

Rabih Abou – Khalil

Traversing Cultural Barriers

Jerry G. Bauer

Born and raised in the cosmopolitan climate of Beirut in the sixties and seventies, Rabih Abou-Khalil leaned to play the oud, the Arabian short-necked lute, at the age of four. In the Arab world this instrument is as popular as the guitar or the piano in the West and is the composer's instrument par excellence. The Lebanese civil war forced him to leave his country in 1978 to study classical flute in the German city of Munich, where he was tutored at the Munich Academy of Music by Walther Theurer. The analytical preoccupation with the European classical tradition enabled him to grasp Arabic music from a further, theoretical position, opening his eyes to the possibility of operating simultaneously within musically divergent systems. Whereas Arab instrumentalists were content to imitate human voice techniques, Abou-Khalil set out to explore new ways of playing his instrument. Music critics have even recommended his accomplished technique as a "study for jazz guitarists"; his ballads, on the other hand, rekindle memories of the poetic dawn of Arabian culture, without ever sounding even remotely traditionalistic.

Rabih Abou-Khalil has asserted himself in the avant-garde as a composer as well as an instrumentalist. This is not just because he is ahead of his time - but because he also questions what others might pursue without further reflection. With his original composing technique, his unconstrained, yet daring approach to classical Arabic music, he has found a musical language entirely his own. Commissioned by the Südwestfunk (Southwest German Radio), Abou-Khalil wrote two unusual compositions for string quartet in his own rhythmically and melodically charged style. The maiden performance with the Kronos String Quartet was the highlight at the Stuttgart Jazz Summit in 1992. On his CD, "Arabian Waltz", with the Balanescu String Quartet he successfully integrated the string quartet - for centuries the domain of European classical music - into his musical language.

What superficially appears to be a chance encounter between opposing instruments and a seemingly antagonistic dash of talents from different musical worlds is in fact the result of a well pondered upon concept. Under Abou-Khalil's guidance these undeniable differences by no means descend into Babylonian confusion. On the contrary, the cosmopolitan musicians from different cultural backgrounds draw inspiration from their shared intuitive understanding of the serious challenge they face in interpreting Abou-Khalil's music. The intellectual and emotional identification with these compositions unleashes charges of enthusiasm in each of the players, inciting new heights of musical mastery. Yet the temptation of individual one-upmanship is never as strong as the collective innovative endeavour and exploration into uncharted terrain. The highly varied works by Abou-Khalil - all nonetheless derived from this very elixir - now stand in their own right, extending so far beyond convention that they somehow elude all fixed categories. Abou-Khalil's music thrives on creative encounters and not on exoticism. From a combination of diverse cultural elements something very personal and coherent emerges. Thus it would be fruitless to mull over descriptions such as Orient or Occident, jazz, world music or classical.

Commissioned by the BBC Concert Orchestra to write music for orchestra, Abou-Khalil wrote works that were performed in London and Chichester. For another project for the German city of Duisburg he chose to collaborate with the Ensemble Modern, one of the most renowned orchestras specializing in contemporary music. "While working with Rabih Abou-Khalil, I was starkly reminded of a saying by Herbert von Karajan: 'Do not play the bar along with the music, play across the measure'." That was how Dietmar Wiesner, the flute player of the Ensemble Modern, summed up his impressions from the rehearsals: "Unbelievably fine, irregular rhythms, masterfully formed into melodic chains that remain in a floating condition, never setting to land, and thus reaching a high level of charm that relentlessly pulls the listener into its magic. "

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