

A Musical Prodigy

By Christina Maria Paschyn

The Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra (QPO) has been in Doha for three years now, enriching the lives of residents through music and culture.

QH gets up-close-and-personal with QPO's youngest member, violinist Lorena Manescu.



Lorena Manescu's music teachers couldn't understand why their star pupil wanted to audition for the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. The 21-year-old Romanian violinist had worked so hard to get to where she was then; endless lessons and victories at music competitions had made her a child prodigy, and she was studying at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory in Austria. Her talent meant that she could play with dozens of orchestras in cosmopolitan cities around the world. So why did she want to live in some tiny country in the Persian Gulf?

"Even when I auditioned, after I played the first piece, the jury asked me 'and why do you want to go there; what's wrong with you?'" Manescu recalled with a laugh. But to Manescu, the opportunity to play with the QPO seemed like destiny. "I had this dream to go to Arabic countries - I've had a passion for this since I was fifteen," Manescu explained to me when we met for our interview at Cafe Tasse in Souq Waqif.

Four years after her audition, she is now a first violin and the youngest member of the

orchestra. Only 25 years old, the Romanian beauty speaks with the confidence of a person who has fulfilled a lifelong aspiration and is now content with her lot.

"I love living here and I think I imagine myself being here forever," she said whimsically. "I still feel privileged about the social land here - a lot of people from all over the world and a lot of [different] social backgrounds." Despite having arrived in Qatar at the start of Ramadan in 2008, when "everything was closed," Manescu describes her first few weeks in the country as the happiest of her life.

And she fondly recalls her first journey into the desert. "I have no words to describe how impressive this was," she said. "It was just the sea, the desert and the sky. So three enormous entities, unending entities, and everything got such a huge dimension for me."

It's hard not to ascribe symbolism to her words. For just as the desert, sea and sky blend to create Qatar's endless landscape, so to do three enormous and infinite entities combine to define Manescu's essence:

music, spirituality and education. And her decision to live in Qatar has allowed them to intertwine in sublime harmony.

Manescu's passion for the violin was sparked when she was a young girl living in Polovragi, a small village in the heart of Romania's Carpathian Mountains. Raised by her maternal grandparents while her mother and father earned a living in the city of Râmnicu Vâlcea, Manescu spent her youth surrounded by luscious greenery, gardens and many animals. Her grandmother was a music teacher in the local school and her grandfather, a well-known fiddler in the region, began teaching Manescu how to play the violin when she was five years old. The hours she spent listening to her grandparents and their students play folk music in the house inspired her to pursue a career in the performing arts.

Manescu got her chance at the age of seven when her parents and grandparents agreed she was better off studying music at a school in the city. For the next few years, her life was filled with classes,

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recitals, festivals and competitions. In high school, she transferred to a music college in Bucharest to seriously hone her skills.

Manescu can only recount good memories from these early years as an aspiring musician. She speaks affectionately of her fatherly instructors, the friendships she made and her classes' various excursions around Europe. All of Manescu's experiences during this period shaped her in some way. But a recital in Munich at the age of 15 changed the course of her life and set her on a path to embracing a new culture and faith.

She was placed with a host family whose patriarch was a Lebanese composer. “In his home I saw a lot of Arabian designs on the pillows, curtains and music instruments, and his music was so Arabic. And I fell in love with all those and this is how it started,” she explained.

As Manescu grew older, she dove deeper into the world of Islam and at 18, began identifying as a Muslim. She embraces the power of spirituality to shape and influence her music.

“Sometimes when I used to have concerts with the orchestras as a soloist, I didn't see this as a performance. I saw the stage like a sanctuary where you share thoughts with the public. It is not just an auditive and visual connection, it's an energetic and spiritual connection,” Manescu said. “Both [music and faith] involve imagination, very deep thinking and philosophy. I would say arts and spirituality are really highly connected because spirituality itself can be an art and art can be spirituality.”

Manescu sees great potential in Qatar's musical endeavors. “I love experiencing how much Qatar has developed in the past years and I really enjoy seeing that their development is culture orientated,” Manescu gushed. “I think this country can be the

nucleus for cultural development and it can indeed start a new era in the Arabic world.”

Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser al-Missned founded QPO through the Qatar Foundation. Manescu believes Her Highness is trying to cultivate an appreciation for the arts through the orchestra and by simultaneously promoting education and a new image of Islam.

“I would say that maybe the orchestra is one of the very few places that people can entertain their intellect as well, not their senses only,” Manescu said. “First of all, it is giving people the freedom to be creative. Secondly, [it is supporting] the rehabilitation of music and arts in general. Third, [the orchestra] is creating a cultural renaissance.”

Manescu said the Qatar Foundation's initiatives helped her to realize that education is the third-most important part of her being. The organization's motto – “Unlocking human potential” – has inspired her to do her part by teaching violin part-time at the Qatar Music Academy in Katara Cultural Village. Although she does not have any Qatari students, she's hopeful local curiosity will grow in the coming years.

For now, Manescu is happy to support the creative spirit in any form it manifests among Qataris. She speaks excitedly about the Bedouin Rababa player she will travel to see after our interview. “I think I will feel very inspired after seeing him. The act of creation itself is one of the highest spirituality forms, and I really enjoy their enjoyment of producing something,” she said.

When we meet, Manescu is dressed in a modest black top and a colourful peasant skirt – perfect attire for a night listening to Bedouin music in the desert. I am amazed at how easily she seems to fit in with the souq's surrounding. It seems to me that she was destined to live in Middle East, as if she always belonged to the desert. But Lorena explains that her effortless

adaptability has as much to do with her Romanian upbringing as it does with her lifelong fascination with Islam and Arabia.

“Romania is a very mixed cultural country. We are really at the confluence between three major cultures, which is to the east the Turks, to the north the Slavic part through Ukraine, and to the west the Western European cultures. So we are really in the middle,” Manescu said.

“And I think one of the easiest nationalities to is Romanian because you are very flexible and can adapt everywhere because everything is in your culture,” she added. “So I cannot say that I always belonged to the desert because I love the desert, but I also love the green places. I'm a Romanian, so it means that I can be at home everywhere.”

Lucky for residents of Qatar, this remarkable, yet humble, violinist feels at home with the acclaimed Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. “Compared to many other orchestras in the world, I can say it is a very, very friendly atmosphere,” Manescu said. “We have started to become a team. It's like getting a new family. At the beginning, maybe the members are not so confident with each other, but as time passes by we are becoming more familiar and we know each other much better professionally. And it is important, especially in orchestra playing, that the members have a lot of information about each other musically and a sort of comfort with each other.”

Manescu's talent and warm personality have surely contributed to QPO's success and sense of camaraderie. Her dedication to education and the arts is also helping to unlock the country's intellectual and musical potential and transform Doha into a cosmopolitan city, perhaps one that Austrian conservatory instructors won't hesitate to send their students to in the future. ●