

Safaafir with Hamid Al-Saadi: Iraqi music at CMA (January 29)

by Nicholas Stevens



When UNESCO made its first list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, it welcomed Kabuki theatre, Sardinian folksong, and dozens of other media into a globe-spanning canon. These, the committee declared, stood out among the untold multitudes of human creative practices. Among them ranked the Iraqi *maqam*, in which poetry, chamber music, and lighter songs flow into extended, semi-improvised performances. As the ensemble Safaafir and singer Hamid Al-Saadi recently proved to Northeast Ohioans, the centuries-old coffeehouse art form still holds the power to thrill.

The group's concert at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, January 29 represented a convergence of diverse skill sets. Al-Saadi, doubly rare as a *maqam* singer in the Baghdadi style who has memorized the entire repertoire, presided as the voice of his nation's musical heritage, and oud player George Ziadeh brought scholarly devotion to his lines. Yet Safaafir also includes Chicagoan siblings Amir and Dena ElSaffar, trained and active as a jazz trumpeter and classical violist, respectively, as well as multi-genre percussionist Tim Moore. These three co-founders took up the *maqam* after mastering other styles, forming one of this country's only dedicated ensembles.

Following tradition, the quintet placed each *maqam* between an instrumental *muqaddimah* and one or more full-group vocal *pestat*. Al-Saadi's weighty, powerful high baritone reshaped the auditorium around it from the start of the first such set, and

remained undiminished throughout the evening. Moore's downbeats provided the grid over which Amir ElSaffar's *santur*, a hammered dulcimer, evoked the charged love story at the center of the poetry.

Captivating syncopation dominated the second *muqaddimah*, but once again Al-Saadi stole the show. As much as his sheer power impressed, the moments when his voice took on an intentional grit and grain — emotion weighing down his tone for a moment — revealed the true magic of his art. A recurring technical difficulty with the speaker system did little to distract from his virtuosic readings, especially at moments like the one where his voice skimmed the edge of its lowest limit but soared again.

The third set offered the most dissonance so far, a consequence of both the particular *maqam*'s scale and some expressive note-against-note clashes. Al-Saadi incorporated a sort of sobbing sound, reminiscent of the Baroque *trillo* technique. Dena ElSaffar switched from *joza* to violin for the fourth set, but retained the Iraqi fiddle's characteristic quiet brightness. Her drones and figurations accompanied an adventuresome solo by Ziadeh, so compelling that Al-Saadi himself broke into applause for the oud player even as the piece continued. Mistimed audience applause hardly deterred Amir ElSaffar, whose quiet *santur* roll paved the path to a new section as if with diamond dust.

The final set of this intermissionless program began with a solemn, stately beat for all instrumentalists, Dena ElSaffar's violin high and plaintive. Al-Saadi's voice seemed to have become more powerful, not less, in this late hour. Ziadeh played a brief solo, Moore undergirded lively unison singing in the *pesteh*, and the soloist's final note pealed forth as though one of the organ pipes behind the ensemble onstage had somehow transformed itself into a human voice, all stops pulled out.

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