

From Karachi to Jeddah with Love, September 2020

"Da Capo", play it again, is what I heard William say in the rehearsal clip he sent me on the eve of a recent concert in Vienna commissioned by BMG Foundation Classics. The young American conductor William Garfield Walker was directing a formation of 20 musicians of his Nova Orchester Wien (NOW!) representing the G20 countries under the motto "East Meets West in Vienna" at the iconic Ehrbarsaal.

Play it again, I want to say, not only regarding this brilliant, KSA-inspired classical concert, but also the past four years we experienced living in Jeddah. Time flies, and, like the recent BMG livestream from Vienna, good things go by too quickly.

Whilst I would need the space of a book to write about all I have seen and heard on this, our first posting in the Middle East, suffice to say that this classical concert project I had the honor to coordinate for BMG Foundation Classics, the charitable branch of BMG Financial Group, was a truly great ending, icing on the cake of possibilities good cooperation amongst people of many different nations, creeds and cultures can concoct. When BMG's CEO Basil Alghalayini asked me for advice regarding his idea to assemble young musicians representing the G20 countries for a digital version of his acclaimed Summer Retreat concert, the annual London live version cancelled in 2020 due to Covid-19, I was immediately drawn in: supporting the spirit of cultural cooperation is a passion of mine, raised and educated as I was in two countries, two cultures, something that has characterized and continues to form my life. A born New Yorker, I was raised partly there and in the city of Vienna, and in the Spanish Moss-adorned subtropical countryside surrounding Jackson, Mississippi. Active professionally in both New Orleans and Vienna, I then married a German diplomat, and our cultural journey continues.

Finding a German musician amongst our associates to play for BMG Foundation Classics was easy but gathering other classically trained musicians from 19 other G20 nations in the short period of time given was going to be a challenge, not only from a sophisticated musical angle but also from the logistical and financial points of view. After all, this was not exactly like assembling a band of informal street musicians. Several people shook their heads, locally and elsewhere, when I began my brainstorming for the project. I knew one person I thought might indeed live up to this challenge, award-winning friend William Garfield Walker from Jackson, now based in Vienna, where he conducts his Nova Orchester Wien - or NOW! as it is called in short - with a pool of 75+ classically trained young musicians in varying ensembles to choose from. And live up to the challenge he did!

Adding to the feat of assembling this G20 formation, William was able to win Diego Collatti, a Syrian-Argentinian composer, for our project, willing to transcribe five popular Saudi melodies to Western notation for classical orchestration. With my father a graduate from Vienna's renowned *Musikakademie*, a pianist next to his international career in medicine, and my mother an opera singer, it embarrasses me to admit I can barely read Western sheet music. Shunning my piano lessons, I much preferred roaming the outdoors, fishing with Harris, a kind old soul who helped my father tend the grounds from whom I learned to sing spiritual Gospel Music which has such a strong tradition in the southern United States and paved the way for my love of Blues and Rock 'n Roll.

And yet, or perhaps because of my musically trained, Viennese parents, I realized that BMG'S commission would not be easy. There are quite a few clips on YouTube that explain the complex differences in Eastern and Western music theory, instrumentation and harmony. Regardless, Diego was ready, relishing the idea in fact, as it addressed his own bi-cultural, East-West heritage. With

enthusiasm he composed his *East West Sketches* in modern classical fashion - fantastic, complex pieces flavored with Arabian and Argentinian overtones which the NOW! orchestra with its focus on 20th century classics mastered with bravado. One can only applaud his effort to take on the challenge of transcribing and recomposing Arabic melodies in a Western context under time pressure and yet yield a magnificent series of works that deserve international attention. Diego Collatti has several compositions published by Universal – which leads one to think these beautiful musical pieces should be recorded when funds can be raised. As a special nod to the economic forums – G20's and BMG's – Basil Alghalayini requested Diego to compose a G20 anthem, the creation of which is another grand story too long to dwell on here.

Last July 15th in Vienna, these commissioned pieces were performed in a premiere by musicians William selected from NOW!, and, for that East meets West touch, young Saudi doctor and oud player Baraa Banoun came from Berlin to Vienna to join the G20 formation. The ancient oud instrument of course represents Saudi music traditions perfectly, and although it is not conceived for Western classical orchestra – this has to do with the way the instrument is stringed for Eastern notation – a beautiful and symbolic touch this was, to have the two musical systems meet on stage and harmonize.

Adding to this program of commissioned pieces inspired by Eastern tradition in homage to KSA's current presidency of the Group of Twenty, or G20, as this important economic formation of countries is called in short - and to complete the East Meets West motto - Maestro William Garfield Walker showcased an array of musical delights from Western musical tradition. Vienna, the Polaris of classical music, is also home to the waltz, or *Walzer* in German, and the undisputed kings of this popular dance are Johann, the father, and Johann, the son, of the famous Viennese Strauss family. Based on popular folk music, the waltzes' style defined almost a century of compositions that went viral from Vienna during the extended Vienna Congress negotiations for peace in 1815 following the Napoleonic Wars. *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* (Tales from the Vienna Woods) is such a classic waltz composition, inspired by folk tunes from the pristine natural areas bordering the city. Strauss, like Beethoven and Schubert in their symphonies and *Lieder* (songs), was inspired by less complex popular music taken to sophisticated heights in compositions for classical orchestra. And although this particular waltz is heard so often in Vienna and elsewhere, played in routine fashion, one could not but prick one's ears while William conducted this musical gem most delicately, reviving the old Vienna spirit in all its gaiety and profundity.

After delightful Strauss, the young conductor deeply moved his musicians and audience with the first-ever performance in Vienna of Florence Price's orchestral music. Price was the first African American woman to have a composition performed by a major orchestra, yet her oeuvre has only recently been discovered and now heard in Vienna. Walker's NOW! orchestra is dedicated not only to furthering Florence Price's recognition but to promoting deserving underperformed composers of the 20th century alongside other great masterworks.

As a final treat in this spacetime spanning, culture bridging arch of sound, P. I. Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* was masterfully performed, a great treat for classical music lovers, a showpiece for string orchestra.

And so, watching the container arriving at the residence, our home in Jeddah for the last four years, to take our possessions to the next posting, I am beginning to feel sad we are about to leave a country I have become fond of for all the kind people we have had the privilege to meet and good times we have been fortunate to experience, especially on the cultural side.

I recall the overwhelming positive surprise with which we experienced HRH Princess Jawaher Bint Majed Bin Abdulaziz and the Saudi Art Council's 21,39 Jeddah Arts initiative <https://thesaudiartcouncil.org/> not long after our arrival. This contemporary art exhibition is held annually to present local, national and international talent – its most recent, 7th edition curated by Maya El Khalil <https://en.vogue.me/art/jeddah-art-week-sustainability-spotlight/> in January 2020.

The burgeoning young art and music scenes in Riyadh and Jeddah are areas where truly local grass root efforts have blossomed to international acclaim. Just to name a few music acts, Nasser Ashemimry's Desertfish, himself a trained classical and jazz pianist, crosses over with ease to a contemporary agenda in electronic music, performing together with famous musicians of Berlin's avantgarde like Gudrun Gut. Dr. Effat Fadag who curated the 6th edition of 21,39 added music to her version of this magnificent contemporary showcase of art, featuring an artistic musical installation of Nasser's. Nouf Sufyani, a dentist by training, aka Cosmicat, has pursued her goal to make music with such success recently that she can do so exclusively as a profession. Or Muhanned Nasser's Vinyl Mode with a mod style that has Paris in awe, or the ever-popular Hats 'n Claps exporting the Jeddah sound to Los Angeles. All-time favorite and a steady feature in the local music scene, Ahmad Alammary, or Baloo, is also the organizer of recent festivals and delights with his House sound. And once you hear jazz singer Loulwa Al Sharif's soulful voice, you'll really feel like she can fly you to the moon.

This so popular, growing, original contemporary drift sends a positive message abroad. Added to other sophisticated music initiatives like BMG Foundation Classics introducing the younger generation to classical music, these developments all add to a sustainable Saudi cultural scene.

Let me end by praising the spirit of music for furthering universal understanding, and saying our heartfelt goodbyes to Jeddah! "Da capo, please."

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