

Amir ElSaffar's Rivers of Sound



MICHAEL GROMMETT

Friday, April 15, 2016

Welcome to the Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art's performing arts series brings together thoughtful, fascinating, and beautiful experiences, comprising a concert calendar notable for its boundless multiplicity. This year we look forward to visits from old friends and new, bringing us music from around the globe and spanning many centuries. Here is the place where performance is intended to explore connections of cultures, the heart, the human spirit.

In the galleries

Pharaoh: King of Ancient Egypt
Through June 12

Silent Poetry: Masterworks of Chinese Painting
Through April 24

Pyramids & Sphinxes
Through May 24

Ji Yun-Fei: Last Days of Village Wen
Through July 31

Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt
Through July 31

Jon Pestoni: Some Years
April 23–July 10

The Flowering of the Botanical Print
Through July 3

Please **turn off all electronic devices** before entering the performance hall.

Photography and audio/video recording in the performance hall **are prohibited.**

Amir ElSaffar's Rivers of Sound

Friday, April 15, 2016, 7:30 p.m.
Gartner Auditorium, the Cleveland Museum of Art

PROGRAM

Not Two

This evening's program will be approximately 90 minutes in duration and presented without intermission.

ENSEMBLE

Amir ElSaffar	<i>trumpet, santur, vocals</i>
Aruán Ortiz	<i>piano</i>
Carlo DeRosa	<i>bass</i>
Dena ElSaffar	<i>violin, jowza</i>
Tim Moore	<i>dumbek, frame drum</i>
Fabrizio Cassol	<i>alto saxophone</i>
George Ziadeh	<i>oud, vocals</i>
Jason Adasiewicz	<i>vibraphone</i>
JD Parran	<i>bass saxophone, clarinet</i>
Kush Abadey	<i>drums</i>
Mavrothi Kontanis	<i>oud</i>
Miles Okazaki	<i>guitar</i>
Mohammed Saleh	<i>oboe, English horn</i>
Ole Mathisen	<i>tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone</i>
Rajna Swaminathan	<i>mridangam</i>
Stephen Harms	<i>cello</i>
Zafer Tawil	<i>qanun</i>

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Rivers of Sound is a large ensemble of instrumentalists from Western and Middle Eastern traditions, exploring the confluences of a musical language that transcends notions of tradition and style. In performing *Not Two*, an original composition by Amir ElSaffar, each musician interacts with the group through both improvised and composed material to create a novel composite sound.

Rivers of Sound: Not Two is a continuation of the Two Rivers concept, but projected onto a wider canvas unprecedented in scope and imagination. Microtonal maqam melodies traverse a richly-textured bed of sound created by oud, buzuk, and santur, in combination with cello, violin, saxophones, English horn, and trumpet. Also at play are multilayered, rhythmic patterns and harmonies performed by re-tuned vibraphone, piano, and guitar. The drum set, mridangam, dumbek, frame drums, and double-bass provide the rhythmic foundation and subdivisions of the multiple currents. Resonance across rhythmic, tonal, and timbral spectra, and across musical traditions, is the guiding principle.

ElSaffar's music is at once unique and engaging, full of heart and passion. Challenging notions of composition vs. improvisation, tradition vs. modernity, microtonality/modality vs. harmony, his compositions bring to light the universality of music across cultures. Given the catastrophes befalling the people of the Middle Eastern and Arab lands, his music is both timely and urgent as he is preserving elements of these cultures by bringing them into context with contemporary musical forms.

ElSaffar received funding from the MAP Fund and Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, to create Rivers of Sound. The 17 members came to New York City from as far away as Qatar, Palestine, and Brussels in April 2015 for three days of rehearsal, the premiere of *Not Two* at

the Lincoln Center, and an epic 14-hour day at Avatar Studios, where they recorded the 80-minute suite directly to tape. ElSaffar believes that the nature of this sound cannot be captured digitally and has committed to all analog, with a double LP to be released in the Fall of 2016.

The group's performance schedule continues in 2016 with a tour including stops at the Kimmel Center, Cleveland Museum of Art, NYU Abu Dhabi, and Royal Opera House of Oman. Booking inquiries for this project can be directed to booking@amirelsaffar.com.

The highest ideal in maqam music is to reach a state of tarab, or “musical ecstasy,” which results from the melting away of borders between a notion of self and other, as performers and audience revel together in the music. As pitches and rhythms become fluid, so do cultural boundaries: elements that traditionally divide musicians and genre-specific modes are re-contextualized in a fresh transcultural soundscape.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Amir ElSaffar

Trumpeter, santur player, vocalist, and composer Amir ElSaffar has distinguished himself with a mastery of diverse musical traditions and a singular approach to combining Middle Eastern musical languages with jazz and other styles of contemporary music. A recipient of the 2013 Doris Duke Performing Artists Award, ElSaffar has been described as “uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music without doing either harm,” (the *Wire*) and “one of the most promising figures in jazz today” (*Chicago Tribune*).

ElSaffar is an expert trumpeter with a classical background, conversant not only in the language of contemporary jazz, but has created techniques to play microtones and ornaments idiomatic to Arabic music that are not typically heard on the trumpet. Additionally, he is a purveyor of the centuries-old, now endangered, Iraqi maqam tradition, which he performs actively as a vocalist and santur player. As a composer, ElSaffar has used the microtones found in maqam music to create an innovative approach to harmony and melody. Described as “an imaginative bandleader, expanding the vocabulary of the trumpet and at the same time the modern jazz ensemble,” (*All About Jazz*), ElSaffar is an important voice in an age of cross-cultural music making.

ElSaffar’s most recent Two Rivers release, *Crisis* (2015, Pi Recordings) chronicles the continuing development of his critically acclaimed Two Rivers Ensemble, a band purpose-built to explore the juncture between jazz and music of the Middle East, in particular the Iraqi maqam. The new work is his reflection on a region in turmoil and strife: revolution, civil war, sectarian violence; a culture’s struggle for survival. It sets aside some of the more

exploratory work that he has done in recent years to focus on music that is passionate and visceral, a cry from the heart. *Crisis* was commissioned by the Newport Jazz Festival, where at its 2013 premiere, it made a clear emotional connection to the audience, receiving a rousing standing ovation after just the first piece.

His latest Quintet release, *Alchemy* (2013, Pi Recordings), received significant acclaim, including from veteran jazz writer Howard Mandel, who dubbed ElSaffar an “exquisite alchemist,” noting his ability to surmount the difficulties of bringing jazz and maqam together, “a challenge that he’s accomplished with aplomb.” The album was described as a “milestone session,” in *Point of Departure*, and “radically contemporary in its sound even as it connects with music’s most ancient roots” by the *Irish Times*. ElSaffar appeared with his Quintet this past summer at the Newport Jazz Festival, following his debut the previous year with Two Rivers that was later broadcasted on Dee Dee Bridgewater’s *Jazz Set* on NPR. A recent flurry of European performances included premieres of a new work, *Ashwaaq*, composed for string quartet, santur, and voice, at the prestigious Aix and Avignon Festivals. Subsequent performances included his Quintet at the Saalfelden Jazz Festival, a week of shows in Berlin, and a performance with Aka Moon and South Indian percussion master, U.K. Sivaraman.

In addition to performing and composing, ElSaffar is music curator at Alwan for the Arts, New York’s hub for Arab and Middle Eastern culture, which hosts semi-monthly concerts and the annual Maqam Fest. In 2013, he collaborated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to create a festival of Iraqi culture in 2013. He also teaches maqam classes at Alwan, and is the director of the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble at Columbia University, where he also teaches jazz ensembles.

Born near Chicago in 1977 to an Iraqi immigrant father and an American mother, ElSaffar was drawn to music at a young age, listening incessantly to LPs from his father's collection, which included Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and the *Blues Brothers* Soundtrack (but interestingly, no Iraqi music). His first musical training was at the age of five, singing in a Lutheran church choir at the school he attended. His mother, an avid lover of music, introduced him to the music of Bach and Haydn, and taught him to sing and play American folk songs on ukulele and guitar. ElSaffar eventually found his calling with the trumpet in his early teens. Chicago offered many opportunities for the young trumpeter: he attended DePaul University, earning a degree in classical trumpet, and had the opportunity to study with the legendary principal trumpeter of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bud Herseth. As a trumpeter of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, ElSaffar worked with esteemed conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Mstislav Rostropovich, and Daniel Barenboim, and recorded on the latter's 1999 Teldec release "Tribute to Ellington," with members of the Chicago Symphony and Don Byron. Additionally, ElSaffar gained experience playing regularly in Chicago's Blues, Jazz, and Salsa clubs.

He moved to New York at the turn of the century where he performed in the ensembles of jazz legend Cecil Taylor. He also performed with Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, who were in the early stages of their careers, making forays drawing upon their ancestral background toward forging a new sound. Amir gradually found himself drawn to the musical heritage of his Father's native country: Iraq. In 2001, after winning the Carmine Caruso Jazz Trumpet Competition, he funded a trip to Baghdad to find and study with the few surviving masters of the Iraqi Maqam. Some were still in Baghdad, but he discovered that most had left the country. Amir spent the next five years pursuing these masters across

the Middle East and Europe, learning everything he could about the tradition. During this period he learned to speak Arabic, sing maqam, and play the santur. His main teacher during this period was vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi, currently the only living person who has mastered the entire Baghdadi Maqam tradition.

In 2006 he founded Safaafir, the only ensemble in the US performing Iraqi Maqam in its traditional format. Later the same year, ElSaffar received commissions from the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and from the Festival of New Trumpet Music (FONT), to compose *Two Rivers*, a suite invoking Iraqi musical traditions framed in a modern Jazz setting. ElSaffar has since received commissions from the Jazz Institute of Chicago (2008), the Jerome Foundation (2009), Chamber Music America (2009), Present Music (2010), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013), The Newport Jazz Festival (2013), Morgenland Festival (2013) and the Royaumont Foundation (2014), creating works integrating Middle Eastern tonalities and rhythms into a contemporary contexts. He currently leads four critically-acclaimed ensembles: Two Rivers, which combines the musical languages and instrumentation of Iraqi Maqam and contemporary jazz; the Amir ElSaffar Quintet, performing ElSaffar's microtonal compositions with standard jazz instrumentation; Safaafir; and The Alwan Ensemble, the resident ensemble of Alwan for the Arts, specializing in classical music from Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq. In addition, he has worked with jazz legend Cecil Taylor, and prominent jazz musicians such as Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway, Marc Ribot, Henry Grimes, and Oliver Lake. ElSaffar has appeared on numerous recordings, and has released six under his own name, *Maqams of Baghdad* (2005), *Two Rivers* (2007), *Radif Suite* (2010), *Inana* (2011), *Alchemy* (2013), and *Crisis* (2015).

UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

Tarek Abdallah & Adel Shams El-Din

Wednesday, April 27, 7:30 p.m., Gartner Auditorium

An evening of classical Egyptian music for oud and riqq (Arabic tambourine). Born in Alexandria in 1975, Abdallah draws his inspiration from the golden age of the art of Egyptian oud solo (1910–30). El-Din's exceptional technique, exquisite sound, and vast knowledge of rhythmic cycles, from Middle Eastern music to jazz and flamenco, make him the most sought-after riqq player on the international stage today. \$33–\$45, CMA members \$30–40. cma.org/abdallah

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, May 4, 6:00 p.m., Museum Galleries

Outstanding conservatory musicians present mixed programs of chamber music amid the museum's collections for a unique and intimate experience—concerts that regularly feature instruments from the museum's keyboard collection. From standard repertoire to unknown gems, these early-evening, hour-long performances are a delightful after-work encounter or the start of a night out. Free, no tickets required.

cma.org/cim

Otomo Yoshihide

Monday, May 9, 7:30 p.m., Transformer Station

The pioneering Japanese experimental musician and composer Otomo Yoshihide (b. 1959) works in a variety of contexts, from free improvisation to noise, jazz, and modern classical. Influenced by his father, an engineer, Otomo began making electrical devices while still quite young. He first came to international prominence in the 1990s as the leader of the experimental rock group Ground Zero, and counts among his collaborators Sachiko M, Yasunao Tone, John Zorn, Nels Cline, and many others. Otomo's evening-length performances are immersive meditations on the nature and quality of sound, exploring the limits of "music" and "noise." Otomo makes his long-awaited Cleveland debut with this solo show.

\$25, CMA members \$22. cma.org/otomo

Performing Arts

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Ellen Fullman

Thursday–Saturday,
September 24–26, 7:30

Ustatshakirt Plus

Sunday, October 4, 2:00

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, October 7, 6:00

Merima Ključo:

The Sarajevo Haggadah

Wednesday, October 28, 7:30

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, November 4, 6:00

Calder Quartet

Monday, November 16, 7:30

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, December 2, 6:00

James Feddeck

Sunday, December 6, 2:00

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, January 6, 6:00

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, February 3, 6:00

CIM Organ Studio

Sunday, February 14, 2:00

JACK Quartet

Tuesday–Wednesday,
March 1–2, 7:30

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, March 2, 6:00

Dervish

Friday, March 11, 7:30

Qasida

Wednesday, March 16, 7:30

Calder Quartet

Thursday, March 31, 7:30

CIM/CWRU Joint Music Program

Wednesday, April 6, 6:00

Orlando Consort

Wednesday, April 6, 7:30

Fanfare Ciocărlia

Wednesday, April 13, 7:30

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**DEPARTMENT OF
PERFORMING ARTS, MUSIC,
AND FILM**

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Programs are subject to change.

These performances are made possible in part by:

The P. J. McMyler Musical Endowment Fund
The Ernest L. and Louise M. Gartner Fund
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