

Challenging Public Perception

By Christina Maria Paschyn

Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra is constantly balancing and sometimes intertwining classical music and traditional Arabic music in order to please and educate their varied audience. Co-principal Cellist Hassan El-Molla Moataz is one of the musicians leading the way in QPO's efforts to challenge public perception of music in the Middle East.

The first things you notice when you enter Hassan El-Molla Moataz's rehearsal room are the strange instruments strewn across the floor like mere sheet music. The three cellos are not unexpected; Moataz is, after all, a cellist in the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. It's the rababas that catch your eye.

A Persian-Arab folk fiddle dating back to the 8th century, the rababa is considered to be "the mother of all string instruments," and Moataz boasts six of differing sounds and origins. There's the deep-voiced rababa with the square leather body that Bedouins in the Gulf play to this day, and a rare Iranian device safely tucked away inside a large imposing case.

But my eyes and ears are most entranced by Moataz's Egyptian rababa, as the Cairo native strums some startlingly haunting notes; this thin-necked rababa, strung with horsehair and a base carved out of coconut shell, is the same one Moataz played as the featured soloist in the QPO's premiere of composer Marcel Khalife's Concerto for Rababa and Orchestra in 2010. The opus – a masterpiece

that so effortlessly conjured images of golden sand dunes and moonlit desert vistas that it's a wonder it wasn't used as the title score for Black Gold - held the audience spellbound thanks to no small effort by Moataz, whose stirring solos formed the soul of the piece.

Surprisingly, Moataz, 31, only started playing the rababa when he was 23 years old. Up until that point, his life had been devoted to the cello, an instrument he fell in love with at the age of nine as a pupil in the Cairo Conservatory. Determined to master the instrument and grow up to be a professional musician, the young cellist was willing to wake up every day at 5:30 a.m. to endure a two-hour bus ride to attend classes. "My schedule did not matter. After one year I really felt so happy and lucky to play the cello," Moataz said. Moataz's parents were happy to support their son's passion.

"My father was supporting me so much. He was making sandwiches for me in the morning and took me to the place where the bus came every day," Moataz said.



"He also helped by picking me up very early [after school] because the bus would come at 4:00 p.m. and I would be finished at 2:00 p.m. So he would come to me, pick me up and drive me home."

Moataz's hard work paid off when he played his first solo concert with the Cairo Opera Orchestra at age 16, an opportunity not often awarded to students that age. He performed with the Opera House from 1995 to 2000. He then joined the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and earned the title of principal cellist in 2004. In 2008, he was accepted into the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra as a sub-principal cellists. Music remained a fixture in his life even during his mandatory



year-long service in the Egyptian Army, where, from 2002-2003, he was asked to teach soldiers the cello and conduct the army chamber orchestra. Even during boot camp, Moataz's artistic aptitude came in handy.

"One day I was changing my clothes and whistling, and my commander was listening to me and liked my whistling so much that he asked me to make a recording of some songs of me whistling," Moataz recalled. "And he said he would give me three days off for this. I gave him the tape and he liked it so much, and after that he asked me to whistle in front of 200 people during break times. I became known as the *whistling man* to my friends."

Not long after Moataz left the army to resume his professional music career, the director of music activities at the Library of Alexandria approached him; he was looking for a rababa player to incorporate a unique rendition of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

"At the time I didn't play the rababa, but I said 'if you give me two months I will

practice and try to play it for you.' But I realized I didn't need to learn the rababa because it's the same technique as the cello," Moataz said.

The cello and rababa may share technical and physical similarities, but Moataz says a musician must take a different and contradictory approach to each instrument and to classical and Arabic music in general.

"In classical music, there is melody, harmony, expression, dynamics and many other things. And everything is planned very well and written to the orchestra instruments [like violin, cello, etcetera]. But for Arabic music, it's often one line written for the singers and there's very little when it comes to accompanying voice or two voices," Moataz explained. "The difference is the melody and how to play Arabic music so beautifully and also include improvisation. In Arabic music there are many scales and they use quarttones. The improvising is how to move among the scales and improvise melody and move to many scales within a few minutes." It's a skill he had to master for his solo in

Khalife's Rababa Concerto, which Moataz says proved a defining moment for him and the QPO.

"In the QPO there are very professional musicians who are playing in a country [whose population] is not that familiar with classical music and are more [knowledgeable] about traditional Gulf music," he said. "To write a concerto for this [traditional folk instrument] is a very strange chance, and it was very good for the name of the orchestra to perform a premiere piece. When my friends knew that the QPO did this, they thought that it was a really new thing to add these two together, blending Arabic into classical music. It was a good thing for foreigners and Qataris to listen to such a concerto and folk music."

Moataz said he hopes to continue sharing his passion for the cello and rababa while challenging public perception and understanding of music in the Middle East.

Most concerts of the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra are presented in the Opera House Building 16 of the Katara cultural Village in West bay. For more information log onto www.qatarphilharmonicorchestra.com. Tickets for concerts are available at Virgin Megastore.