

Composer and pianist Malek Jandali performs at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall.

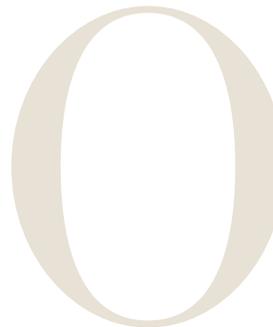


by Thomas May

A New East-West

Composers inspired by their Arabic, Turkish, and Iranian roots are enriching America's orchestral life.

Composer Mohammed Fairouz meets the Symphonic Choir of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra at an early rehearsal for his oratorio *Zabur*, which premiered on April 24.



On April 24, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and Symphonic Choir unveiled Mohammed Fairouz's ambitious new oratorio *Zabur*. The piece was commissioned by a consortium of performing arts groups, schools, universities, and houses of worship throughout Indianapolis. Taking its name from the Arabic title for the Psalms of David, *Zabur* was just one of an astonishing seven world premieres this season for the young Arab-American composer, a native of New York who spent time growing up in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the Gulf.

And that's not counting the regional first performances of other major Fairouz compositions: February saw a new production of the chamber opera *Su-meida's Song* at Pittsburgh Opera, while across the continent the Reno Philharmonic programmed his Violin Concerto. Not yet 30, Fairouz is working simultaneously on two large-scale opera commissions, as well as another orchestral work, *Pax Universalis*, to be premiered in October by California's Santa Rosa Symphony. With the recent release of his debut recording for Deutsche Grammophon, *Follow, Poet*—including the new song cycle *Audenesque* and *Sadat*, a ballet—he's the youngest composer in the label's history to release an entire album focused on his music.

Fairouz is one among a remarkable wave of composers working today in America whose music incorporates Middle Eastern idioms that up until very recently were routinely pigeonholed as "exotic." This wave includes such names as Fawzi Haimor, Mariam Adam, Mehmet Ali Sanlikol, Kinan Azmeh, Kareem Roustom, Karim Al-Zand, Malek Jandali, and Reza Vali—to mention just the figures discussed in this story. They encompass not only Arabic traditions but the intricate musical legacies of Turkey and Iran as well, representing the genuine diversity of approaches and commitments that interest these artists. Overall, these composers are subverting the clichés by which the Islamic world has so often been represented

in the Western canon—from the “janissary” military bands “alla Turca” in Mozart or in Beethoven’s Ninth to the enticing, luxurious “Orientalism” of Rimsky-Korsakov. According to the literary critic Edward Said’s formulation of the concept of Orientalism, the Western world’s colonialist objectification of (primarily) Arab peoples and cultures depicted the latter as not only different but inferior. These blinders, Said famously stated, reinforced the Western prejudice that “the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself.”

Far from simply offering an updated version of musical tourism—a 21st-century spicing of Western ingredients with “the Other”—Fairouz’s compositions, for example, integrate his Eastern and Western models into complex, original wholes. A profound understanding of and admiration for Bach, Schubert, and Britten underlies his incorporation of Arabic *maqamat* (modes) and their melody-centered, microtonal inflections.

“We can do wonderful things if we apply our collective effort and break down walls,” observes Fairouz. “That is what a renaissance is defined by: the breaking down of walls.”

And this trend isn’t happening only in the large pluricultural centers of New York and Los Angeles, as you might expect, but across the country.

Breaking Down Stereotypes

Merely being identified as an Arab-American composer in the post-9/11 world triggers expectations of a political dimension beyond whatever specific piece of music is being discussed. “There’s no doubt that we’re in a moment of vital transition between the so-called Arab world and Europe and the U.S.,” says Fairouz. “I think we need to work hard toward understanding one another and appreciating each other’s cultures. You have to dehumanize someone to be able to go to war with them, and that is almost impossible when you appreciate the others’s culture and poetry. It was dehumanizing of the Jews in Europe that enabled the Holocaust.”

Fairouz’s convictions about the power of art to subvert our worst destructive impuls-

es and enable reconciliation pervade such works as his Third and Fourth Symphonies. The Third (“Poems and Prayers”) sets the Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer often used when mourning, along with texts by modern Arabic and Israeli poets, while the Fourth draws inspiration from Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*, an anguished response to 9/11. “We need to turn down the volume on the matter of misunderstanding,” Fairouz emphasizes. “Music is a key to forging the bridge of understanding. I don’t mean in a *kumbaya* way, because it’s much more rigorous than that.”

Why, then, has it taken so long for these voices to emerge as a critical mass in the American music scene?

The 32-year-old Arab-

American conductor Fawzi Haimor points to reasons within Arabic culture itself: “Although our musical traditions date back for centuries, in the past 100 years or so, music was not necessarily embraced in the Middle East or in Middle

“Symphony orchestras understand that their programming needs to draw on the influences of how the world actually looks,” says composer Mohammed Fairouz.

POLYPHONY



Composer and musician Kinan Azmeh in performance with the Silk Road Ensemble, Royal Opera House Muscat, Oman

Eastern households. But now people in the Middle East and those who have moved to the West want to express themselves musically. I was Western-trained and grew up in an environment where I heard Arabic folk music, but at the same time was playing violin in Western orchestras.” Regarding the issue of music in Islamic theology, Haimor argues that the naysayers have it wrong: “I’m a Muslim musician and obviously believe music is compatible with the religion. The call to prayer itself is inherently musical in nature.”

Israel, by contrast, has had a robust infrastructure in place to promote the institutions of Western classical music since its founding. The Israel Philharmonic, after all, was founded in 1936 by the Polish-born Bronisław Huberman as the Palestine Symphony Orchestra, and Leonard Bernstein maintained a lifelong commitment to the ensemble starting in 1947. There has been a tradition of touring to the U.S., with advocacy of contemporary Israeli composers like Shulamit Ran and Avner Dorner.

The gatekeepers of what we call classical music are realizing that “we need to debunk the perception that it’s an elitist art form,” Fairouz remarks. “But we have a long way to go before the concert hall becomes a truly inclusive place. Symphony orchestras understand that their programming needs to draw on the influences of how the world actually looks.”

Among the ensembles determined to do that is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra,

Fawzi Haimor, seen here conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra during a free community concert in November 2013, recently completed a three-year tenure as the orchestra’s resident conductor.



which has commissioned a new concerto from Fairouz for the Israeli-born American cellist Maya Beiser. Erik Rönmark, the DSO’s general manager and artistic administrator, observes that the fusion of Western forms and orchestral sonorities with influences indigenous to non-Western or non-mainstream cultures “is not a new concept. Bartók used folk music influences. But the Arabic part of the world has not often been represented in a way that doesn’t make it into an ‘exotic’ other. Like any composer,” continues Rönmark, “Mohammed draws on his experiences, but being as talented as he is, he’s able to create something interesting and unique from this. He writes in what we refer to as Western form, for symphony orchestra, but he’s melding two separate traditions in a way that asks questions and stimulates dialogue. Orchestras are trying to find points for people to relate to music today.”

Pierre Ruhe, director of artistic planning for the Alabama Symphony Orchestra—which premiered Fairouz’s Violin Concerto (titled *Al-Andalus*) last year to acclaim—says that while Fairouz’s Arab heritage is a significant influence, it shouldn’t pigeonhole him. “He has so much depth as a person, and such an enormous range of technical skills as a composer—you hear it all in his music,” Ruhe says. “He’s trying to say serious things, but he’s doing it with freshness and simplicity. Part of what makes Fairouz’s voice so compelling is how he uses folk elements in his music, often in a raw or unstylized way. He’s not removing it from a meaningful context. In his Violin Concerto, the result was both timeless and hip, which is surely a great path for a classical composer to follow.”

A Surge in New Voices

Another busy, in-demand composer, the Syrian-born, U.S.-based Kareem Roustom, came into the international spotlight last summer when Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra—the pathbreaking youth ensemble comprising Israeli, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern musicians—took his work *Ramal* on tour. Currently Roustom is working on a commission shared by the

Michigan Philharmonic and the Michigan-based National Arab Orchestra that will combine the Western orchestra with the *takbt* (the chamber ensemble of Arabic music). The world premiere will take place in September with Michigan Philharmonic Music Director Nan Washburn conducting. “One of our brands is to present music that introduces our audiences to new cultures,” explains Beth Stewart, the orchestra’s executive director. “For our collaboration with the National Arab Orchestra, we wanted a piece that would combine both ensembles. We did a lot of research and chose Kareem because the orchestra loved his music. It has just what we were looking for: a lot of Middle Eastern flavor while still being very classical in format. For this project, he’s using the *concerto grosso* model to create a dialogue between the two cultures.”

“I’m anticipating that in the next decade or two, we will see a surge in musicians from the Arab world—and in the classical music scene in particular,” says Haimor, who has just completed a three-year tenure as resident conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Born in Chicago of Lebanese heritage and raised in the Middle East and in the San Francisco Bay Area, Haimor has emerged as a persuasive champion of composers like Fairouz and Roustom—composers who, through their Arabic cultural background, are contributing to the American new-music scene.

“As one of the few Arab-American conductors out there,” Haimor continues, “one thing I hope to do as I build my career is to educate the Middle Eastern world about these talented Arab-American composers and artists who are expressing themselves through music and giving a voice to their culture. What’s so great about someone like Momo’s [Fairouz] success is that he under-

As to why there are not more Arab-American women composers, Imani Winds clarinetist Mariam Adam says that “over the next decade there will be more women graduating with the degrees and competition accolades needed to launch a composing career.”



stands how to bring music from that region to the Western world in a way that's accessible for Western-trained audiences and orchestras."

Regarding current composers whose works straddle cultures, clarinetist Mariam Adam remarks, "A good comparison would be to Villa-Lobos and Astor Piazzolla, who went to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Her message was to write within your heart, to write what is native to you. In that way it becomes profound. If she hadn't said that to so many composers, we wouldn't have many great gems from the past century."

A native of Monterey, California, and from a mixed Lebanese-Mexican background herself, Adam is clarinetist of the Imani Winds chamber ensemble, a solo performer, and the cofounder of the AdZel Duo with fellow clarinetist Stephanie Zelnick. In 2011 AdZel commissioned a piece from Fairouz called *Adzel*. "I encouraged him to write more in the chamber-music arena since he was doing lots of vocal writing at the time," Adam explains. "It worked beautifully."

As to why there are not more female Arab-American composers, Adam points out that "in general, in the cultures we're speaking about in the Middle East, women will more likely grow up making music as singers and storytellers than as instrumentalists. It also has to do with the female role in the household, which allows less room to pursue that kind of career path. Everything comes at its own time through exposure, and this trend is still very new. Many of these musicians come from families of immigrant parents who are concerned about their children being able to make a living. Musicians are highly revered, but there's still pressure to become a doctor or lawyer or merchant. Unlike, say, in Korean families, where girls are encouraged to go to the conservatory, there aren't many role models. And there's a barrier when women consider having a family: if there are two musician parents, the woman will usually end up making the career sacrifice and defer to the husband."

Nonetheless, Adam has "no doubt over the next decade there will be more women graduating with the degrees and competition accolades needed to launch a composing career. Someone like Simon Shaheen [a prominent Palestinian-American *oud* and violin virtuoso and composer] has been making sure there are more female

Composer Kareem Roustom (near right) takes a bow following the premiere of his *Ramal* by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra led by Daniel Barenboim (right) at the 2014 Salzburg Festival.



musicians at the Arabic Music Retreat he holds every summer [at Mount Holyoke College]."

Female musicians drawing on their Middle Eastern heritage are "no longer the exotic dish on the menu," Adam notes. "Their music doesn't have to be presented as a meal of hummus but as the meat and potatoes. What I see happening in the concert hall translates into the chamber music scene and affects the climate of what gets programmed there as well."

Living in the U.S.A.

Haimor's prediction about an influx of new Middle East-inspired voices already seems to be coming true: not just for American-based composers who draw on their Arabic cultural background, but for those with roots in other Islamic cultures of the Middle East, especially Turkey and Iran.

The past year brought breakthroughs for Mehmet Ali Sanlıkol, who moved from Istanbul to settle in the Boston area two decades ago. Sanlıkol is on the faculties of Emerson College and the College of the Holy Cross and leads a multifaceted musical life as a composer, jazz pianist, scholar, and director of the DÜNYA ensemble (a musicians' collective that presents Turkish music with other world-music traditions). His piece *Vecd* was commissioned by the Boston-based string ensemble A Far Cry and included on its recording *Dreams and Prayers*, a finalist in the chamber music category of this year's Grammy Awards. Sanlıkol's recording of jazz compositions, *Whatsnext*, was included in the top Critics

Choice list for 2014 by *Jazziz* magazine. Next year includes the premiere at Carnegie Hall of a commission from the American Composers Orchestra.

This attention comes more than a decade since Sanlıkol attracted notice for his cantata *Ergenekon: An Ancient Turkish Legend*, premiered by the PALS Children's Chorus in Boston in 2002. Yet for all the favorable reception, Sanlıkol didn't see the "classical" side of his composing career take off—nor did he feel he had sufficiently absorbed the Turkish elements. He points out, somewhat ironically, that his understanding of his Turkish musical roots was limited when he resettled in the U.S. (His Turkish-Cypriot mother had taught him Western piano.) "I was a bit of an 'Orientalist' when I started out!" he jokes.

"It was almost as if I were a native speaker who had no idea of the grammar of my native language." Sanlıkol disappeared from composing and jazz for seven years to study Middle Eastern music intensively—and then "slowly I started coming back. I'm confident that the long stretch of Turkish music study really contributes to a genuine

voice in my case, to internalizing the language."

That immersion sharpened the urge to compose for Sanlıkol, who is known for his subtle incorporation of the large-scale rhythmic cycles of Turkish music, along with its modes and instrumental timbres. "I had so much stored up inside me—a lot of musical potential that was wanting to speak," he says. His piece *Vecd* "refers to a state of ecstasy among Sufi dervishes," the composer explains, "and uses the mostly rhythmical

Contemporary composers with Middle Eastern backgrounds are subverting the clichés by which the Islamic world has so often been represented in the Western musical canon.



Tarek Al-Zand

Karim Al-Zand, a Canadian-American, part-Iraqi composer whose *City Scenes* was performed by the Houston Symphony at the beginning of this season, alongside works by Copland and Barber.

ostinatos and structures of Sufism in Turkish culture to create a contemporary composition.” The Sufi tradition ideally suited A Far Cry’s *Dreams and Prayers* CD project: *Vecd* is the Islamic counterpart to the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions represented by Osvaldo Golijov and Hildegard of Bingen.

The Syrian-American pianist and composer Malek Jandali is another musician who says that living in the U.S. helped him rediscover his native musical roots. Raised in Homs—the city now largely devastated by Bashar al-Assad’s bombing campaign in Syria’s ongoing civil war—Jandali states that his training at the Arab Institute of Music in Damascus largely ignored the country’s own treasures and placed so much stress on rote memory work that he came away with only a superficial understanding of Western musical forms. A scholarship to continue piano studies in North Carolina in the mid-1990s initiated Jandali’s path toward a deeper appreciation of how music works and ignited a desire to change his focus to composition. His *Echoes from Ugarit* for piano and orchestra fuses this ambition with a newfound interest in Syria’s heritage by reanimating a hymn melody recovered from an ancient clay tablet fragment. Jandali plays the solo piano part on the recording he has made with the Russian Philharmonic.

Jandali writes in a largely neo-Romantic style. So far he has not gained the interest of many American orchestras, but he’s cultivating a robust online following. Jandali has had his compositions recorded by metro Atlanta’s Ludwig Symphony Orchestra and

by Russian- and London-based ensembles, releasing them directly on CD—such as his recent *Syrian Symphony*, which was recorded by London’s Royal Philharmonic.

Now based in Atlanta, Jandali is an outspoken critic of the Assad regime. “Prior to all the oppression that came with the current dictatorship,” he says, “there was a real tradition, which is now in danger of being forgotten. For example, there were some amazing composers writing complex music in Syria in the nineteenth century.” A central part of Jandali’s message as a composer is that of the activist humanitarian: “The meaning of *sym-phony* is literally to bring voices together in song, and that’s what I decided I need to do for the children of Syria.”

Escaping the Niche

Syria is also the country of origin of Kinan Azmeh, a composer, solo clarinetist, and member of the Silk Road Ensemble. Established in 2000 by Yo-Yo Ma as a collective of composers and performers who represent global musical traditions—and with a focus on those traditions found along the trade routes of the legendary Silk Road—the SRE puts a new spin on the “world music” genre. When not on tour, the Juilliard-trained Azmeh is based in New York. “There used to be two niches for presenting works by composers from Arabic cultures,” he says. “One was as an ‘exotic’ concept, and the other has been to juxtapose Arab and Israeli composers, like in Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. But in the last few years, Western orchestras have started realizing there are composers of substance who have a real voice and deserve to be programmed on their own terms.”

A 2013 commission from the Osnabrück Symphony in Germany resulted in his *Ibn Arabi Suite*, an orchestral work inspired by the medieval Sufi mystic and philosopher. “Now there is more genuine interest in the sounds that these composers are bringing into the concert hall,” Azmeh says. He adds that the confusion over terminology—the lack of an all-purpose phrase to en-

compass composers from “Middle Eastern” backgrounds—points to the absurdity of attempting to lump widely divergent creative voices together. “When you think of a composer from ‘the Arab world,’ this person might be drawing influences from Kurdish or Armenian traditions or might be inspired by Islamic theology,” Azmeh points out. “There’s so much variety, even when it comes to Syrian composers. I started doing my dissertation with the idea that I’d write about contemporary composers in the Middle East, but I discovered the topic is so vast I had to narrow it down.

“Now there is a bigger wave of performers who are of Arab descent,” Azmeh says. “They feel the need to support each other, and might mention an Arab composer who would have been overlooked in the past.” Mehmet Ali Sanlıkol recalls that when he moved to Boston in the 1990s, “there were maybe one or two other Turkish students at the conservatories. Now there must be at least 100 Turks and Arabs. The number of composers has been increasing dramatically.”



Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra Archives

Right: Composer Reza Vali. Above: The Alex Theater (Glendale, California) in 2007, when the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra performed Vali’s *Toward That Endless Plain*, a concerto for Persian ney and orchestra co-commissioned with Boston Modern Orchestra Project.

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra Archives





Tim Skoog

Composer Mehmet Ali Sanlikol has written for Western orchestra, world-music ensembles, and jazz groups. Above, he leads a 17-piece jazz orchestra.

According to Reza Vali, a composer and professor of composition at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie-Mellon School of Music, “There is no one answer to the recent emergence of these composers on the American scene, because the issues are too complex.” As a composer, Vali draws on the traditions of his native Iran. “Persian music poses special challenges, since it involves a combination of two systems—folk music and Persian traditional music—and in this way differs from Turkish and Arabic musical tradition,” he says. “This can be very challenging for West-

ern orchestras, and so I’ve had to find a way to answer this challenge.”

Vali’s *Toward that Endless Plain*, a concerto for *ney* (Persian reed flute) commissioned by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, has been widely performed, and led to recent projects with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and even to the invention of a “microtonal trumpet” for Neal Brentsen, who will premiere a new concerto for that instrument this summer at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina. The interaction of Persian musical ideas with Western orchestras has shaped Vali’s evolution as a composer. “Since about 2000 I stopped basing my work on the European system of equal temperament and Western forms and turned to the dual Persian system,” he says. “This is one of the most complex and advanced systems in the world, with its own tuning, form, and aesthetics. It satisfies my aesthetic to be more adventurous.”

Not everyone is willing to make the effort to emerge from their comfort zone—even if the effort is no more burdensome than letting down the armament of stereotypes that

seem, if anything, to be making a resurgence. When Yahoo published a short profile of Mohammed Fairouz in February (“Rising Arab American composer seeks more poetic era”), an online commenter responded by telling Fairouz to “feel free to go back home.” Fairouz was born in New York City. Such knee-jerk bigotry likely didn’t come from someone interested in new musical developments.

For his part, Fairouz expresses an optimistic outlook that audiences are by nature curious and want to encounter more than the familiar stories. “The whole idea behind the symphony is polyphony and counterpoint: bringing many voices together to make music. The qualification is that you always program music on the basis of merit, never only to diversify for its own sake, in a tokenistic way,” he says. “That’s the wrong way to approach pluralism. But I do think that the face of music needs to more adequately represent the face of human existence, of life and the world.” **S**

THOMAS MAY is an internationally published essayist and arts writer. He blogs at memeteria.com.

INDIANAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA | SYMPHONIC POPS CONSORTIUM

NOW BOOKING FOR THE 15/16 SEASON!



BROADWAY DIVAS

Broadway leading ladies deliver a show stopping performance of songs from *Wicked*, *Chicago*, *Dream Girls*, *Cabaret*, *The Sound of Music* and more.



CLASSIC FM

Five Decades of radio staples in one concert including: Graceland, I Will Survive, Happy, Can’t Buy Me Love, Tiny Dancer, Sweet Caroline and others.



www.PeterThrom.com | 734.222.8030 (office) | 734.277.1008 (mobile)
peterthrom@me.com | 2040 Tibbitts Court, Ann Arbor, MI 48105