

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 September 2024
1.00pm

Arabæscue II

Marouan Benabdallah piano

Gamal Abdel-Rahim (1924-1988)

Lament and Conflict (1974)

Abdelhak Masri (1950-2007)

Nocturne (1981)

Prelude No. 3 (1979)

Anis Fuleihan (1900-1970)

Cypriana (c.1943)

*The Girl from Paphos • Syrtós • Kyrenia •
Serenade • Café dancer*

Enrique Granados (1867-1916)

*From 12 danzas españolas (c.1883-90)
Galante • Orientale*

Nabil Benabdelljalil (b.1972)

Nocturne No. 1 (1992)

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Jerez from *Iberia (Book 4)* (1908)

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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. Although 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 'Arabæsqe Project' counts more than 130 composers in a repertoire of solo, chamber and symphonic music.

Apart from a few late-19th-century composers, most are from the 20th Century. They have varied backgrounds, with many trained in European or American conservatories. Nonetheless, we can distinguish compositional trends: music based on Arab folklore; music with an Arab-Oriental character; Western-style music with an Oriental flavour; strictly Western music with no apparent cultural hints. For this second **Arabæsqe** concert at Wigmore Hall, we are continuing the exploration with a strong focus on the Spanish connection.

Gamal Abdel-Rahim (1924-88) is recognised as a pioneering Egyptian composer whose works bridge traditional Egyptian and Western classical music. *Lament and Conflict*, considered one of his most original contributions, exemplifies this synthesis. The piece is rooted in the Egyptian 'Maqam Saba', a mode associated with grief and sorrow. Abdel-Rahim's use of this mode, characterised by its diminished fourth interval and descending melodic lines, creates an evocative atmosphere that reflects the emotional resonance of the piece.

Abdel-Rahim's work reflects a profound engagement with both his Egyptian heritage and his Western musical education. He sought to innovate beyond the harmonic approaches of earlier Egyptian composers by integrating polyphony into the traditionally monodic character of Arab music. His approach, which he described as 'Eastern, Arabic modal polyphony', allowed him to create a unique musical language that remains deeply connected to his cultural roots while embracing modern compositional techniques.

Following the intense music of Gamal Abdel-Rahim, we turn to Lebanese composer **Abdelhak Masri**, whose works offer a reflective contrast. Born in 1950 in Tripoli, Lebanon, Masri studied in France, graduating from the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris under Tony Aubin. He returned to Lebanon in 1982 to found the Conservatory of Music in Tripoli. Masri's compositions are rooted in the French tradition, influenced by Charles Koechlin, whose *Traité de l'orchestration* was a guiding text for him. His music often draws on personal inspirations, particularly the nurturing presence of his mother and the varying shades of sunlight, themes evident in the two pieces presented in this concert. Lebanese-American composer **Anis Fuleihan** (1900-70) developed a distinctive musical style that synthesises various cultural influences. Born in Kyrenia, Cyprus, he was immersed in a rich blend of Greek, Turkish, Byzantine, Jewish and Arabic music. His compositions reflect these

diverse influences through a cohesive Levantine style. His suite *Cypriana* is one of the few works where he directly references Cyprus. The suite's pieces, while not strictly adhering to Baroque dance forms, are unified by thematic and rhythmic material that evokes a bucolic, festive atmosphere. *The Girl from Paphos* draws on the Paphitike *phoni*, a traditional melody from Cyprus, with the pithkiavli's (a Cypriot flute) pastoral qualities echoed in the piano's sweeping runs and trills. *Syrtós* captures the energy of a traditional Greek dance in 7/8 metre, with cross-rhythms and virtuosic flourishes. *Kyrenia*, named after Fuleihan's hometown, offers a serene contrast with a chant-like melody that evokes Byzantine liturgical music. The piece's rhythmic stasis, likened to the gentle movement of a boat at anchor, enhances its tranquil atmosphere. *Serenade* shifts towards Spanish music, drawing on the Andalusian *cante jondo* and linking Fuleihan's Levantine roots to Spanish traditions. Finally, *Café dancer*, described as a *jota*, closes the suite with a lively Spanish dance characterised by complex rhythms and a vibrant energy.

Enrique Granados (1867-1916) masterfully blended European classical traditions with Spanish folk elements. His *12 Spanish Dances* Op. 37, probably composed between 1883 and 1900, are pivotal in Spanish nationalist piano music. Known for their lyrical expressiveness and rhythmic diversity, these dances are composed in a ternary (A-B-A) form and draw heavily on Spanish folk traditions. *Galante* is a vibrant bolero in G major, dedicated to Granados's wife. It features a lively allegro and a more introspective middle section, capturing the charm of the Spanish salon style. *Oriente*, in C minor, showcases Granados's emotive depth. Its slow, ornamented theme beautifully complements Moroccan composer **Nabil Benabdelljalil's** *Nocturne No. 1*. Though inspired by Chopin, Benabdelljalil's nocturne integrates Andalusian melismas and Arab ornamentation, echoing the melancholic style of *cante jondo*. Born in Morocco in 1972 and trained in Kyiv and Strasbourg, Benabdelljalil bridges diverse musical traditions.

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) composed his influential suite *Iberia* between 1905 and 1908, reflecting his deep connection to Andalusia. The suite frequently references Andalusian locales, with *Jerez* [de la Frontera] drawing on *cante jondo* traditions. Its opening theme, styled after 'Soleares', a traditional flamenco form, features a descending melodic pattern in the Phrygian mode combined with A minor, creating a distinctive sense of tension and melancholy.

Andalusia, with its history of Arab rule from 711 to 1492, reflects a rich blend of cultural influences. Although specific Arabic tunes may not have survived, the modal scales, melismatic singing and emotional depth of Andalusian music retain this heritage. The interplay between Andalusian and Moorish music highlights the complex cultural exchanges that have shaped the music of both regions. The works of Albéniz, Granados and Benabdelljalil reflect these rich intersections, blending folk traditions with classical sophistication to create music of enduring appeal.

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