we're in a rural town where, except for the Esterházy Foundation, there are great economic challenges. No market, no industry." The sense of aristocracy still lives, with remnant resentment between rural populations and princes. "The aristocracy was banned years ago, but they still say, 'You work for the Prince?'"

Fadia insisted, "yes but there's more tolerance and acceptance." She told Robert about her experience of singing Bach in the Arabic language at the Lincoln Center in New York and that the critiques were unexpectedly positive. This surprised Robert immensely, noting that American wealthy families that usually dictate cultural production in the United States are a pretty conservative crowd.

Looking back at the history of classical music, he said, "The idea behind a place like Esterházy Palace was to do perversely rich performances for very few people." Musicians were servants to the palace and concerts were designed to be too expensive and out of everyone else's reach. Today, the owners of places like the Esterházy Palace want to offer events that fill the house. Commercialism and consumerism are overtaking quality.



What people forget is that Classical Music was never about easy listening. "You should read the bad reviews!" Musicians were daring and experimental, they stretched their audience's ears. Nobody liked them except the very few.

Robert then turned to Joelle and said "I love your opera! I saw it on YouTube when we were checking out the scores. Really great!" "I'm very nervous," she replied. "Don't worry, you are surrounded by the best musicians," Maestro Gidon assured her.

The discussion then veered to funding issues, private versus governmental sources of financial support. Whether in European countries or in the Arabian gulf, a lot of the decision behind cultural funding come down to old-style family feuds."

The Gulf phenomenon and the trend of buying culture, even whole museums, naturally came up. Kris wondered why the countries of the Gulf spend so much money importing Western culture instead of spending it on developing and exporting Arab culture. "They're even opening the Louvre in Abu Dhabi," he said, noting that "AFAC's methodology is different."

MAias joined the conversation when Robert brought up the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. "Even musicians from the Berlin Philharmonic are opting for Qatar," he exclaimed. They compared cultural and financial benefits and drawbacks to being a musician in the different orchestras. MAias admitted that it was a sweet deal in Qatar and invited Robert to come check it out, to which Robert laughed heartily. MAias also proposed bringing his String Quartet, Maqam, comprised of Arab musicians from Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, to come and perform at the Esterházy some time. Robert said, "Yes! Good idea!" Cross-cultural networking over meals is always the best way to go.

Zakar Keshishian, having no rehearsals scheduled for Monday, took this opportunity to go to Vienna and visit the house of Mozart. On his return, we walked around the quiet streets of Eisenstadt, working up an appetite for dinner. A Lebanese-born Armenian duduk player and conductor, Zakar had many fascinating stories to tell about discovering young musical talent in Lebanon, Syria and Armenia. , "I can never forget that Syria and Lebanon made a home for Armenians and gave us nationalities," he said. "We have always been welcomed among the Arab people and many aspects of Arab culture have also become part of Armenian identity."

Over dinner, MAias told us about his experiences too. He revealed that "for the past 8 years, my dream has been to play with Maestro Gidon Kremer. And here he is playing 2nd violin to my solo. What could be more great? I am very happy."

After dinner we returned to the hotel to find Joelle, Fadia and Mohammad Taha discussing the first day of rehearsals. Joelle was tense and trying to make jokes to lighten up. Fadia and Mohammad reassured her that it was only the first day and everyone's just getting to know each other, the music will surely flow more smoothing tomorrow.



Second day of rehearsals begin. MAias and Maestro Gidon practice their duets. Katharina comments that Maestro Gidon has been attending everyone's rehearsals all day since yesterday, though he usually needs his rest. She is amazed at his presence for everyone, always listening and giving constructive feedback in the politest of manner. Not at all a superstar in the way that many accomplished musicians can be.

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Katharina also commented, "A lot of MAias's music sounds Hungarian! How appropriate since we are sitting in Austria so close to Hungary!" We wondered about the meaning of "Eastern" and "Oriental" since many sounds do indeed resemble central European, Eastern European and Russian sounds.

Ali Osman's peculiar yet enchanting piece, "Fusion", had the musicians banging on their instruments, stomping their feet and making hissing sounds. In Arabic music, the words indicating sounds are "Dum", "Tac" and "Hss". The conductor Maestro Andris couldn't help chuckling as, in his native Latvian tongue, "Hss" means "Me!" and it was feeling too egotistic for the musicians to be declaring "Me! Me! Me!" in the middle of the performance!

During the break, I spoke with the conductor and asked his impression of the music. "It is really interesting to try to feel and to perform music from another culture," he said, "especially music that is contemporary. And here I am being asked to do so at the Esterhazy Palace! I have read so much about this palace and about the life of Josef Haydn here, so it is great for me to get a phone call one day and be asked to come here and conduct this collaborative project."

The next piece for performance was Zaid Jabri's 'Song without Words'. Zaid, who lives in Poland, has been trying to sort out his papers in order to attend the rehearsals. As a Syrian, however, he has not been able to acquire a visa. Cellist Eriks Kirsfeld and conductor Maestro Andris have been wondering if he will arrive in order to give his feedback. I contacted Zaid on Skype and had him listen to the rehearsal via my laptop – technology saves the day. The cellist came around and asked "Was that ok? Did he like the way we preformed it?" And so – clackity clack on the key board, "Yes! I loved it!" came the answer, "Just a few little things, Bar 158 needs to be a quarter tone lower... we're going for a metallic sound." Eriks leaned over the laptop and typed "Ok, the same for Bar 165, right?" "Yes, exactly." The communication was useful and the musicians were eager to hear directly from the composer, so we moved into a side room and, while the rehearsals continued in the main hall, the conductor and cello soloist brought their musical scores and had a Skype meeting with Zaid. His final words were: "This is music! You should follow your feelings! If it feels right for you go for it!" at which the conductor smiled and said: "Yes! Great!"

It was then time for lunch. The food in Eisenstadt has been quite delicious! We met up with young Mustafa Said and his

assistant Clara Sfeir who had just arrived. Mustafa has an encyclopedic knowledge of Arabic music, composers and instrument-making, as well as a refreshing sense of humor about his blindness. Sitting at his table was a Tunisian friend of his, Mohsen Soua, who lives in Vienna. Mohsen Soua has one of the most professional online archives of Arabic classic music called "Zaman al-Wasl." Offline, he also works at AMAR, the Arab Music Archiving and Research foundation, alongside with Mustafa Said and Kamal Kassar. He explained how they had produced a very rare and important publication about a founding father of modern Arab music, Youssef Al-Moneilawi, and yet it has done very poorly in sales. He and Mustafa have brought these CDs with them to display and sell here in Eisenstadt. Little did they know that even the cultural director at the Esterhazy Palace is suffering from similar challenges for their in raising interest for their own quality productions.

After lunch was Zakar Keshishian's rehearsal. The sound of the Duduk was a very different timbre from all the other sounds and it took a moment to find the right pitch. He plays a duet with Lithuanian violinist Ula Ulijona. And then there were a few European pieces. "The most Arabic sounding piece to me is the one by Pelecis," commented a member of the orchestra with an ironic smile.



Then Mustafa Said arrived to the Haydnsaal and played Vivaldi for the Mandolin but on the oriental instrument Oud. Gidon Kremer was very attentive and, in kind intervention, he would advise the orchestra to play more softly in order not to over-dominate the sounds of the Oud. Mustafa's take on Vivaldi's piece includes an improvisational solo in the Arabic style which had a totally different tempo and sound aesthetic than what the Baltic orchestra was used to. They held their breath in alertness, instruments ready, not knowing how long to allow for an Arabic cadenza. Mustafa Said laughed apologetically and said "I am sorry, this is very Arabic!" They responded heartily, "No, no, no apologies, it is music!" In the second run through Mustafa invited Mohammad Taha to come in the orchestra and add a few percussion accents, saying "the sound is too empty." The orchestra welcomed him on board and Mohammad was very pleased to have the opportunity to play with Mustafa. It was great to see fluid and spontaneous solutions arising – a genuine sense of collaboration and conviviality among everyone present.

Meanwhile, in a separate room, the chamber quartet had long hours of rehearsals backstage for "Dream She Is" with Joelle on piano and Fadia El-Hage doing vocals, Maria Fedotova on flute, Ruta Lipitaityte on violin, Ula Ulijona on viola and Giedre Dirvanauskyte on cello. While usually a small ensemble does not require a conductor, the complexity of this piece proved too challenging and Maestro Andris Veismanis was asked to conduct.

Troubleshooting for the day, Mahmoud Turkmani who should have arrived had missed his flight and the music notes for first violin in Ali Osman's piece did not match the rest of the score. Arrangements were made to issue Mahmoud another ticket and to coordinate with Ali about sending the correct scores. MAias also took the opportunity to follow up on the possibility of the Esterhazy Foundation inviting his Quartet. And finally, after a long day of rehearsing, Joelle, Fadia, Mustafa and Zakar stayed late into the evening practicing while MAias and Mohammad were feeling quite comfortable with their pieces and we went for a relaxed dinner.





More rehearsals on May 2nd. Things are starting to sound much better. Oussama Rifahi arrived from Salzburg where he had been participating at the Salzburg Global Seminars on "Cultural Diplomacy in the Digital Age," discussing the rise of social media and its impact on international cultural engagement. I mentioned to him how handy Skype came in for Zaid Jabri to give his feedback on rehearsal. We met with Maestro Gidon Kremer, cellist Giedre Dirvanuskaite and Kris Kucinkas over lunch and shared stories on different cultural collaborations. Maestro Gidon asked about philosopher Edward Said and we talked about the artists and intellectuals working for peace through music. Then we prepared for the panel at the University of Music in Vienna where we also met with British violinist and co-director of the Brunel Center for Middle Eastern Music Oliver Butterworth, Vienna-based Egyptian composer Amr Okba, and music journalist on Bavarian radio Thorston Preuss. Also speaking on the panel were MAias Alyamani, Joelle Khoury and Mustafa Said. The turn out, however, was very poor. The panel evolved into a casual discussion over beer at a nearby pub. I was given a crash course on new structures and designs in contemporary music, as Joelle explained to me the importance of Arnold Shroenberg and the School of Vienna in breaking open the boundaries of classical music. "Shoenberg decided to kill tonality just as Nietzsche declared the death of God" beginning a new era in music and philosophy.

May 2



May 3rd, the day of the concert, everyone is bright and rehearsing early. A Lithuanian sound engineering team had driven 12 hours overnight to arrive to Eisenstadt at 3:00 am,

May 3

coordinating with Kris on recording the concerts.

Also arriving that day was Libyan businessman and philanthropist Amr ben Halim who had recently joined the AFAC Circle of Friends. We enjoyed some Esterhazy wine tasting then headed for the concert, set to begin at 7:30 pm. Zaid Jabri was able to make it at the last minute in time to attend the performance.

The concert opened with "Havun Havun", a sacred hymn written by the medieval Armenian monk Gregor Von Narek and performed by world renowned cellist and winner of the prestigious International Tchaikovsky Competition Maestro Mario Brunello. Then Maestro Gidon Kremer played "Fratres", a heartbreaking piece, minimalist in style, written by contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Mustafa Said was then escorted to center stage by Mohammad Taha to perform his Arabized and improvisational rendition of Vivaldi on Oud. Zaid Jabri's haunting composition, the tense and slowly drawn out "Song Without Words", was performed with Maestro Andris Veismanis conducting, Eriks Kirsfelds on cello, Andrei Pushkarev and Mohammad Taha on percussion. Then came Joelle Khoury's "Variations on Imaginary Folk Dances" performed by Fadia El-Hage and the orchestra. The playful duet between Maestro Gidon Kremer and Andre Pushkarev ensued in Stevan Kovac Tickmayer's "East-West Soundscapes." Ali Osman's melodic refrain was fluid and sensual his "Fusion" of Oriental melody and percussion sounds. Zakar Kashishian's sorrowful duet with Ula Ulijona in "Ashug's Story" by Pelecis was soulful and sweet, touching the audience when they unexpectedly broke into improvisational song. The finale of the first day's concert were MAias Alyamani's catchy interpretations of oriental melodies, the easily enjoyable and moving "Sea Waves" and "Nahawanda Longa" with Maestro Gidon performing second fiddle next to MAias on center stage.



The next morning Zakar, Mustafa and Clara returned to Beirut and the remaining musicians continued their morning rehearsals as the upcoming performance was a challenging one. While there were ten compositions performed the night before, today's would

May 4

have three: Joelle Khoury's hour-long mono-opera "Dream She Is", Giovanni Sollima's "Spasimo" in four movements, and a short ensemble piece by Mahmoud Turkmani on Oud called "Black/White."

Meanwhile, Amr Ben Halim met with Oussama Rifahi and myself to discuss plans for the upcoming trip to Libya, scheduled in two weeks. AFAC regularly does field trips to various parts of the Arab world to reach out to art circles and cultural practitioners more directly and Amr was advising us on potential contacts. Also, arriving that evening to Eisenstadt to attend the concert were two of Amr's friends, Saudi residents of Vienna, Fuad Al-Zayer head of the OPEC research division and his wife Ibtisam. Over drinks we shared stories on cultural diplomacy as Ibtisam had helped launch a circle of Arab wives of diplomats in Austria aiming to communicate to their European host countries some of the traditions and values of Arab culture. Fuad and Amr also exchanged stories as fellow cyclists in the Cycle for Gaza marathon routes. Philanthropy and awareness-raising on Arab identity was a main theme, comparing the different cultural features in the Arab region and Europe, particularly the cultural merging that occurs through travel and education. Soon it was evening, and we headed again to the palace.

Joelle's opera was upon us, and I wondered if any of the audience members knew what they were in for. Musicians on stage, all in smoking black except for Joelle at the piano in a bright red dress, sat in solemn silence. Unexpectedly, the piece began with an electronic recording: discordant sounds, scattered voices, a woman's voice as if hallucinating in her sleep. Then Fadia and the musicians began the live performance, an intense journey in Arabic words, string instruments piano and flute. "Dream She Is" Joelle's music is merciless in delving into psychological states. Through anxiety, fear and desire, everything is questioned and the urge to be free recurs and recurs. After an arduous journey of inner turmoil, there is at last a moment of soothing calm, as soft as a lullaby... only to end with a final escalation, like a reminder of chaos always just around the corner.

The opera was intense; a break was welcome. We stepped out to the palace portico overlooking the orangeries while sipping Esterhazy wine and taking in the music's impact. "I've never heard such a performance before," said Ibtisam, "and we often go to concerts!" "It is a challenging piece," said Oussama, "contemporary music isn't about pleasing the crowd." I found the piece very feminine in the kinds of emotions it expressed and I wondered how men can relate to it.

The bell rang for the second part of the concert. "Spasimo", written by Palermo-born contemporary composer Giovanni



Sollima, is an innovative composition that merges the cultural legacies of the Mediterranean region. Performed by Maestro Mario Brunello on cello with the Kremerata Baltica and young Andrei Pushkarev on percussion, it also began with an electronic recording of a deep male voice describing a scene of enslaved men, speaking in Italian and in Arabic with seamless alternation. The energy was deep, with wave-like rhythms and unexpected rumbling finale. "If Joelle's piece was feminine, then this piece was definitely very masculine!" said Fuad. The final piece, "Black and White" composed and performed by Swiss-based Lebanese composer Mahmoud Turkmani, took on a more abstract approach to music with an atonal and minimalist style. Mahmoud's non-traditional Oud playing deconstructs boundaries and juxtaposes unexpected sounds together, allowing silence to break through.

The second day of concert was finished and a celebratory buffet of chocolate and wine awaited us behind the scenes. This was probably the high point of Arabic-Baltic interaction, as everyone was relaxed and relieved after the accomplishment of challenging musical pieces. Lukas Geniusas, the keyboard player, commented to Mahmoud Turkmani that he was not expecting such strong contemporary expression from Arabic composers breaking away from folklore and tradition. Mingling among the crowd was journalist Thorston Preuss who conducted several interviews with the musicians and with AFAC. CD's and book sales were also available for audiences on both days of the concerts. As we made our way back to our hotel, Maestro Andris Veismanis invited us all to an informal gathering in the lobby and a final farewell.



The next morning, discussions over coffee, fruit and yoghurt were relaxed. We exchanged feedback on the previous days' performances and hoped the audio recording would not need

May 5

too long to be ready. Fadia and Joelle wondered about the possibility of bringing

Maestro Gidon Kremer and the Kremerata Baltica to Beirut in a reciprocal gesture of collaboration. Looking back, it was a short and meaningful experiment in musical collaboration, whose high points and low can be remembered and built on for future collaborative projects.

written by Zena Takieddine



festival Esterházy

In Zusammenarbeit mit dem Arab Fund for Arts and Culture



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