

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 11 April 2023
7.30pm

Arabæesque

Marouan Benabdallah piano

Salim Dada (b.1975)

From *Miniatures Algériennes* (2009)
Aurore de Djurdjura • Danse Zaydan

Dia Succari (1938-2010)

Samah from *Suite Syrienne* (1965)

Danse de Leila (pub. 2008)

Amer Ali (b.1990)

Tableau (2012)

Zad Moultaqa (b.1967)

From *Zàrani* (2002)

Laha Badrou I-tim • Naes maleh el tarf • Badrou Hosnen

Interval

Mohammed Fairouz (b.1985)

From *El Male Rachamim* (2013)

God, full of mercy • I, who pluck flowers from the hilltop •
I, who brought corpses from the mountains

Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984)

From *5 Pieces for piano* Op. 34 (1943)

Pastorale • Canzonetta • Toccata

Nabil Benabdeljalil (b.1972)

Raqa (2016)

Nocturne No. 1 (1992)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Africa Op. 89 (1891) *arranged by Marouan Benabdallah*

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In September 2014, after several failed attempts to find Arab composers of classical music, I managed to use just the right keywords in my search. This stroke of luck enabled me to discover a musical 'treasure chest' filled with countless gems of a repertoire completely unknown to me at the time. Even though I was born in Morocco to a Moroccan father, I was raised, from the start, in the musical traditions of my Hungarian mother.

What began as a short-term, three-to-four-year detour from the standard classical repertoire turned into a major focus in my life as a concert pianist. Today, the 'Arabæesque Project' counts more than 120 composers in a repertoire of solo, chamber and symphonic music.

Apart from a small group of late 19th-century composers in the first generation, these authors are, in the main, from the 20th Century. They all have different backgrounds, and most were trained in European or American conservatories. Nonetheless, we can distinguish five compositional trends:

- Music based on Arab folklore
- Music with Arab-Oriental character
- Music based on both Eastern and Western traditions
- Western-style music with an Oriental flavour
- Music that is strictly Western, offering no clue as to the origin of its author

For this debut concert at Wigmore Hall, I opted for a diverse programme of shorter pieces by select composers, as a kind of musical 'Menu dégustation'.

Salim Dada was born in Laghouat, Algeria in 1975, and trained in Turin and Paris. He is an exceptionally meticulous composer with a preoccupation with the tiniest detail and a precise idea of how his music should be played. *Algerian Miniatures*, composed in November 2009, is a cycle of five pieces for solo piano in which he combines socio-cultural elements with landscapes of his native country. In *Aurore de Djurdjura*, Dada evokes 'Ashwîq', the plaintive song of the Kabyle (Berber) women, tearfully chanted *a cappella*, mourning the husband, son or brother who went into exile or joined the war. The festive *Danse Zaydan*, on the other hand, joyously calls to mind long musical evenings in the Constantine region.

A native of Aleppo, Syria, **Dia Succari** moved at the age of 13 to France, where he studied composition with Olivier Messiaen. His music is unique and easily recognisable: it is a blend of Oriental melodic and rhythmic patterns combined with French Impressionist harmonic effects and textures. What results is truly fascinating, as *Samah* ('Pardon') and *Danse de Leïla* demonstrate perfectly. The former is based on the love song 'Lamma Bada Yatathanna' which dates back to Andalusia sometime between the 11th and 14th centuries and is still extremely popular in Arab culture.

Based in Rojava, Syrian Kurdish composer **Amer Ali** was born in 1990. His music focuses on extremes of density, and displays the potential energy of the performers by considering physiological anatomy as an essential element in the composition process. Astonishingly, he is completely self-taught and has

never studied abroad. Still, there is a strong influence of Ravel in *Tableau*, composed in 2012 as a musical depiction of *Mem û Zîn*, the Kurdish *Romeo and Juliet*.

Zad Moutaka sees composing as a space for questioning. He was born in Lebanon in 1967 and trained at the Paris Conservatoire with Pierre Sancan and Aldo Ciccolini. At the age of 26, Moutaka chose to forgo his international career as a pianist to devote himself entirely to composition. Trained in the rigour of Western musical writing while intrinsically linked to his Arab roots and to music of an oral tradition, his music exemplifies duality and fusion of genres, mixing Western and Arab instruments, and combining Western contemporary writing and Eastern specificities. He composed *Zârani*, a cycle of muwashshahs, a form of rhythmic poetry set to music which first appeared in 11th-century Andalusia. In this cycle, three muwashshahs are for solo piano, allowing the singer and the other instrumentalists to rest.

Both Emirati-Egyptian **Mohammed Fairouz** (born in 1985) and Israeli **Paul Ben-Haim** (1897-1984) composed a cycle of five movements. In the case of Fairouz, *El Male Rachamim* ('God, full of compassion'), a moving Jewish prayer, was meant to memorialise his master, composer György Ligeti. Fairouz is an artist involved with major social issues, and a strong advocate for peace between Jews and Arabs; in art and in life, he seeks to promote cultural communication and understanding. Ben-Haim's association with the famous Yemenite Jewish folk singer Bracha Zefira had a fortuitous influence on the development of his own musical language. Her Yemenite, Bukharian, Persian, Arabic and Ladino repertoires are apparent in much of Ben-Haim's oeuvre, including his *5 Pieces for piano* Op. 34. I chose three movements from each, starting with a slow, contemplative first, followed by a more lyrical, flowing second and ending with a *perpetuum mobile* or toccata-like third.

'Sincerity, power of emotion, purification and demystification of musical language: intellectual complexity could not have value in itself, if it is not to serve the expression.' These words by Moroccan-born **Nabil Benabdeljalil** perfectly reflect his musical approach. The Nocturne No. 1 was his very first composition, a simple yet charming piece that combines Chopinesque lyricism with Andalusian melodic elements. *Raqsa* ('Dance') is more recent, written in 2016, and based on the popular Arabic song 'Ma Ladda Li'.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) divided his time between music and travel. Indeed, for health reasons, he regularly traveled to warm countries for much of the year. He discovered Algeria in 1873 and Egypt in 1891, and often stayed in both thereafter. His frequent visits to the banks of the Nile in Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor and Ismailia were sources of inspiration for works including *Africa* Op. 89, *Souvenir d'Ismailia* Op. 100, the Fifth Piano Concerto Op. 103 'Egyptian' and various *mélodies*.

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