



Rabih Abou-Khalil em português

What should a Lebanese composer, oud player and band leader do next, after recording with jazz greats, with traditional Arab musicians, with classical string quartets or Armenian musicians, who has been commissioned to write symphonic orchestral works by the BBC Orchestra in London, and the Ensemble Modern in Germany – his work always carrying his own identifiable signature? Naturally, he would go to Portugal, put music to Portuguese poetry and record the songs with a young Fado singer from Lisbon.

The adventure started with an inquiry by Ricardo Pais, the director of the National Theatre in Porto, who wanted to know whether Abou-Khalil might be interested in putting music to Portuguese poetry and performing the songs in Lisbon and Porto. Abou-Khalil, who first thought the whole idea was humorous – especially considering that he spoke absolutely no Portuguese at the time – immediately consented; the thrill of doing something that surreal was simply irresistible. It had not been the first time that Abou-Khalil considered working with a singer. However, he had not encountered the right one before – a free spirited virtuosic vocalist, who could sing Abou-Khalil's complex rhythms and unusual melodies – yet who is sufficiently rooted in his own culture to be able to transcend it. These traits have always played a major role in the choice of musicians Abou-Khalil made. And if the lyrics should have to be in Portuguese, so be it, music transcends language...

Abou-Khalil's discovery is Ricardo Ribeiro, a young singer from Lisbon, who until now has "only" sung Fado, Portugal's national music. Despite his 26 years he has already established a reputation for himself. He sings Abou-Khalil's compositions as if they were his own, he masters the complicated rhythms and unusual melodic lines with absolute ease. His voice, at times tantalizingly silky, at others rapturously powerful, melts into Abou-Khalil's oud playing to create a new unity, as though the two sprung from the same source. Ever present is Ricardo's Saudades, the Portuguese art of sadness and longing.

Abou-Khalil's long time companions have more than a supporting function. Luciano Biondini from Spoleto in Italy, the accordion virtuoso, is as discreet as he is present, masterfully accentuating the musical subtleties. Michel Godard from Paris, the French tuba player, who doubles on bass and serpent, has been playing with Abou-Khalil since 17 years. It is always a revelation to hear the tuba played this light footed, or to hear the almost human voice of the serpent, a Renaissance instrument brought back to life by Michel. Jarrod Cagwin, the American drummer from Iowa, is once again part of Abou-Khalil's recordings. He moved to Europe eight years ago so as to join the band, and has become an expert on Abou-Khalil's rhythms, making every note swing with an infectious drive.

The result is an "imaginary folklore", a music that sounds new and strange, yet familiar and natural, as if it had always existed. Far away from any banalities, something new has been born. Perhaps the missing link between East and West, between Classical and Modern, between Folklore and Art Music, deeply rooted in the everywhere and the nowhere.