

CMA: “Journey to the Heart of the Iraqi *Maqam*”

by Jarrett Hoffman



Amir ElSaffar has had the type of musical career that you can imagine laid out as a board game: a winding path with important points along the way where he’s taken on new instruments, absorbed new genres, and crossed the globe to research musical practices more deeply.

He began as a classical trumpeter growing up in Chicago, the son of an Iraqi immigrant father and an American mother. And he has since found his way to jazz, Arabic music, composition, and Iraqi *maqam*, a centuries-old tradition of highly structured, semi-improvised compositions sung to Classical Arabic and colloquial Iraqi poetry.

The foremost purveyor of that tradition is Hamid Al-Saadi, who will join ElSaffar and the group Safaafir for “Journey to the Heart of the Iraqi *Maqam*” in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Wednesday, January 29 at 7:30 pm as part of the Museum’s Performing Arts Series. Tickets are available [online](#).

Safaafir is co-led by ElSaffar (who will handle the *santur*, a hammered dulcimer) and his sister Dena ElSaffar (who will play the *joza*, a bowed string instrument). Rounding out the group is a third family member, Dena’s husband Tim Moore (percussion). And taking on the role of vocalist will be the central figure in this performance: Hamid

Al-Saadi, the only living practitioner of Iraqi *maqam* who's memorized and mastered the entire Baghdadi tradition.

Al-Saadi's and ElSaffar's lives became intertwined after the trumpeter went abroad to learn more about *maqam*. "I had to go to Iraq to get even the faintest idea of what this music was," ElSaffar said by telephone from New York. "There wasn't a lot of information or recordings."

He spent five years seeking out masters of the art form in what was, as ElSaffar said, "a step-by-step process." He would meet one teacher, who knew another, who might offer up a book or a recording. In 2002, with the impending Iraq War, ElSaffar left the country and traveled throughout the Middle East and Europe. It was in London where he found Al-Saadi, who was there at the time as a refugee.

"In a way he saved me," ElSaffar said. "I had wanted to do more research in Iraq, but because he took such an interest in teaching in a very demanding way, that really allowed me to grow and flourish as a singer, and eventually as a *santur* player." Indeed, Al-Saadi had a gift for teaching. "He was so knowledgeable but also knew how to explain what he was doing and knew how to give me feedback."

ElSaffar recently brought Al-Saadi back to the United States through an Artist Protection Fund Fellowship. Al-Saadi is teaching until the end of the school year at Rutgers University and Sarah Lawrence College, in addition to touring.

"We're trying to extend with Rutgers, Sarah Lawrence, and possibly other universities that have expressed interest in having him come teach, perform, and do some documentation," ElSaffar said. "He's already written one book about Iraqi *maqam* and is working on a second. Basically his mission is to continue this music in the world — to keep it alive and disseminate it in every way possible."

The group Safaafir is doing its part as well, as the only ensemble in the U.S. dedicated to performing the Iraqi *maqam* in its traditional format. "The source of any musical endeavor is that it's what I love to do — what brings me joy," ElSaffar said. "But there is also a sense of a mission in terms of the continuity of *maqam* music at a time when there aren't a lot of practitioners in the United States."

ElSaffar pointed out that others in this country are creating their own takes on Iraqi *maqam*, like Rahim AlHaj, who plays it as a soloist on the oud. The tradition is also being carried on in Europe. "Of course in Iraq, there are still groups performing it. But there's not an ecosystem around arts and culture so that this music can really thrive."

In 2016, prior to another performance at the Museum, Amir ElSaffar gave an in-depth explanation of the tradition of maqam during a [conversation](#) with Mike Telin of ClevelandClassical.com.

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