

New York Music Daily

Global Music With a New York Edge

The Mehmet Polat Trio Play a Rapturous, Paradigm-Shifting Lincoln Center Debut

by delarue

Watching the [Mehmet Polat Trio \(http://mehmetpolat.net\)](http://mehmetpolat.net) in their Lincoln Center debut last night, what became formidably clear was that these are three of the best musicians in the world on their respective instruments. But not only do oudist and bandleader Polat, ngoni player Victor Sams and ney flutist Pelin Başar push the envelope as far as Middle Eastern and African music go, they do it with gravitas, and virtuosity, and soul, and made good on Polat's promise to draw the audience into their magical interchanges and improvisations, holding what appeared to be a full house in a near dream-state for over an hour.

Polat's erudition, drawing on years of study of not only Middle Eastern but also Balkan, Mediterranean, Indian and African traditions, expressed itself strikingly in terms of breathtaking technique as well as his vast and searching expanse of melodic ideas. Now based in Amsterdam, Polat hails originally from the Turkish city of Urfa, located close to the Syrian border, legendary as a pilgrimage spot for Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. Much mysticism is associated with the region, and that came across in the more rapturous, enveloping, carefully crafted numbers that Polat played, particularly a couple of slowly crescendoing duo pieces with Sams that blended the hypnotic, circular quality of West African folk music with the brooding, contemplative side of the Middle East.

Bantering gently with the crowd between songs, Polat's stage presence was humble yet proud. His chops on the oud are spectacular, and his fellow oudists had come to check him out, something Polat was quick to pick up on. His often dazzling speed and ability to evoke the most minute timbral shifts out of his custom-made instrument may have something to do with genetic good fortune- he appears to be doublejointed. And he loves the lows: his axe features a couple of extra low bass strings, which he sprinted down to early in the set to drive that feature home. But ultimately, the additional low end enables Polat to employ the standard low strings for melodic spirals and flurries that most of his peers typically play further up the scale.

Sams made a strong and similarly individualistic sparring partner, taking his spiky calabash harp to places it's never gone before, shifting into as many somber, stately Levantine-tinged interludes, tersely minimalist riffs that edged toward Steve Reich territory, and sprightly coy high harmonic accents, as he did the cyclical, trancey patterns typical of the instrument's usual repertoire. Başar played even more judiciously, and arguably even more hauntingly, mostly in her lower ranges, spiced with minutely intoned melismas and precise patterns that mirrored Polat's picking.

Together, the three moved seamlessly through slinky, moody, dusky grooves as the beat shifted from a camelwalking sway toward the mystical spirals of qawwali music. Polat showed off as much affinity for the highs as the lows, particularly during a couple of numbers where he built ecstatic

crescendos using riffs straight out of the classical Indian sitar playbook. Polat and his trio return to New York for an unlikely gig at Club Bonafide on September 11; cover is \$20.

And the Atrium at Lincoln Center (<http://atrium.lincolncenter.org>) continues its eclectic series of concerts. As Jordana Phokompe, its programming director, smilingly asserted before the concert, there's literally something for everyone here. Fans of Prince can see Burnt Sugar (<http://burntsugarindex.com>) play the Purple Rain songbook on August 25 at 7:30 PM. And high-voltage, socially relevant psychedelic cumbia band MAKU Soundsystem (<https://makusoundsystem.bandcamp.com>) are here at the same time on September 22. Seats get taken quickly for these free shows, so early arrival is always a good idea.



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