



CONCERT REVIEWS

MEHMET POLAT TRIO PLAY MUSIC OF THE HEART

FEBRUARY 25, 2016 DOROTHY JOHNSON-LAIRD 3 COMMENTS

Some fusions between musical genres do not work, because they sound too forced. Other fusions fail because modern electronics drown out ancient instruments. But, the Mehmet Polat trio form a true union between Africa, Turkey and the Middle East. Nothing about their music sounds too pre-planned. It moves in cycles and is as hypnotic as Philip Glass's minimalist works. The trio is of three virtuosos: Mehmet Polat from Turkey plays the oud, Sinan Arat also from Turkey plays the ney, an end-blown flute and a very ancient instrument, and Bao Sissoko from Senegal plays the kora, a 21 stringed instrument from West Africa that has as its base a carved out calabash. The trio performed in New York during the annual APAP (Association of Performing Arts Presenters) conference in January, which is where I heard them.

It was an intimate evening of instrumental music at the Chhandayan Center for Indian classical music in Manhattan, where both the Mehmet Polat trio and Sahba Motallebi (an Iranian-American musician) shared the stage. The room held an audience of about forty, sitting barefoot and some on meditation cushions.

The trio sat alongside each other in a half circle. They performed without overt showmanship; no one musician sought to stand out above the others. Their simple, yet powerful unity was refreshing and provocative.

Their music was slow, gentle, simple. The elongated notes of the ney breathed into the air while the oud and kora danced together alongside the melody. This music rewards patience in a listener. It is not for fast paced and restless individuals. It tells you to slow down, take deep breaths as you listen, and it will calm you down. Yet, the languorous feel of the music demands your attention. And then you were introduced to a traditional West African song that was playful and light. The whole evening the three instruments spoke to each other gracefully. The sound was enchanting: the music was meditative.

Mehmet and Sinan both come from families who are Alevi, a Sufi Community in Turkey. Mehmet grew up in the city of Urfa, in South Eastern Turkey. Before the concert, he told me: "*Urfa has a big musical tradition with roots in ancient times.*" There, he says, he was surrounded by the voices of his parents singing Sufi songs. The music moved him as he was growing up. And he says, "*I knew at the age of ten that I wanted to become a musician. When I was about 13, I began exploring Anatolian folk music. There is a huge diversity of music in Turkey.*"

DJL: So how did you learn about all of this music?

MP: By listening. At 17, I started with the oud lessons from oud masters in Istanbul.

DJL: But why oud, did you see or hear it being played?

MP: I was visiting a poet in Istanbul with my brother. And I was curious about an instrument on the wall. What's this instrument? It looked so interesting. I grabbed it and I lost myself for a few minutes in it. And the deepness of the sound, it touched me so much that I decided to learn. But it is not only the instrument, it is the culture of the instrument that drew me to it. It has roots in the Ottoman Empire, in Iran, in all the Arabic countries, among others,

so I got a chance to learn something of those influences. Afterwards, I became interested in Balkan, Flamenco and Indian music.

DJL: Indian classical music has a strong spiritual component, for example, we know that the great Pandit Ravi Shankar saw playing his instrument as a way of connecting to God. Do you relate to what he said?

MP: Yes, I do connect with that. Music for me is a kind of language. When I play music, my intention is to bring sincere feelings from my heart and share them with the universe.

DJL: But in the Indian classical tradition, musicians spend years learning, it is a real apprenticeship. So did you spend a long time learning?

MP: Yes, I studied Indian classical music officially for two years at school, but my study is still ongoing. I also like Western genres, also jazz, Latin, grooves. The musician has to be both a revolutionary and a master of his instrument to have enough ability to convey his emotions. And a musician has to have a broad vision and good taste. Without good taste there is no music.

DJL: This music has a very meditative quality, so are you approaching it from a meditative place as a musician?

MP: Yes, that's why it sounds peaceful. Sometimes before the concert if I see that it is needed, I will say to the audience, 'close your eyes, open your heart, let the music come to you and let us be one.'

DJL: How did you first hear the kora?

MP: I heard the kora live when I first came to Holland in 2007. In Turkey, there were African musicians, but on hearing the kora live I was moved, and thought about making something beautiful with it in the future. In 2013, after some musical ideas became clearer in my mind, I contacted my friend, the kora player Zoumana Diarra. (Diarra was the group's first kora player and continues to play with them from time to time). I was interested in how Balkan rhythms in 7 or 15 beats to the bar would work with some African rhythms. It's like teaching an Italian cook Chinese cooking. Bao Sissoko joined us from Senegal, and he has played with the band for the past three months. He's risen to the challenge, and he's dedicated to the music.

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DJL: Bao comes from a very strong Griot musical tradition in Senegal, West Africa. So, you went to the kora second, and then to the ney as the third instrument, right? The ney is one of the oldest instruments still played today. It is a flute dating back four to five thousand years. It has a unique and ethereal sound.

MP: Yes, the time difference from the kora to the ney was one hour. (He laughs.) In Turkish, we say, 'breathing out through the ney'. It has the sound of soul, the sound of spirit. The ney is almost like a human voice sometimes. Sinan is a very good musician, a great improviser, and a master of his instrument. He is a poet with a big vocabulary, and so he has an opportunity to speak out.

DJL: All three of you are gifted musicians, and you work together so strongly.

MP: For me, it is not only the meeting of three unique instruments, but also the making of deep connections, keeping the ancient and authentic traditions, and combining them in a contemporary way. This music is eighty percent improvised, and that makes it very exciting for me.

DJL: Something else I noticed is that the tone of the three instruments is aligned.

MP: When I compose the music, I try to use the full capacity of the instruments, and to keep them in harmony with each other. I ask the ney musician, for example, to play a lot of low notes.

DJL: These instruments are not combined with any modern instrument such as drums or electronic guitar. Is that deliberate?

MP: Yes, sometimes when I have played with other larger groups with drums and bass, or as a guest musician with orchestras, I didn't like it. Because they do not hear or listen what I played or perhaps don't care. They may have me there as a picture or as an image. I do not want that.

DJL: You added two extra bass strings to the oud, so you provide your own bass?

MP: Yes, I do that.

DJL: Would you like to come back here to the US for another tour?

MP: Yes, we are planning it for the mid-August and the mid-September. Our hope is to reach more people and to learn more about traditional American music.

DJL: And you are now working on a second album. Do you see a development from the first?

MP: The second album will be more about developing the music. I would like it to include a more spontaneous feeling, more of a sense of oneness as musicians, uniting our energies. In the end, music is not just for entertainment, it can connect us to a more sincere spiritual world.

Recordings available: [Next Spring](#)

For more about the Mehmet Polat trio, you can visit: www.mehmetpolat.net

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