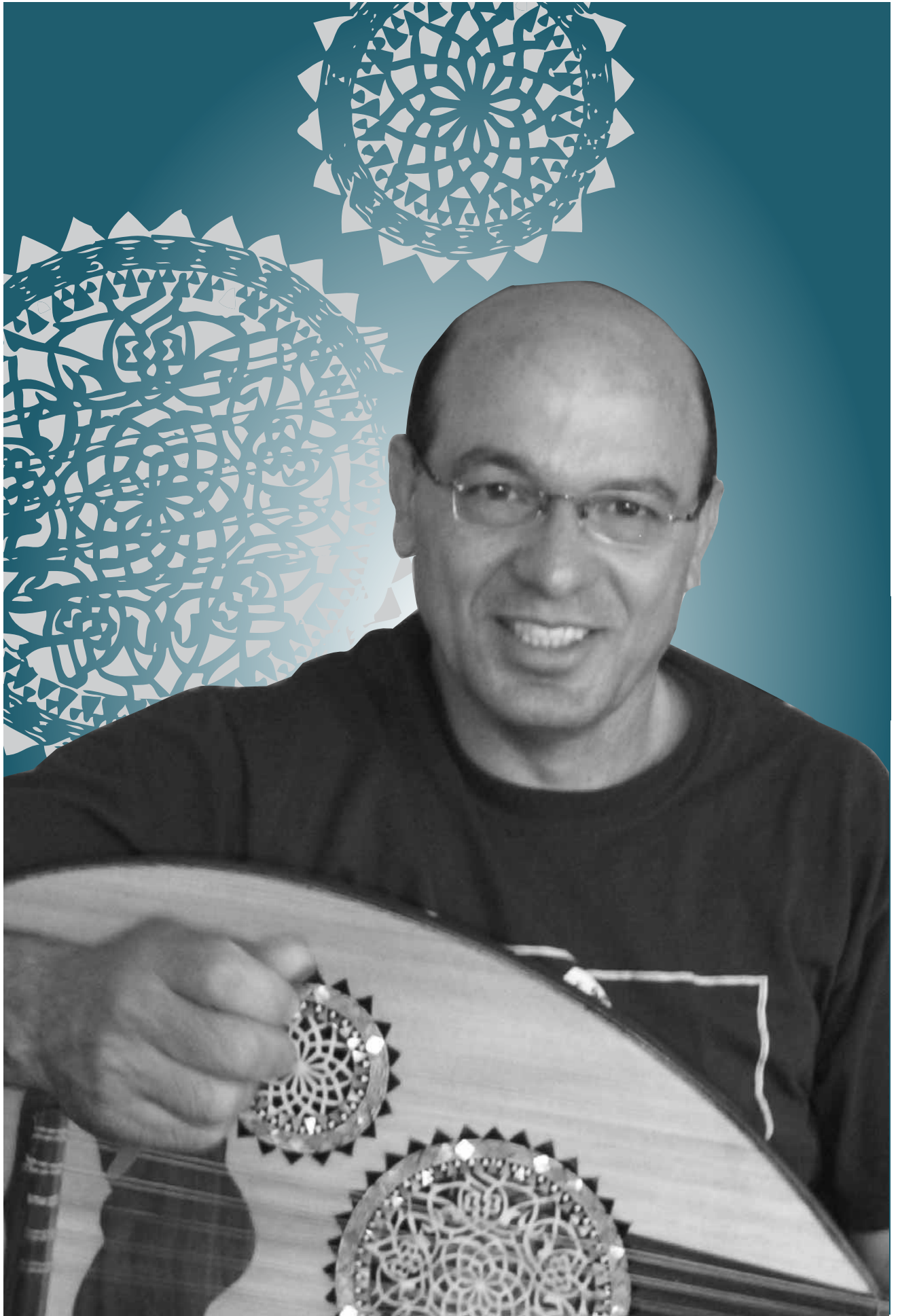


>artist*profile<



*Adeeb Refela.
Photo:
Elizabeth Sayre*

by Elizabeth Sayre

Adeeb Refela:

“The freedom to feel whatever you feel”

ADEEB REFELA IS AN 'UD (OUD) PLAYER AND violinist from Cairo, Egypt, resident in Philadelphia since 2003. Understanding his musical world means crossing wide spans of time and space. One of his two specialties, the 'ud, is a short-necked, pear-shaped, fretless lute; it dates from the seventh century.¹ Some of the melodies and types of pieces he plays on it are more than a thousand years old. His other instrument, the violin, was introduced into Egypt and other Arab areas in the late nineteenth century during the British colonial period.² Most importantly, Refela grew up in a dynamic, urban environment. Cairo is a regional cultural capital, where musicians continually adapt older genres and incorporate new ideas into their work. Including old and diverse roots, representing complex and cosmopolitan understandings, his music is very much born out of the moment in which it is played. Virtuoso melodic and rhythmic improvisations are characteristic of Arab music.

Of his family, early life, and first experiences with music, Refela says:

“I was born on the 22nd of December, 1957, in Cairo. My father was in the military. He had artistic inclinations. My mother, too. My mother was a housewife, and she used to sing as she was doing anything, washing dishes, or whatever. She sounded good. I have nine siblings; I'm number eight.

[They all have] musical inclinations—they love music so much! My younger brother, he's a singer. He started after me. He's a singer in Egypt, and he has some albums. His name is Ameen Samy.

I was introduced to music by my [older] brother

buying a guitar. By the age of 16, I had figured out how to play. I didn't know how to tune it at that time, and I asked one of my friends, he was a musician, how to tune it, and I got it very quickly. And I practiced. After that I played the 'ud. The 'ud is the national instrument in our country. I used to listen to it on the radio; I used to like it very much. So I decided to try it. When I started, I used to go to some friends in the music field. They encouraged me; that's why I kept going. Otherwise, I would have stopped. I was stuck in the second year of college for three years. I didn't finish because I was distracted by music too much, because I love it! Whoever goes on in this field has too much struggle with the culture and everything...and with their parents. If it wasn't for love, they wouldn't go on.”

Growing up, he heard records, radio, and TV broadcasts, and quickly developed an interest in instrumental music:

“I used to know songs, but not the lyrics. I don't know why. The music was more interesting to me than the lyrics. Sometimes the lyrics didn't mean anything to me. That's what I thought when I was young. The composer of music is deriving the feeling from somewhere else, not writing to the lyrics, anyhow. That's all over the globe. They derive the feeling, or the picture of unity of the composition, from somewhere else. So the lyric is something to fill in.”

Nonetheless, one of his major inspirations was a vocalist who reinvented art song in the Middle East and who drew much of her authority from childhood

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Adeeb Refela
and his oud
(details).
Photos:
Elizabeth Sayre

training in Qur'anic recitation (an important verbal/vocal genre governed by very specific rules of pronunciation):



"I used to listen to Umm Kulthum. She's legendary. She had fans from all over the Arabian countries, even the Turkish people, even in Persia, Iran. She passed away in 1975. So I didn't have the chance to... I was too young to go to concerts, you know? My favorite composer's name is [Muhammad] 'Abd al-Wahhab."

It would be hard to overestimate the cultural impact of Umm Kulthum, "unquestionably the most famous singer in the twentieth-century Arab world."³ She and singer-composer 'Abd al-Wahhab were of the same generation, born in the early 20th century, and were media stars, direct competitors, and eventually collaborators in the 1960s and 1970s. In some ways they represented opposing trends in Egyptian music. 'Abd al-Wahhab was known as a modernizer who borrowed from Western styles in his compositions, while Umm Kulthum, always a savvy judge of her audience as well as a spectacular performer, positioned herself as an authentically Egyptian traditionalist.⁴

Both Umm Kulthum and 'Abd al-Wahhab lived at a time when Egyptian music, particularly music performed in highly visible public venues or broadcasts, was undergoing a transition in the uses of Western-style staff notation. Until the mid-twentieth

century, many great Egyptian performers had little use for Western musical notation.⁵ Umm Kulthum, for example, was famous for teaching new pieces to her accompanists by rote—that is, by ear, through repetition. Although many musicians trained in Western classical music develop a bias that elevates the ability to read music over aural skills, musicians who play in other styles recognize the advantages of learning by ear. Refela comments about his own process as a student:

"I started by ear. Actually... if you want to learn music, and get the best out of yourself, the logical way is to learn by ear, because it's like language. We spoke before [we] invented written language. You get the feeling and you get the ideas. Anyway, I started by ear, but afterward I taught myself how to read and write by reading method books. By reading, and asking somebody if it's right or wrong, some musician. It was too much work, but it's more engrained in my brain than [if I had been] led by somebody."

In Egypt in the mid-twentieth century, highly visible professional ensembles became more and more used to playing from written scores, which also meant that the sound of instrumental ensembles became increasingly uniform and less heterophonic.⁶ This change, in part due to the creation of music conservatories with fixed curricula and the resulting standardization of repertoires and styles, also meant that educated musicians had to be increasingly literate, in addition to aurally skilled, in order to manage both traditional and Western-influenced musical jobs.

While in college, Refela made an important connection with a brilliant Cairo musician who exemplified the aural and improvisational skills necessary to play Arab music well. Abdo Dagher (b. 1936) did not read or write music or

any language, yet he is famous and widely admired for his brilliantly structured compositions (many of which have been transcribed by admiring students). At Dagher's salon-like gatherings, Refela learned these pieces, as well as more about the art of creating melody.

In 1976, Refela began performing in public, and in the early 1980s he moved to the United States, joining family members in California. Early on, he experienced the typical mishaps of negotiating a new environment in a foreign language:

"I had difficulty when I came first to America. I lost my luggage, and I had to deal with a worker in the airport. It was difficult for me to describe. I told her, 'I lost my bags.' She asked me, 'Your luggage?' I didn't know what the hell is 'luggage.' I thought she was talking about something else. But, anyway, they sent me the luggage on the second day. I was successful in giving them the address."

Working many different kinds of day jobs, for more than six years he played three nights a week in nightclubs and other venues in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. In 1988, in order to comply with U.S. immigration rules, Refela returned to Egypt.

In the early 1990s, two opportunities arose that were important for his music career. The first, in 1993, was an international 'ud competition in Cairo; his sister read about it in the newspaper and suggested that he enter. Refela won second place (but, he notes, the first-place winner told him he should have won). Second, and just a few weeks after the 'ud competition, he joined the National Ensemble for Arabic Music at the Cairo Opera House, a cultural institution somewhat like Lincoln Center, with many different subdivisions and ensembles. One hundred members strong, the National

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Ensemble played “the classical stuff, serious compositions,” says Refela, on a variety of instruments, both Arab and European. The European bowed strings play Arab music:

“The base of our group is the violin. You can add as many as you [like], because they sound good together. We have the violin, and the cello, and the double bass; we don’t have the viola. The ‘ud is usually a solo instrument; you can have only one, or two at the most. And we have an instrument made from reed, it’s called nay. Like a flute. They [make the holes] in it in a certain way [so] that they reach our tunes, with the quarter-tones. The nay is solo, too; you have only one. We have the qanun. The qanun is a zither, you pluck it. You hook picks to your fingers with, like, opened thimbles. And a percussive section—you have the tabla, and we have something like a tambourine, we call it ‘riqq.’ And we have a bigger size [of frame drum]; we call it ‘duff,’ so we have the bass sound of it.”

He remained with this group for ten years and also traveled with smaller groups to Austria and Germany and countries in the Arab region: Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In 2003, however, facing economic difficulties despite these prestigious performance opportunities, Refela made the decision to return to the United States. This time he came to Philadelphia, where one of his brothers lives, and where he found that it is easier for a newcomer to make a living than in California. Refela very quickly connected with local Arab American musicians:

“The first week I came here, my brother told me, ‘Why don’t you go to a place called The Nile?’ It was at 2nd and Chestnut in Old City. I grabbed my violin and went there Saturday night, and talked to the

group performing at that place. I told them, ‘I do this and this.’ And they said to me, ‘Why not? Why don’t you join us?’ I performed the whole night with them. Not for five minutes or ten minutes, I performed the whole night with them, because we got...engaged. They knew what I did. They’re American, second-generation Lebanese. Joe Tayoun was the first person I knew. He played the drum and his brother played the second drum, and there’s an ‘ud player, his name is Roger Mgrdichian. So I joined them, and from that time, I used to perform with them regularly. That was 2003, January. I performed with them for six months. I had to go back to Egypt; because of my visa, I had to leave after six months. I went back to Egypt and I came back after two months. Not even two months. And started performing with them again.”

He has found performing for American audiences to be creatively stimulating:

“Americans, by culture, look for what’s new. It’s not that they get bored easily, it’s because they’re looking for progression, improving all the time. So they look for something else. Since this [music] is completely different from what they’ve heard, they find it very unique. They interact with us more than anyone else. That’s how I feel it. They get it more than other foreigners, our music.”

The audience back home, they know the stuff... So we have to be relevant to whatever they know. You [can’t] go too far from what should be played. So they won’t be like, ‘Oh, what are you doing? You’re out of your mind!’ But here it’s more free. You can come up with different things because of the audience here.”

A permanent resident of the United States since 2005, Refela has readily joined in others’ educational performance projects. Alongside Jewish, Greek, and Lebanese American

artists Bruce Kaminsky, Bill Koutsouros, and Michele Tayoun, Adeeb works as a violinist in the Spice Route Ensemble, one of the musical groups affiliated with Musicopia (formerly Strings for Schools, an organization that presents local musicians in school residencies and performances).⁸ He has been an instructor at Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture summer camp in Chestnut Hill, an organization that educates youth of all backgrounds in Arabic language and culture (“Al-Bustan” means “the garden”). He also participates in “Intercultural Journeys,” a Philadelphia non-profit organization that promotes cross-cultural collaborations, particularly between Arabs and Jews—the artistic director is Israeli cellist Udi Bar-David of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Nonetheless, Refela is eager to expand his teaching and sharing of Arab music; he would like to take his wealth of knowledge to university students who want to know about the inner workings of Arab music.



Refela is known as a specialist in a genre called taqsim, a solo instrumental improvisation that combines “traditional understandings of the Arab maqam system with the present-day performer’s individual creativity.”⁹

“The word ‘taqsim,’ it’s an Arabic word and they used it afterwards in Greece, [where] they call it ‘taksim.’

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Taqasim is division, how you divide what you're doing. Taqasim is representing the maqam, and the beauty of the maqam. There are some notes that are stronger than others that you reveal by playing. It depends on your own point of view. So everybody is different from [each] other [in] representing this. The factors are your experience, your emotional state of mind—you might be different from yourself in a different state of mind, representing the same maqam. Taqasim means division. You divide the pronunciation of the music [according to] the way you feel at the time. Sometimes it's prepared; sometimes it's not. Sometimes you prepare those divisions beforehand. Me, I don't prepare. Wherever I perform, there's vibes from the audience. They might like this, or not like that. It's not that I'm intelligent. It just comes automatically. By the energy of the audience, I feel it should be this way, or that way, or some other way. So I'm a specialist in this, performing differently all the time. It's interaction between the people and the performer."

Spontaneity, flexibility, and an openly expressed, reciprocal, emotional connection between audience and performer are all part of Arab music. Ultimately, for Refela, the importance and uniqueness of music lies in its emotional impact and the diversity of responses it permits:

"Music in general is something to help you cheer up or to express [yourself]. It might not always be [for] cheering up, but you need it. Sometimes you feel mellow, or you want to be crazy? Music helps in this. That's why music is a beautiful art.

The highest level of art is the abstract. You reduce everything to some point. You reduce it so it means more. If you have ten people performing the same music in the same moment, you're going to have twenty different opinions about the music. That's what's good about music, in general. It's abstract. It gives you the freedom to feel whatever you feel. You play the same music for ten people, you get different opinions. Maybe even the same person is going to tell you something else about what they heard. That's what's good about

music, that's how I look at it."

—Elizabeth Sayre

Notes

¹ Marcus, p. 45. "The 'ud is the direct ancestor of the European lute both in name and shape."

² As in India, where it became a virtuoso instrument in local art music styles, the violin fit easily into Arab musical schemes due to its ability to play melodic slides and reproduce shades and degrees of pitch beyond the twelve fixed pitches used in most European music. One of the most well known characteristics of Arab music is its use of "quarter tones," also sometimes called half-sharps or half-flats – pitches that fall in between the notes, so to speak, of Western scales.

³ Danielson, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid, p. 172.

⁵ Ethnomusicologist Stephen Blum suggests that Middle Eastern music was, in fact, too rhythmically complex to make notation an effective tool for transmission: "A major reason why most Middle Eastern practices never came to rely on musical notation is the complexity of the rhythms to which verse and prose are appropriately sung or recited." (Blum, p. 9).

⁶ A typical small-ensemble texture in Arab music is heterophony, in which each of several instruments interprets the same melody somewhat differently, according to the particular techniques of each (see Marcus, p. 16). In contrast to much European music, traditional Arab music, like Indian music, does not stress or use much harmony—different instruments playing different musical lines, which simultaneously creates note-against-note, "vertical" relationships (chords). Rather, both Arab and Indian music involve the art of "horizontal" development of melodies.

⁷ "Tabla" in this context is not the North Indian pair of hand drums, but rather the single goblet-shaped drum also called dumbek or darabuka in other areas.

⁸ Musicians from the Eastern Mediterranean find collaboration easy due to regional commonalities. Musical similarities across national, linguistic, and religious differences are characteristic of the Middle East. "The model of national music histories is more misleading than helpful when applied to the Middle East, where the norm has been cultural interaction among speakers of two or more languages and among practitioners

of several religions." (Blum, p. 12)

⁹ Marcus, p. 114. The maqamat (pl.) are the melodic modes used in all types of Arab music. They are not only sets of pitches (like Western scales), but also have characteristic turns of phrase, specific orders for the introduction of notes, and, if rendered properly by skilled musicians, should put audience and performers alike in states of ecstasy.

Resources for further exploration

Books:

Blum, Stephen. 2002. "Hearing the Music of the Middle East" in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, v. 6, The Middle East*, ed. Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds. New York & London: Routledge.

Danielson, Virginia. 1997. *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, Scott. 2007. *Music in Egypt: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Racy, A. J. 2003. *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*. New York & Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Online:

Educational site on Arabic melodic modes, the maqam: <http://www.maqamworld.com/>
National Arab Music Ensemble at the Cairo Opera House:

http://www.cairooperahouse.org/english/about_cairo_opera_house/about_music_ensemble.asp

Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture website:
<http://www.albustanseeds.org>

The Spice Route Ensemble:
[http://www.animusmusic.com/spiceroute/Intercultural Journeys:](http://www.animusmusic.com/spiceroute/Intercultural_Journeys:)

[>>](http://www.interculturaljourneys.org)

Adeeb Refela's website:
<http://www.adibsaaman.tk/>