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MUSIC REVIEW | MUSICIANS FOR HARMONY

Music for Peace, Words by Whitman

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

[Walt Whitman](#), who wrote that the duty of a poet is to “to cheer up slaves and horrify despots,” hoped to heal a divided nation with his “Song of Myself.” Excerpts from that poem were incorporated into “Song of Myself Workshop,” featuring texts by Whitman set to music, which was performed at Merkin Concert Hall on Thursday, a day when fractious political factions attempted a brief show of unity.

The Company Colombari sang and narrated the work, which opened Musicians for Harmony’s Concert for Peace, an annual event commemorating the attacks of Sept. 11. The words were set to music ranging from spare and quiet to urgent and theatrical, mirroring the drama of the texts, which at times could have been delivered with more conviction. The music was composed and performed by Colin Jacobsen, a violinist; his brother Eric, a cellist; Alex Sopp, a flutist; and Kyle Sanna, a guitarist.

The highlight of the evening was a performance by the virtuoso Syrian clarinetist Kinan Azmeh, whose music blends elements of classical, jazz and Middle Eastern idioms. Mr. Azmeh; Mr. Sanna, the bassist Josh Myers and the percussionist John Hadfield played several compositions in a segment of the program called “Sounds of Syria.”

The works included “139th Street,” which Mr. Azmeh said was inspired by the sounds he hears at 4 a.m. in his neighborhood, and “Airports.” Mr. Azmeh, who lives in New York but often travels to Syria, joked that he is often detained at Kennedy Airport for questioning and “decided to use the time creatively.” In “Airports,” a resigned clarinet melody tentatively rises above an anxious orchestral tapestry before breaking out into a victorious rhapsody.

The Knights, a young string orchestra, joined in for the exuberant “Wedding.” Composed by Mr. Azmeh for Hewan, his Syrian Arabic jazz ensemble, it is based on a traditional melody played at Syrian weddings.

The mood turned somber for the American premiere of “Janan” (“Requiem”), an elegy composed by Mohammed Amin Ezzat for the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra in 2006.

With a mournful, rhapsodic cello line lamenting over an urgent orchestral framework tinged with dissonance, it is meant to evoke, in Mr. Ezzat’s words, “a person who’s dying.” It was played here by the Knights, who performed standing and without a conductor. Making his New York debut was

the fine cello soloist Karim Wasfi, the director of the Iraqi orchestra.

The concert also included a vigorous performance of Brahms's String Quintet in G by the Shanghai Quartet and Michael Tree, the Guarneri Quartet's violist.

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